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# WRITING IN RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AT THE SECONDARY EDUCATION LEVEL

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## Abstract

*Studies show that the use of writing in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can discourage some adults, especially those without a diploma. For those who do proceed, how is the use of reading and writing experienced? Is it a lever or a barrier? This article presents results from a study conducted in Quebec based on semi-structured interviews and archival data. It describes the use of reading and writing in two secondary education level RPL measures. The first, called Spheres of Generic Competencies, is offered in adult general education. The second, Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) concerns vocational training. The article also identifies barriers and levers related to reading and writing. A concluding discussion highlights challenges adults face when required to read and write during an RPL process.*

## Résumé

*Des études montrent que le recours à l'écrit dans les dispositifs de reconnaissance des acquis fait reculer des adultes, notamment des adultes sans diplôme. Pour ceux qui vont de l'avant, comment se vit le recours à l'écrit, est-il levier ou obstacle? Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude québécoise ayant fait appel à des entrevues semi-structurees et à l'analyse de documents d'archives. Il décrit le recours à l'écrit dans deux dispositifs de reconnaissance des acquis à l'enseignement secondaire. Le premier est offert en formation générale des adultes et s'appelle Univers de compétences génériques. Le deuxième est celui de la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences (RAC) en formation professionnelle. L'article identifie leviers et obstacles relevant de l'écrit au sein de ces dispositifs. La discussion met en valeur les défis que pose l'écrit au cours du processus de reconnaissance d'acquis.*

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## **Introduction**

From the perspective of lifelong learning, learning is an inclusive continuum of knowledge developed in all spheres of life. In this context, new ways of recognizing non-formal and informal learning, particularly for adults with no previous qualifying diploma, are essential. However, writing requirements may present accessibility issues for these adults (Bélisle, 2004; Gosseau, Houdeville, Poulain & Riot, 2010; Presse, 2004). The opportunity to graduate with officially recognized prior learning can be attractive and motivate many adults to return to school (Livingstone, 1999; Livingstone & Myers, 2007). However, these adults are also known to choose non-academic training or learn informally (Bourdon, 2006; Livingstone, 1999), and their participation in most of these Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) measures remains significantly lower than those who already have a diploma, whether in Quebec or elsewhere (Besson, 2008; Cameron, 2011; MELS, 2014). In a context where some believe that reading and writing requirements in RPL could be reduced (Besson, 2008) or that tools should be adapted to people with low levels of literacy (Loarer & Pignault, 2010), it is important to examine the question of how writing is used in RPL in order to better understand the challenges faced by adults engaged in a process of formal recognition within a secondary education program.

Our article presents the results of a Quebec study that seeks to describe and better understand these challenges in what is called summative recognition (Harris & Wihak, 2011; Werquin, 2010). It offers a few answers and discusses the following question: Is the use of writing in the process of recognition of prior learning at the secondary level a barrier or a lever? The next section presents an overview of current knowledge on reading and writing in summative RPL, followed by a description of the major categories of barriers and levers informing our analysis. A methodological summary of the study follows. We then describe the use of writing in each of the two measures, as well as documented barriers and levers related to writing. The discussion section highlights the different challenges and importance of recognizing them in order to better assist adults engaged in this process. The conclusion discusses possibilities for future intervention and research.

## **Writing in Recognition of Prior Learning**

The degree to which recognition of prior learning has been developed varies from country to country (Werquin, 2010; Werquin & Wihak, 2011). For example, in France, *Validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) (validation of experiential learning) is included in a law, which explains the high number of practices and abundance of research there. Some studies of the VAE stress that using writing can hinder (Champy-Remoussenard, 2006; Presse, 2004) or even lead to withdrawal from the process, particularly among adults without a diploma (Presse, 2004). In the RPL process, the first phase involves identifying competencies and producing evidence in the form of various documents (Werquin, 2010), and relies heavily on reading and writing. The written record allows the institution to judge the application's admissibility before starting the prior learning assessment. Prior learning dossiers can take many forms; the portfolio (Pokorny, 2013), VAE booklet (Astier, 2008), and description

