

A Scaled-up Model of AP(E)L for Sectoral Professionalisation: Lessons from the 2005 Valex Pilot Project (Dublin)

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Abstract

This paper outlines the policy and pedagogical outcomes of an AP(E)L Pilot Project in the social care sector undertaken as an element of the 2003-2005 Socrates-Grundtvig Research Project: VaLEx Valuing Learning from Experience, by the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and the Open Training College (OTC). It deals with the experiences of the two providers in taking a scaled-up rather than an individualistic approach and considers the evaluation feedback from participants, facilitators/accompaniers and assessors. The paper recommends that accreditation for prior experiential learning AP(E)L / recognition of prior learning RPL could be managed more effectively and efficiently by linking it with pedagogies of work-based learning for professional development in communities of practice.

Introduction

The VaLEx Research Project, *Valuing Learning from Experience*, was an EU Socrates-Grundtvig 2003-2005 project that aimed to develop a theory-based model of AP(E)L for higher education which would be more holistic and inclusive than the competence-based, credit exchange model which has generally predominated in higher education in Ireland, the UK and elsewhere. The model took an existential/hermeneutic, future-oriented, capability approach to adults' learning plans, with the adult's life history of learning as central to the process. The model was heavily influenced by the French AP(E)L model - *validation des acquis professionnelles* - and by emerging literature on indigenous knowledges and biographical methods which emphasise the value of contextualised and socially constructed ways of knowing (Bailie and O'Hagan, 2001; Bertaux, 1981; Dominicé, 2001; Feutrie, 2003; Murphy, 2004; Pouget and Osborne, 2004; Pouget, Sallic and LeScouiller, 2004).

The VaLEx model was field-tested through local pilots by Glasgow-Caledonian University (lead), the universities of Warwick, South Brittany, Brussels, Turku and Tartu, and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) with a range of partner organisations/groups in the first half of 2005 and evaluated locally in Summer 2005 (Murphy, Megarry & Ní Mhaolrúnaigh, 2005).

The anticipated outputs of the overall VaLEx Research Project included the following:

- a pedagogical model of AP(E)L underpinned with educational theory which would be transferable across diverse European realities;
- an AP(E)L toolkit, evaluated through the pilots, which will include both electronic and paper-based resources;
- professional guidelines for teaching, advising and support staff.

The policy context of the VaLEX Pilot (Dublin)

The Dublin Pilot of the VaLEx model of AP(E)L was specifically planned to advance previous scaled-up models designed for the vocational/professional areas of childcare through an earlier DIT pilot project, the Omna pilot project (DIT, 1999), the training-of-trainers for the disability sector through NUI Maynooth (Murphy, 1996) and the training of literacy organisers through The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) (Mernagh, 2005) which had each used three different theoretical and pedagogical approaches (Murphy, 2003). What was significant about the timing of the Dublin VaLEx pilot was that it coincided with the development of AP(E)L/RPL policies and procedures for further and higher education providers under the regulation of the National Qualification Authority of Ireland (NQAI, 2005) and also coincided with a growing interest in the epistemology and pedagogies of AP(E)L fostered by the Irish Higher Education AP(E)L Network. The timing coincided, too, with the broader policy context of lifelong learning generally and the emerging, if contested, discourses of formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Of particular policy interest to the VaLEx Pilot (Dublin) was the NQAI's remit to bringing coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning through obliging providers and awarding bodies to make provision for AP(E)L for any individual who applied for access, credit or full award. The approach of all higher education awarding bodies has traditionally been to apply AP(E)L at

the individual learner/applicant level and not to offer a collective, or sectoral, approach, other than in the three models mentioned above. Education providers are now additionally obliged to outline progression routes for all learners on their programmes and to make both access and accessibility arrangements for mature students and RPL applicants explicit in their internal documentation and public information data (NQAI, 2003). These two principles obliged the VaLEx AP(E)L pilot (Dublin) to be linked explicitly to specific programmes and to provide for individual assessment of claims for module exemptions and credits.

A further principle of importance to the design of the Dublin pilot was that of *accessibility* which obliges providers to make provision for the successful progression of learners through development of capabilities. That notion was hinted at in the Green Paper on adult education, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, where it was predicated that providers would become obliged to accompany learners throughout their lifelong learning careers:

It is likely that, as the demand for ongoing or continuing education grows in the future, educational institutions will look to ‘accompanying’ the student through their work life cycle rather than merely preparing them for it.

