1.1 Introduction: the object of research; the *validation des acquis de l'expérience*

The realisation that France had an elaborate system of *validation des acquis de l'expérience*

(VAE), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) came to me serendipitously, as part of a general

comparative enquiry into adult education practices. This discovery, such as it was, occurred well

before the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) became an explicit objective in

Europe within lifelong learning policies (CEDEFOP 2009b).

France, with its legislation on the recognition of experiential learning, appeared to contrast with

many other European countries, where RPL is, in comparison, a more localised, sectoral

phenomenon (EUCEN 2010).

The VAE in France is rooted in a historical evolution of ideals within a particular social and

political context. This French specificity is a significant factor in this study, as the Law of

Modernisation (Minefe 2006), giving citizens the right to have their *acquis* (or "learning

outcomes", Werquin's OECD report (2010)) recognised and assessed, illustrates.

The story of this research passes through the mesh of a more personal re-discovery; it implied a

sometimes arduous re-engagement with French language, my 'mother's tongue', and a

questioning of the underlying historical, social, and cultural realities underpinning the processes

and interactions encountered. There is no apology therefore for a story telling mode appearing through the cracks of 'academic' writing. It is a story of evolving understanding of one particular aspect of French educational history, interfaced with a constant questioning of the meaning and role of social research practice.

We, social researchers, as Law (1994: 2) argues, are

> "unavoidably involved in the modern reflexive and self-reflexive project of monitoring, sense making and control. But since we participate in this project, we're also, and necessarily, caught up in its uncertainty, its in completeness, its plurality, a sense of fragmentation".

In this chapter I present an overview of the main characteristics of RPL – practice and theoretical - in the Anglophone and Francophone contexts. I explain the historical and political background to the development of the French VAE, before presenting the context of the research itself. I then outline the structure of the thesis through its chapters

1.2 An introduction to the terminology

Validation des acquis de l'expérience literally means to "validate acquisition from experience", which in English speaking countries is replaced by the variations of Accreditation or Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning, (APEL), Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, (PLAR in Canada), or Recognition of Prior Learning, (RPL), in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and South Africa, and more recently in Scotland. While the French language uses a word carrying the idea

of "value" in it, the English language context seems to focus on the idea of assessment, with its formal education connotations, and on the idea of exchanging experiential learning for credits; a transfer made easier by the articulation of learning in the form of learning outcomes (Kennedy *et al.* 2006; CEDEFOP 2009a) while the Canadian terminology introduces the more generic idea of recognition. The Québec experience influenced those early French practitioners and pioneers (Barkatoolah 1987). A discourse appeared in France on the concept of recognition in the late eighties, where it is acknowledged first as a self-evaluation process, the self- recognition, to become a process of social recognition and validation by the awarding institutions (Charraud and Paddeu 1999; Feutrie 2000).

The concept of recognition was adopted by the Scottish Qualification Agency (SCQF 2005) in Scotland, an acknowledgement perhaps of the influence of the French model. This terminology will be used in this text when referring to RPL in the Anglophone world, in preference to the more traditional APEL, which nevertheless will occasionally be used when referring to older texts.

1.3 The validation, a resonance within Europe

The French terminology of '*validation'* rather than accreditation, has also been adopted at European level, as we have just seen, while Anglophone concepts related to learning outcomes have gradually dominated the European discourse on credit transfers and qualifications frameworks (EC 2008). The Commission's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (EC 2000; 2001) explicitly states that, creating a learning-for-all-culture should involve the valuing and rewarding of all forms of learning, from all sectors, in order to encourage the most alienated from returning

to learning. This document includes suggestions to focus on the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the development of innovative pedagogy designed to address the "shift from knowledge acquisition to competence development" (EC 2001: 5). The widely used term 'validation' in the European discourse justifies its occasional adoption in this text as an immediately recognisable and generic expression to refer to the VAE or RPL in general.

To continue with the European background, the Copenhagen Declaration of November 2002 (EC 2002: 3) set its main objectives as "transparency, recognition, quality", with main elements featuring the development of Europass (EU 2004b), the European Curriculum Vitae, and the common principles for VNFIL (EC 2004a). The proposed development of a European credit transfer system for VET (vocational education and training) or ECVET, introduces a discourse which includes and gives the highest focus on "learning outputs/ outcomes [...], and the facilitation of transparency of learning processes [...]" (EC 2003a: 15).