sheets (Bélisle, Gosselin & Michaud, 2010; MELS & MESRST, 2014) are common. In summative recognition systems, learning assessment employs various methods, including observation of real-life situations, role-playing, the use of oral or written language in interviews with a specialist or committee, and the production of written documents or exams (Prot, 2009; Werquin, 2010). The significance of writing in many of these methods raises the question of what is being assessed—language skills or acquired experience (Bélisle, 2004; Champy-Remoussenard, 2009; Presse, 2010)—and of whether this is fair for adults “with a poor command of the written language” (Cognier, 2010).

But limited literacy skills are not the only issue here. For example, having followed less formal or qualifying education programs contributes to a lack of familiarity with established RPL language (Bélisle, 2004; Caramelo & Santos, 2013), and the lack of social legitimacy of some of their activities (Bélisle, 2004; Presse, 2010) introduces power issues that interfere with the use of writing (Belfiore, Defoe, Folinsbee, Hunter & Jackson, 2004). Moreover, it can be difficult for anyone to describe acquired knowledge, which results from “doing” and is often mobilized outside of language (Lainé, 2005; Loarer & Pignault, 2010; Presse, 2010). This difficulty exists in both speaking and writing: it comes from the challenge of putting work into words (Boutet, 1995). The challenge of describing one’s “real work” and generating knowledge from informal learning is taken into account in several RPL systems, which offer assistance and the opportunity for oral interaction to help adults make progress in their writing (Astier, 2008; Caramelo & Santos, 2013; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Cognier, 2010; Loarer & Pignault, 2010; Presse, 2010; Prot, 2009; Rioux & Bélisle, 2012). RPL practitioners often use written materials to help adults put their knowledge into words through encouragement and guidance. For example, a counsellor who writes during face-to-face interaction may encourage adults to deepen their knowledge (Lucas & Retiere, 2001). Thus, in addition to the required instruments, RPL practitioners rely on documents such as their own checklists of words or things (Caramelo & Santos, 2013) to help adults better understand RPL terminology and mobilize it in meetings with committees (Prot, 2009). Whether or not an adult writes during any phase of the process, reading and writing play significant roles in the summative recognition of prior learning.

### **Barriers and Levers in Participation**

Official recognition of prior learning measures are closely linked, at least in Quebec, to actions that encourage going back to school or seeking more training. It therefore seems appropriate to reflect on barriers within RPL related to writing and to participation in adult education programs (Cross, 1981). From an analytical point of view, this also allows the identification of various levers that can increase participation. These barriers and levers are divided into three categories: institutional (information about services, available support, school activity schedule, etc.), situational (income, transportation, child care, employer flexibility, network support, etc.), and dispositional (states of mind, emotions, beliefs, representations of writing, etc.).

### **Methodology and Context of the Study**

Conducted from 2008 to 2012 and referring to RPL processes carried out in 2007 and 2008, our study aimed to identify and understand meaningful learning experiences of adults in different life contexts who have successfully obtained formal recognition of prior

learning at the secondary level. The study took place in Estrie, in southern Quebec, with the participation of three French school boards<sup>1</sup>. The team received ethics committee approval, as required for all studies conducted through a Canadian university, and ensures participant anonymity by using fictitious names in all publications. Two different measures are included in this study: Spheres of Generic Competencies (SGC) in adult general education (AGE) and Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) in vocational training. Within the population of our study, all adults participating in SGC in AGE are without a diploma, whereas only 21% of adults in vocational training are without a diploma. The majority, almost 70%, have a secondary diploma in general education (Secondary School Diploma, SSD) or vocational training (Diploma of Vocational Studies, DVS)<sup>2</sup>. All others are postsecondary graduates.