(DES, 1998, p. 33)

Conceptually and technically, then, such accompaniment could include accompaniment for entrants who used AP(E)L for access to programmes as well as for learners who gained access through other routes.

Reasons for resistance to AP(E)L in higher education

As outlined above, provision for AP(E)L in Irish further and higher education is generally based on the individual applicant/learner and most models relate to access to existing programmes in the national framework in the case of higher education, or to occupational standards in the case of further education and training. Achievement of a full award through AP(E)L is rare, though the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) made its first, perhaps symbolic, award of a masters degree to an individual in June 2005 based on that individual’s life history of knowledge production and publication. Likewise, the Irish university sector has traditionally had provision for doctoral awards based on scholarly publications, and some education providers have traditionally accepted experiential learning as *equivalent* to accredited learn-

ing for non-traditional/exceptional case entry to postgraduate programmes. However, awards, or exemptions, based on experiential learning have been less favoured at undergraduate level despite enabling legislation and procedures, according to the audit of AP(E)L practices undertaken as the first activity of the Dublin VaLEx research project (Murphy, 2004b, 2004c). That audit, conducted by questionnaire in the first half of 2004, found that no higher education institution had an inclusive approach to AP(E)L provision, and that only one had a dedicated AP(E)L/RPL officer. Colleges which had discontinued AP(E)L cited lack of resources and cumbersome procedures as the reasons. Other weaknesses identified in the audit included: lack of conceptualisation of levels of learning appropriate to experiential learning; inappropriateness of traditional assessment modes; lack of grading; restriction of types of evidence; lack of uniformity; the need for constant updating and individualisation of procedures; the extensive resources required; and the cumbersome paperwork involved. Academic problems identified by colleges included: resistance by staff to the concept itself; lack of academic skills for future study; fear of lowering standards; over-caution with documentation; limitation to the range of evidence permitted in a portfolio format; negative impact on future modules; and lack of coherence in how experiential learning is expressed relative to traditional learning. A persistent problem was the confusion between the requirement to satisfy a number of learning outcomes and the percentage score required to reach a pass standard. Further weaknesses included: inconsistencies of models applied; pressure on individual applicants in pursuing claims; lack of staff training and lack of efficient resources and templates. The Dublin Pilot of the VaLEx AP(E)L model needed to address at least some of these concerns.

VaLEx AP(E)L Pilot (Dublin) rationale, research methods and objectives

The VaLEx model was piloted with participants from the social care sector since it seemed to address particular immediate needs for professional accreditation of a large number of experienced practitioners. In this regard, The Health Executive Eastern Region (HEER), now The Health Services Executive-Eastern Area (HSE-EA), had requested the two main providers of social care qualifications, the DIT and the Open Training College (OTC)/St Michael's House, to devise a mechanism to professionally accredit unqualified staff already working in the residential care and disability care sectors, building on significant practice experiences and in-house training. A scaled-up AP(E)L approach was therefore essential, with key academic staff in the two colleges required to have a direct input into the processes of accompaniment and assessment. It was also required

that the model should also be approved within the quality assurance arrangements of both providers. The DIT and OTC formed a management team for the VaLEx Pilot, nominated generalist and specialist accompaniers, and consulted with academic staff on the adaptation of module assessment criteria and means of presenting evidence of learning.

It was agreed that the model would be piloted with fourteen, volunteer, experienced social care workers as participants, all of whom had no previous professional qualifications in social care or direct experience of participation in higher education, but who were keen to acquire formal qualifications on a part-time basis. Participants were selected through an advertising and recruitment campaign, supported by social care agencies in the regions. Existing part-time, in-service programme modules were made available by the two colleges to the VaLEx Pilot for AP(E)L by the participants as follows:

DIT BA (Ord.) in Social Care Practice (in-service)

Modules: (i) Principles of Professional Practice (10 ECTS¹ Credits)
(ii) Health and Well-being (5 ECTS Credits).

OTC/HETAC Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies (Disability)

Modules: (i) Introduction to Disability (12 ECTS Credits)
(ii) Health, Safety and Personal Care (12 ECTS Credits).

