

Transformative Learning: Immigrant Learners Who Participated in Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC)

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) as it is known in Quebec, Canada or Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), requires a learner to engage in retrospective thought about their learning path, their learning style and their experiential knowledge. This process of critical self-reflection and rigorous analysis by the learner of their prior learning is often the first exposure to the examination of their own knowledge. This article provides case studies of immigrant learners from the Montreal, Quebec area in a Recognition of Acquired Competencies process in vocational education. Through the analysis of interviews with learners, the authors suggest transformative learning is a by-product of the Recognition of Acquired Competencies process.

Keywords: *Immigrant, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC), Transformational, Transformative Learning*

INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) is a service offered through educational institutions in the Province of Quebec, Canada to adult learners. In 2002, the Government of Quebec produced an *Action Plan for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* in which a commitment was made to:

- Take aggressive action toward the official recognition of adults' prior learning and competencies.
- Offer recognition of prior learning and competencies as a regular service in adult education and continuing education and

training in Quebec (Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, 2002, p. 25).

Subsequent to this policy initiative, a network of trained pedagogical advisors was established to offer RAC services to the public. The service is offered through vocational education in adult learning centers in school boards and the General and Vocational College system of the Province which is commonly referred to by the French acronym CEGEP (*Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel*). There are 48 public CEGEPs within the Province of Quebec that offer post-secondary education. The diploma of college studies from a CEGEP is a prerequisite for Quebec student admission to

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university within the Province. These institutions are often compared to junior colleges or community colleges however they are unique to Quebec. In addition to offering a diploma of college studies, the CEGEPs also offer attestations in vocational studies that are recognized as valuable accreditation by the labor market of the Province.

The service of the Recognition of Acquired Competencies is similar in principle to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in that a person's prior learning is assessed and recognized toward formal accreditation. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Prior Learning Assessment is defined as "the process of earning college credit for college-level learning acquired from other sources, such as work experience, professional training, military training, or open source learning from the web" (CAEL, n.d.). In Quebec, the recognition of experiential learning is linked to academic programs within adult vocational and general education programs. The researchers of this article are employed by Champlain College Saint-Lambert, a CEGEP just south of Montreal and are part of the Centre of Expertise in Recognition of Acquired Competencies (CERAC) – an initiative funded and supported by the Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche, de la Science et de la Technologie (MESRST). The purpose of this study is to share case studies of immigrant learners who enrolled in the RAC service at Champlain College Saint-Lambert and who, as a result of the process, experienced a sense of transformative learning.

BACKGROUND

The RAC service at Champlain College Saint-Lambert is offered in the following areas of vocational study: Early Childhood Education, Information Technology Support Specialist, Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA), Dispatch Specialist, Special Care Counseling, Applied Business Development, General Education and Specialist in Transportation and Logistics. The education system in Quebec from

K to college is competency-based and therefore the assessment of prior learning is as well. The RAC service offered by Champlain College begins with an orientation session open to the general public in order to explain the concept and provide potential candidates with an understanding of the expectations of this service. If a candidate wishes to pursue RAC there is an individual meeting with a RAC advisor to ensure they are in fact a good candidate for the service – meaning they possess extensive experiential learning and competencies in their chosen field that can be assessed and recognized toward the academic elements of the program of study. The RAC process begins with a self-evaluation in which the candidate indicates on a grid, competency-by-competency, if they are able to demonstrate their full proficiency of this competency, if they need more information related to the competency or if they know they are not proficient in the competency. Once this is complete, the RAC advisor, the candidate and a content expert meet for what is called the validation interview. This meeting is an opportunity for the candidate and the context expert to interact and discuss the self-evaluation grid as colleagues. It is also during this meeting that an action plan is developed for the candidate to demonstrate the competencies the candidate has self-identified as having mastered. The second part of the action plan is a prescription of competency areas where the candidate may need partial or full training (gap filling). The process of assessing experiential knowledge and competencies is the basis of most Prior Learning Assessment however, the inclusion of an action plan for partial or full training is a unique feature to the Quebec model and allows holistic support of the learner to the point of attainment of their accreditation.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

From the review of the literature on transformative learning, it is noteworthy that very little research exists in the area of vocational education and transformative learning. There are even fewer examples to cite on the topic of

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