We have a mixed research design. Quantitative data consist of administrative data on adults who have obtained credits through one of these two measures in 2007 and 2008. These data allow us to establish a profile for the study population. Qualitative data consist of a sample of 42 adults either without a diploma or with a secondary school diploma (usually the SSD, sometimes a first DVS). Once consent was obtained, we digitized their applications for recognition, including documents identifying acquired skills and other evidence of prior learning and, when applicable, documents supporting assessment. In 2010, after analyzing these files, we met with 37 of the 42 participants for a semi-structured interview: 24 in vocational training and 13 in general education. We also met with five practitioners who worked with adults in SGC and five in RPL in vocational training. Our analysis is thematic (Paillé & Muccielli, 2010). This article uses files and interview transcripts.

## Results

### *Writing in Spheres of Generic Competencies (SGC)*

SGC was implemented following a 2002 government policy on lifelong learning (Bélisle et al., 2010). It involves a process in which adults already involved in AGE participate for a few weeks. To do so, they must have obtained Secondary III-level credits for which French or English was the language of instruction. Three documents define the three-step process: the information bank, achievement booklet, and exam questionnaire. All three are ministerial documents, and the last two are the materials required by the Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport (MELS)<sup>3</sup>. The responses recorded in these two documents

- 1 Territorial structures organize educational services according to the Loi de l'instruction publique (LIP) and three formal educational sectors: the youth sector covers initial general education, the adult sector covers the general education of adults (AGE) or persons over 16 who are no longer subject to compulsory education, and the vocational training (VT) sector supporting the learning of a trade.
- 2 The SSD is obtained after five years of secondary studies (Secondary V). One can enrol in a program leading to a DVS after the third or fourth year of secondary education, depending on the program. The length of the vocational training programs is counted in hours and varies between 600 and 1800 hours.
- 3 This ministry changed its name in 2015 and 2016 and is now called the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur [MEES]).

are evaluated and a score is assigned based on a framework provided by the Ministry. Successfully completing the process results in four Secondary V credits in elective subjects. Secondary V is the final level for a secondary school diploma in Quebec.

In 2007 and 2008, the measure was not well known and many adults told us that they learned about it for the first time from a practitioner, vocational guidance counsellor, or teacher. For practitioners who feel that SGC may discourage adults uncomfortable with writing, the measure is discussed with some adults and not others. *"It's a lot of writing, and it's lot of introspection and work on the self, you have to be open to it"* (Roxanne, practitioner). From the first stage of information gathering, face-to-face exchanges with the practitioner, and personal reflection that may follow, the process is based on a variety of documents.

Once an adult begins the process, he or she must complete the information bank. This document is a table with instructions to refer to various spheres of life to briefly describe what they have done (experience) and what they have learned (prior learning), as well as strengths and weaknesses drawn from these experiences. Space is limited and lists are often preferred. Most adults complete information bank at home, although some complete it at an adult education centre. Very few adults say they have done it without help. At home, a parent, child, or spouse can help them understand the instructions and choose prior learning and experiences to highlight or write down. People close to them can also provide emotional support when they are called upon to put intense experiences into words. At the adult education centre, RPL practitioners usually provide assistance in understanding instructions and writing, although peers sometimes do so as well. In addition to the information bank, additional documents, including a list of words useful to describe personal strengths and weaknesses, are used to facilitate the exchange and writing. Approaches to this step vary significantly from one practitioner to another and from one adult participant to another. This is probably due to the heterogeneity of the studied population, for example, in terms of age and experience, and the diversity of competencies deployed by the RPL practitioners.

The achievement booklet and the exam questionnaire are both completed in the exam room. For a maximum of three hours, adults have access to their information bank and a dictionary. The information bank is considered very useful by most adults we have encountered: *"Yes, I had put some little ideas so that when I write the exam: 'Ah yes I wanted to talk about this'"* (France, 41 years old). For some, being able to use the information bank has a calming effect, *"we are like lost in the exam, you know we are stressed, that's why it helps us a lot, our information bank"* (Jeanne, 40 years old). Even though spelling mistakes are not counted, adults say they were concerned about phrasing their responses correctly and the quality of their language: *"I'm not saying that I will not make mistakes for example. But the ones I saw, I definitely corrected them"* (Luce, 51 years old). Evaluator's comments can be seen in the margins of the scanned documents, which may be viewed by adult students but are rarely consulted. Most adults we have encountered say they have sought and received verbal feedback on the telephone or during face-to-face meetings with an RPL practitioner, a meeting which itself refers to a written document.