The participants met in the DIT for three hour AP(E)L sessions on eight occasions over a two month period between March and May 2005. The early sessions focused on learning from life and work histories and on the development of academic capabilities. The later sessions focused on the preparation of evidence of learning in support of claims for module exemptions. Seven participants completed portfolios for the DIT degree and seven for the OTC degree. Participants whose module portfolios were deemed to be of a pass quality were assured of exemptions from the modules when they registered on the degree programme.

Challenges for design of the VaLEx AP(E)L model

One of the main challenges for the VaLEx model (Dublin) was to design a *scaled-up* process which would both meet the accreditation needs of all the individual learners involved *and* address the reservations of academic staff, particularly

¹ European Credit Transfer System

around the acquisition of sustainable academic writing skills for future learning, and around the credibility of the assessment process. The VaLEx model would also need to be sustainable in terms of time and resources. Accordingly, the Dublin model initially claimed to include the following features:

- It was regarded as an ideal mechanism for practitioners who were experienced in their field of practice to have their experiential learning formally recognised and accredited towards a qualification;
- It offered guidance and accompaniment;
- It led towards a clearly identified learning plan;
- It focused both on current competence and on future capabilities;
- It was related specifically to existing course modules;
- It allowed for module learning outcomes to be synthesised into appropriate portfolio tasks;
- It allowed applicants to challenge module assessment tasks instead of preparing a portfolio of learning evidence;
- It offered a biographical/narrative approach to the identification of appropriate informal and non-formal learning;
- It allowed for flexible approaches to the presentation of learning for assessment;
- It expected to be subject to the same criteria for assessment and the same quality assurance controls as the target modules;
- It is specifically designed to be 'scaled up' to groups and sectors, as well as serving the needs of individual applicants;
- It was underpinned by current theory and scholarship on work-based learning (WBL) and on learning-in-practice for professional development;
- It took account of current research and policy development related to recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- It had explicit guidelines and procedures with potential for transfer to other professional sectors.

(DIT/OTC, 2005)

The VaLEx model of AP(E)L assessment

AP(E)L is essentially about the assessment of prior learning towards accreditation. In this regard, the AP(E)L audit referred to earlier (Murphy, 2004c) had indicated that lists of discrete module learning outcomes designed for formal programmes were unsuitable for assessing experiential learning through AP(E)L. Taking this into account, and following discussion with the pro-

gramme directors and module assessors from both the DIT and the OTC, it was decided to offer VaLEx Pilot (Dublin) participants a choice of three ways of meeting module assessment requirements. Firstly, they could take the original learning outcomes as stated in the programme document and provide evidence from prior learning to prove that learning had already been gained in terms of the skills, knowledge and attitudes required by the module. They could request the assistance of the accompanier in this task. Secondly, they could ask to see the assessment assignments for the modules from the past and arrange with course personnel to challenge those assignments without the assistance of the accompanier. Thirdly, they could carry out a set of assignment tasks in their current context of professional practice and meet the learning outcomes in that way.

To make this third option more efficient, module learning outcomes were combined, or synthesised, into assessment tasks for completion within the duration of the Pilot and included in the portfolio for assessment. Participants could write an account as in the example in Table 1 below, or perform a task based on a learning contract as in Table 2 below:

Table 1: Original and synthesised learning outcomes with written account

<i>Original list of module learning outcomes</i>	<i>Synthesised Learning Outcomes as Portfolio Task</i>
Health, Safety and Personal Care	With reference to legislation, demonstrate your understanding of health and safety in the workplace (based on prior learning).
1. Outline the importance of good health and safety practices in your work;	
2. State the main provisions of the Health & Safety and Welfare at Work Act 1989;	
3. State the areas covered by the Health & Safety and Welfare at Work General Application Regulations 1993;	
4. List the responsibilities of the employer and employee with regard to the 1989 Act;	
5. State the main provisions of the 1981 Fire Services Act.	