It is therefore undeniable that this measure is highly structured around the use of writing: MELS uses writing in its prescriptive documents, RPL practitioners use writing of varying degrees of formality throughout the process, and adults themselves use writing to help prove their generic competencies, note things they want to highlight, or reduce stress in exam rooms.

### ***Writing in RAC in Vocational Training***

Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC), a more common type of official prior learning recognition, consists of matching acquired competencies with the competencies framework of a vocational program. After the first phase of information about RAC, the next steps are file preparation based primarily on self-assessment forms and determination of admissibility by the institution. If the file is admissible, the adult is called for a validation interview. The next step, assessment, may be conducted in the form of an interview, role play, exam, or other activity. All competencies within the framework may lead to an RAC assessment. In the case of partial recognition and when an adult wants to obtain a diploma, the process is completed by acquiring the missing education or training components. In Estrie in 2007 and 2008, it was rare for an adult to receive a diploma through RAC without pursuing additional training. A 2002 government policy normalizes the RAC measure and provides similar instruments in what is called a harmonized approach to the recognition of acquired competencies (MELS & MESRST, 2014)<sup>4</sup>. This approach is gradually replacing the traditional one based on local instruments, some of which resemble self-assessment forms (Bélisle *et al.*, 2010). In 2007 and 2008, RAC via the harmonized approach, which allowed adults to complete self-assessment forms on the Internet, was only available in a few vocational training programs<sup>5</sup>.

Adults participating in our study learned about RAC by searching on the Internet, through personal networks or contacts, on the radio or in newspapers, or during information sessions at their places of employment. Adults can contact the centre by phone, participate in individual meetings, or interact online. The volume of texts to read at the information phase can be minimal (a short brochure), but may be more significant for those who learn about RAC online.

Self-assessment forms are central to dossier preparation: they are based on the program's competencies framework. Even when self-assessment forms were available online, RAC practitioners sometimes offered hard copies both because they believed that many participants were more comfortable writing on paper and because the online service experienced regular problems. These forms were usually completed outside the vocational training centre and submitted for analysis with other documents (resume, non-academic training certificates, letters from employers, etc.). Adults who have difficulty completing these forms can ask for help. At this stage, the perception of the act of writing varies widely by adult and program. None of the RAC applications analyzed contained elaborate narrative writing. Most often, answers were provided with checkmarks or short answers.

Once the application has been submitted to the training centre, its admissibility is determined. If the application is admissible, the adult is called for a validation interview<sup>6</sup>. This interview links daily technical language and the formal language of the framework, and

4 This document is available in English at <http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/en/references/publications/results/detail/article/recognition-of-prior-learning-and-competencies-in-vocational-and-technical-training-guide-to-desig/pubLang/1/>

5 This website has been closed due to security issues.

6 Unlike elsewhere, where validation means assessment (Werquin, 2010), the Ministry of Education of Quebec distinguishes validation from assessment. Here, validation aims to "determine whether there is sufficient evidence to presume that a competency has been acquired or sufficiently developed" (MELS & MESRST, 2014, p. 14).

determines whether the level of proficiency seems sufficient to proceed to an assessment or whether it is better to guide the adult towards further study or training. In this way, language, whether spoken or written, is central to the dialogue between actors. The interview is usually conducted by a content specialist teaching the trade or occupation in question. Often, RAC counsellors<sup>7</sup> are present. Although RAC counsellors or content specialists take notes during the interview and consult the person's file, the participant seems rarely to rely on written documents. Participants said that they did not take notes during the validation interview, nor did they refer to any technical document they could have brought with them: "*It was really just the interview in front of the person*" (Laurence, 22 years old, maple syrup production).

At the assessment stage, there is considerable variation in the use of writing, depending on the program of study. In general, the more writing skills involved in a vocational program, the higher the number of written tests or writing assignments. As a result, candidates for secretarial studies must demonstrate administrative writing skills focused on form (layout, language), typing skills, and familiarity with word processing software. We note, however, that some forms of writing required by the assessment are not directly related to the competencies framework or the relevant profession. For example, in secretarial studies, there is a demand for writing about oneself (*écriture de soi*) (Astier, 2008; Rioux & Bélisle, 2012) and candidates must explain how they manage their time using terminology relevant to the time management competency. Here, one's own time management narrative is used in service to the description of time management competency. Other programs may require written descriptions with schematic writing, numeracy skills, or technical writing. This is the case in the production equipment operation program, which requires, among other competencies, the ability to write a detailed report on a manufacturing process. Two RAC counsellors in vocational training say that understanding technical texts is challenging for some adults participating in RAC.

There are sometimes written tasks to be performed before the RAC assessment<sup>8</sup>. "*I received a document and there were questions I had to answer, and then I answered. Then when I returned the document, I wrote, 'is it really that?' [...] She answered me, and then she told me, 'it's more in this sense, this, this, this'. So I was then able to develop it in that direction*" (Suzanne, 48 years old, secretarial studies). Several adults we encountered associated writing with the assessment, be it prior learning assessments during the RAC process or learning assessments conducted during the pursuit of missing academic components: "*He gave us the book, 'good, do this thing here, and then when you're done, you tell us, and we will do the exam'*" (Alain, 53 years old, production equipment operation). Because missing academic components can be obtained through self-training, adults often confused them with the assessment of prior learning.

7 RAC counselling positions are rare in Quebec (MELS, 2006). There are five pedagogical counsellors who do some RAC counselling by completing many tasks. They have all had a previous career in a trade or occupation, followed by a career in teaching in vocational training education before becoming a pedagogical counsellor. This career path is fairly typical for this position.

8 Between the validation interview and assessment, adults often have to refresh their knowledge or acquire a specialized language by completing recommended readings and exercises.

But some assessments make very little use of writing and, when required, is used to support the core activity (cooking preparation plan, for example). In some programs, including cooking and maple syrup production, several competencies are assessed through direct observation. Writing is certainly required, but usually by content specialists who use assessment instruments and record their observations.

### ***Barriers and Levers Related to Writing***

Institutional barriers related to writing in both measures are connected to instruments required by MELS, particularly those used in Spheres of Generic Competencies. Some RPL practitioners and many adults believe that the basic form of these documents, wording of the questions, and overall logic are not easy to grasp. For some, the form is confusing. "*It was almost necessary that you formulate your question yourself*" (Guy, 47 years old, AGE). In addition, answers must be written in limited spaces, which can restrict description. Instructions given by an RPL practitioner suggesting the use of keywords instead of complete sentences can lead to a sense of repetition among adults: "*I thought, 'well, it seems that they have just asked me to do this'*" (Linda, 45 years old, AGE). In vocational training, the wording of competencies makes them sound strange and gives the impression of being disconnected from the familiar vocabulary of the trade: "*Sometimes it is asked with words, my God, how to say it, of another language*" (Christine, 50 years old, secretarial studies). Furthermore, problems with the former RAC web site were reported by both participants and RAC counsellors in the secretarial studies program. This web site was one of the few available on this platform in 2007 and 2008. This is a category of obstacles documented in other research (Cameron, 2011).

One institutional lever related to writing reported by a large number of adults participating in both measures is the presence of RPL practitioners playing an advisory and supporting role, particularly regarding becoming familiar with the RPL or competencies framework and writing help<sup>9</sup>. This lever is identified in other research in the field, including the OCDE report (Werquin, 2010). This support seems crucial to overcoming the challenges of writing in RPL.