Table 2: Learning Contract task to meet module learning outcomes

<i>List of module learning outcomes</i>	<i>Synthesised Learning Outcomes as Portfolio Task</i>
Principles of Professional Practice in Social Care	Using Gibbs' reflective cycle write a 3,000 word analysis after completing the following task:
1. Have an understanding of the history and development of social care in Ireland;	1. Observe colleagues and clients over a five day episode of care and then identify, assess and discuss how models of service delivery meet clients' overall needs;
2. Have explored the principles of professional practice;	2. Illustrate your own and others' professional roles, responsibilities and contributions to the clients' needs;
3. Have an understanding of the needs of client groups and demonstrate awareness of appropriate responses to these groups;	3. Illustrate your own and others' professional roles, responsibilities and contributions to the moral and ethical values of the organisation in this regard.
4. List the responsibilities of the employer and employee with regard to the 1989 Act;	
5. State the main provisions of the 1981 Fire Services Act.	

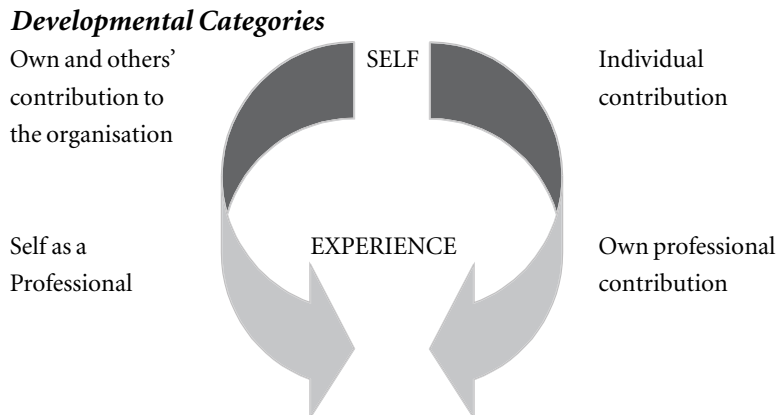
An optional *viva voce* was part of the VaLEx model of assessment in cases where a candidate did not fully meet the assessment requirements in the written submission alone. The accompanier could act as an advocate for the candidate in this process, but could not act as an assessor. Module assessors were required to prepare sets of module assessment criteria suitable for use in AP(E)L mode which would attract the same credibility with colleagues, examiners and quality assurance systems as the criteria for the taught mode. These criteria were made available to accompaniers and candidates.

Systematic, critical reflection on professional practice for AP(E)L claims

The VaLEx AP(E)L model regarded the development of critical reflection as central to the AP(E)L process and aimed to develop a model of reflection suitable

for a group-based process transferable to any sector of professional practice. In practical terms this was achieved by linking reflection on the practice context with the structure of portfolio entries to meet module learning outcomes. Each module required just one substantial portfolio entry to demonstrate learning. A model based on Gibbs' reflective cycle was used as an analytical framework to structure the process and the written accounts for inclusion in the portfolio, as follows:

Figure 1: Developmental Categories with Gibbs' reflective cycle



Source: VaLEx Pilot (Dublin) Participants' Handbook 2005

Through reflection on life history and professional experience the participants' personal learnings were identified and used as evidence to support the specified outcomes of the modules, and critical analysis was required to draw conclusions from individual practice. The developmental process began by analysing the *self*, or asking how experiences contributed to the participant's own world-view, values, personal development and learning. Then it progressed on to analysing *individual contribution* to the situation or experience and moved through the categories to analyse how the *profession* contributed to the situation. When focused on the profession the participant needed to revisit *yourself as a professional* and the final category helped put the experience into a holistic focus of *your own and others' contribution to the organisation's purpose*. For efficiency of implementation in the portfolio process, the individual's life history of learning was organised into two sets, *life narrative* and *biographical work record* as follows:

Life Narrative

Personal Life Achievements;
Life and Job Transitions;
Personal Qualities and Values.

Biographical Work Record

Evidence of work, life,
educational attainments;
Personal and Professional
Development Goals.

This information was regarded as a tool to identify learning from experience, to evaluate personal and professional future goals, to link experience to module outcomes and for future lifelong learning.

AP(E)L developing academic capabilities for accessibility

The Dublin VaLex Pilot was informed by a keen awareness of the need to enhance the capabilities of AP(E)L applicants to survive in a higher education environment. This need had been identified in Irish higher education research with mature students (Fleming and Murphy, 1998; Inglis and Murphy, 1999) and in the AP(E)L audit results reported earlier above. Additionally, the explicit requirement of the NQAI for access and participation by mature students in higher education is that the principle of accessibility should apply. In practice this implies that the receiving institution is obliged to provide the appropriate supports for students who enter their programmes to enable them to succeed. The principle implies that all institutions must provide whatever bridging studies are required either at the point of entry, or at the point of transfer to another programme. In adherence to this principle it was agreed that participants on the VaLex Pilot Project would be offered appropriate support in developing their skills in academic writing, in library research skills, in information technology and in the presentation of assignments for assessment.