Furthermore, an institutional barrier identified in our study has thus far been little documented, most likely because it is specific to Spheres of Generic Competencies and the requirement of showing prior learning related to self-knowledge, particularly one's personal strengths and weaknesses. This request can be interpreted in different ways, and some participants see it as an obligation to disclose intense, sometimes painful, personal experiences. Moreover, it can be misleading to ask adults to reveal what they consider their weaknesses, given that the process of recognizing prior learning is generally associated with strengths<sup>10</sup>. Although this request constitutes a barrier for some adults, it can be a lever for others, as is the case with the opportunity to obtain credits by writing about what one knows well: "*it was my life, it was not complicated, it's about what I knew, what I had experienced.*"

9 Other institutional barriers in vocational training were also mentioned, but they seem less directly related to the adults' use of writing. They include, among others, the display of the overall process in some programs and the organization of missing training. Also, one of the levers frequently mentioned is the flexibility of the RPL process and assessment methods.

10 Nothing in the departmental or institutional documents available to us shows any reason for this request.

(Maude, 19 years old, AGE). Some people are familiar with introspective approaches, for example, through psychotherapy or addiction treatment. As we have seen, some adults appreciate being able to structure their thoughts in writing and rely on it throughout the process.

Very few situational barriers related to writing were mentioned; adults instead mentioned positive aspects: the support of their friends and relatives who helped prepare their dossiers or provided emotional support, as well as workplaces open to hosting RAC assessments in vocational training.

As for the dispositional barriers and levers, they seem more significant and more complex in Spheres of Generic Competencies, which draws from a larger collection of experiences than the RAC in vocational training. None of the adults engaged in the process have a diploma, and many live in precarious conditions. Their generic competencies often exist in a context of poverty, disease, unemployment, and sometimes violence and aggression; the words will often either spill out or dry up. Although some RPL practitioners discourage adults from lingering over painful experiences, some believe that these are experiences they know well and they have learned significantly from: *"to secure myself I had said I'll take this, I have no discomfort, anyway I am in therapy. I said this is a good way to free myself."* (Ariane, 21 years old, AGE).

In vocational training, the specialized vocabulary used in the self-assessment forms sometimes encounters resistance: *"they gave me a word I did not know, I was not going to try to look it up in the dictionary"* (Olivier, 29 years old, maple syrup production). Low literacy skills may be the cause here, but not necessarily, because using new professional vocabulary is also part of the identity and activities related to the trade or occupation: *"I will not use the words [from the competencies framework], they're mongrel words, I will not use them but I will understand"* (Laurence, 23 years old, maple syrup production).

It is important to note that, in both processes, the adults interviewed had strong personal dispositions towards learning before, during, and after the RPL process, which was certainly an asset in the process and use of writing: *"If we do not learn, we would not go far. We would stay at home eating chips and watching movies. It's fun to learn. We discover many things"* (Maude, 19 years old, AGE.); *"I think it is important to learn. It is necessary to learn every day"* (Berthe, 41 years old, secretarial studies). We can link this finding to the work of Livingstone and Myers (2007), which establishes a close link between some adults' significant investment in informal learning and their interest in RPL.

### **Learning and Addressing the Challenges**

Our study revealed the strong presence of writing in both measures: Spheres of Generic Competencies and the RAC process in vocational training. Writing is sometimes used to structure a personal journey (*démarche*) (written framework, self-assessment forms) or support it (list of keywords or readings provided by RPL practitioners). Based on the above results, we cannot argue that the use of writing is a barrier to the process: first, what constitutes a barrier for some is a lever for others and, second, as mentioned by Mourlon-Dallies (2014) with reference to barriers and levers regarding professional writing, an obstacle can easily become an asset when correctly identified and, we like to add, for which adequate support is provided. Consequently, identifying the challenges of putting prior learning into words seems to be an interesting avenue of exploration for both

analysis and intervention. In terms of challenges, we would like to highlight that the use of writing in RPL is neither self-evident, nor necessarily an insurmountable obstacle, even for adults without a secondary school diploma.

If we want to contribute to the creation of participatory literacy environments that foster the maintenance and development of reading and writing skills (Bélisle, 2007), it seems beneficial to support this type of practice without avoiding writing, an approach suggested by some practitioners working with adults with limited schooling, as well as some participants of this study and other research studies (Bélisle, 2007, 2008; Hurtubise, Vatz-Laaroussi, Bourdon Guérette & Rachédi, 2004)<sup>11</sup>.

Some of the challenges related to writing about prior learning can be identified in our results. One of the first challenges encountered in both measures concerns inclusion of the RPL framework. The information bank and self-assessment forms ask the participant to partially decontextualize prior learning and quite literally make their competencies fit into predetermined boxes. Placing an adult in conversation with academic, technical, or unfamiliar vocabularies seems, in some cases, to be a root cause of the difficulties they experience with the instruments. The support or presence of RPL practitioners who know the vocabulary of both the trade (in the case of RAC in vocational training) or relevant experiences (in the case of Spheres of Generic Competencies)—in other words, who are familiar with the vocabulary of both the academy and everyday life—seems necessary to address this challenge. Moreover, although some French authors (Lainé, 2005; Loarer & Pignault, 2010; Presse, 2010) have noticed that putting what one does into words can be difficult in the context of VAE, we do not find this sentiment in the words of the adults encountered or in the archival data. Within the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to judge whether this is a limitation of our study or if the writing difficulties reported in France are more relevant to VAE in certain professions or trades based on relational competencies or at the technical or university level. However, analysis of records and interviews leads us to think that RPL in vocational training in Quebec gives less priority to spoken and written language than in France.

The use of writing about oneself, included in SGC and the secretarial studies program<sup>12</sup>, can be seen as a challenge. Difficulties writing about oneself are partly due to the fear of focusing on personal information one does not necessarily want to see or that one does not want to others to see, particularly those who will be making normative judgments about one's prior learning.

As documented elsewhere (Presse, 2004; Prot, 2009), difficulties describing one's prior learning may also be related to the fact that, at work or in any other context, learning often includes a collective dimension, whereas RPL aims at recognizing a specific individual's prior learning. The use of self-narration in some RPL assessments in secretarial studies also reveals another challenge: putting into words prior learning that involves the acting self while also taking the requirements of the competencies framework into account. The writer must find a way to forge a writing style that falls neither entirely into first-person

<sup>11</sup> However, it is necessary to carefully consider this statement on the avoidance of writing, because observational research (eg. Bélisle, 2008) indicates that it is often certain types of writing that are avoided and not writing itself.

<sup>12</sup> In 2007 and 2008, in Estrie, relational professions were rarely subject to RPL, which may explain why only one vocational program discussed here includes this kind of writing.

narration, nor into genres associated with third-person professional writing, as used in the RPL framework. Here we find a writing style “halfway between the diary [...] and the professional report in due form” (Astier, 2008, p. 59). Writing a shared experience and collective competency in the first person can be as much of a challenge as writing in a way that combines the first person “I” with an objectifying structure, as used in the RPL. This mixed genre is a source of insecurity for these adults, which leads to the following common complaint: “*but I did not know what they wanted me to write.*”

### Conclusion

To conclude, this study shows that the issue of writing in the RPL process is complex and, although it cannot be seen as an insurmountable obstacle once the process has begun, its use will be the source of many challenges. Consideration of these challenges and the discursive genres in use (in the Bakhtinian sense) must be integrated into a general discussion of the use of writing in RPL and the support provided. Moreover, it is important to distinguish the challenges of writing in the competencies identification and assessment stages, which have been presented here, from those earlier in the process or at the information stage. At the information stage, it may be relevant to further reassure adults without diploma that counsellors are available to help them, and not to assume that they are uncomfortable with writing. This is how we can promote greater accessibility for adults engaged in lifelong learning, and particularly those with no previous diploma, without questioning the use and relevance of writing in RPL.

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