Feedback and recommendations from participants

Participant evaluation methods included sessional evaluation through evaluation questionnaires, a post-pilot questionnaire, a collective report to the VaLex dissemination event in June 2006 and a focus group evaluation session. Feedback from participants stressed the needs for accurate information for potential applicants, including information on roles, responsibilities, workload and timescales. In particular, they recommended that the distinction between the roles of generalist accompaniers and subject-expert accompanier be more explicit. They also recommended that workplaces and employers should actively encourage and support staff engaged in the AP(E)L process with sufficient time-off and access to documentation, computers and other resources. The value of

group-based rather than individualistic AP(E)L was stressed by participants. The life-history model used in the VaLEx model was given a mixed evaluation, with the theory-practice conflict of valuing life histories of learning while only rewarding selected instances of learning questioned a process that devalued certain types of learning and valued others without any defensible rationale for the practice. In terms of AP(E)L pedagogies, participants valued the opportunity to develop skills and capabilities to survive the world of formal academic study and the presentation of written assignments. In particular, they recommended that colleges should provide specific literature which shows how college-theory relates to the real-life worlds of social care practitioners and to offer worked examples to applicants at the start in the same way that examples are offered to college-based students. They also recommended that the adult status of AP(E)L candidates should be respected with regard to how and when they were given access to materials and assessment exercises, since to do otherwise is to diminish the power of participants to control the content and pace of their own learning. Additionally, they recommended that e-learning technologies be used for AP(E)L candidates with irregular working patterns and for those who may be geographically removed from contact with other applicants and academic staff. Above all the participants recommended that the social learning opportunities provided by group-based AP(E)L be maintained and extended both with and between workshop sessions.

Feedback from the participating colleges

Analytical reports from accompaniers and academic staff of the two partner providers, the DIT and OTC, concluded that the Dublin VaLEx AP(E)L model addressed a number of perceived blockages to the implementation of widespread AP(E)L in higher education in Ireland, especially with regard to the management of module learning outcomes and to assessment methods and assessment criteria for experiential learning. It also introduced the concepts of synthesised learning outcomes and learning contracts as pedagogical tools for AP(E)L. Additionally, it highlighted the value of group-based, social learning opportunities for continuing professional development for occupational sectors with strong commonality of contexts and experiences, emphasising the sharing of existing knowledge and the generation of emergent knowledges among communities of practice in workplaces. Both accompaniers and assessors valued the model as an opportunity for participants to develop what are regarded as the capabilities to survive in academic studies, the future-oriented accessibility factor identified in the NQAI documentation on access, transfer

and progression, rather than being predominantly an audit of current competences. Both partner colleges approved of the on-going accompanier model rather than the front-loaded, facilitator/tutor model generally used in AP(E)L. They also saw the model as easily quality assured and transferable to other contexts. There was a specific recommendation that AP(E)L should be viewed only as an assessment/ pedagogical activity and should not be confused with counselling or therapy. With regard to the further development of the model, the partner colleges concluded that the VaLEx model has the potential to link the scholarship and practice of AP(E)L with the scholarship and technologies of Work-Based-Learning with regard to curriculum design in higher education, and that staff training and development will be required in this regard.

Conclusions

The VaLEx Dublin Pilot set out to demonstrate that AP(E)L need not be a marginal, individualistic and resource-hungry activity for colleges and that the reservations of academic staff can be allayed by collaborative design which is supported by acceptable pedagogical theory and academic quality assurance. It also set out to demonstrate the value of working at the interface between professional practice and academia where a more seamless approach to professional development can be achieved by a life history and professional learning plan model which gives more direct control to the learner than the traditional in-service training model. Since the Pilot ended, a complementary work-based, contract learning model has been developed for a number of modules on one of the degree programmes. It is likely that this mixed mode of learning will influence in-service professional development courses across a range of activities as some of the main academic reservations about AP(E)L have now been addressed and resolved in this scaled-up model for professional sectors.

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