Identifying clear learning outcomes within the vocational sector is linked to the facilitation of the recognition of those 'other' learning outcomes emanating from people's non-formal and informal experience. Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training, may or may not lead to certification, being provided in the workplace, or through the activities of civil society organisations (EC 2001); informal learning concerns "everyday social practices and everyday knowledge" (Colley *et al.* 2003: 4); it is not considered intentional or structured. It may well not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. Colley *et al.* (*ibid*.: 9), on the other hand, give a much more in-depth analysis than the EU documents on informal learning and its development, what

they call the "pre-history of non-formal education" in English speaking countries and in Britain in particular, explaining that

> " 'non-formal' as a category can only emerge in opposition to 'formal', once mass formal education becomes meaningful. Prior to the 1944 Education Act, for much of the population, most intentional learning undertaken beyond elementary schooling would be undertaken in a 'non-formal' context" (*ibid.:* 9).

However, the intention here is not to engage in a discussion on the meaning of learning but to situate the contexts surrounding the development of RPL and of the French VAE, whose development predates the European commission's documents on VNFIL, while still being part of a European discourse linking lifelong learning, employability and social inclusion.

These European working papers are, at any rate, very clear as to the perspective within which they are framed: the validation is "aimed at the (re)-integration of individuals into education and training, labour market and society at large [...]. Emphasising objectives of social integration, employability and lifelong learning of the least qualified individuals [...]" (EC 2004a: 2). There is a recurring discourse about competences, learning outcomes or knowledge used often interchangeably, posed as unproblematic. Equally, the Lisbon strategy intends to match education and training systems to the concept of lifelong learning, employability and social inclusion "through investment in knowledge and competences, the creation of an information society for all and fostering mobility" (EC 2004c: 1).

Terminology is signigficant (see Edwards and Boreham (2003) for an analysis of Learning Societies). It reflects specific strands of historical and social realities and policies. These policies, at national and European level, have been translated through a common language into practices influenced or underpinned by dominant, often implicit and contradictory discourses and perspectives; hence the emphasis given to the European context in relation to the RPL-VAE.

These perspectives are to be found within the narratives offered by the various actors in the VAE process, and will be interrogated in this research in an attempt to decipher how experience is 'transformed' into an end product, the qualification.

1.4 RPL and the North American tradition

This thesis will focus on the practices of the French validation as observed during a set period of time in a French university, a small scale qualitative research seeking to capture what some have called the "nebulous" characteristic (Paul 2002) of the French validation process, or even, according to Cherqui-Houot (2006: 84) "the dream of the alchemist".

The preliminary background for the research, however, and the author's experience of RPL, was set in an Anglophone tradition supported by an extensive literature on the subject. Inevitably, this background has acted as an implicit comparative benchmark with which to think about the French practices and underpinning principles. It seems appropriate, therefore, before presenting the context from which the French validation has emerged, to give a brief reminder of RPL in the English speaking world, as the literature review which follows this introduction stems from, initially, but not exclusively, Anglophone sources.

The beginnings of RPL can be found in post-war USA and in Britain in the late sixties and early seventies respectively where there was a need for adults, especially war veterans, to return to higher or continuing education. Originally, RPL responded to what now would be called a 'social inclusion' perspective or an emancipatory vision (Cavaco 2008), aiming to widen access to formal education as well as improving access to employment.

In the UK in particular, the introduction of RPL coincided with the development of modularisation and credentialisation within formal education, in particular within vocational and professional education, (Evans 2000; Walsh and Johnson 2001), with a focus on outcomes of learning rather than on inputs. The origin, duration or method of learning mattered less than the knowledge resulting from it, and how that knowledge could be assessed and accredited within existing certification systems (Johnson 2002). There is evidence that the introduction of learning outcomes within programmes in the UK influenced developments at European level (Bjornavold 2000) in the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EC 2008).

This focus on the assessment and accreditation of prior learning developed alongside practices based on a self-reflective learning process. Indeed, in order to assess experiential learning it was necessary to create tools for assessment, a process which Weil & McGill (1989) described as part of the changes taking place in post school education and training. This approach was based on the idea that learners were autonomous, actively engaged in their own learning. As Weil and McGill (1989) explain, the focus is on self-development, on defining personal and professional goals. The teacher becomes a facilitator; the pedagogical relationship between facilitator and learner is at the heart of the learning process (Rogers & Freiberg 1993).

In that perspective, as we will see in the next chapter, Kolb (1984) exercised the most influence, on both side of the Atlantic, with his famous experiential learning cycle. Most portfolio practices follow his model, where experience can only be meaningful if it is submitted to a rational process of reflection, thus dividing human experience and the reflection on that experience (Fenwick 2000). This presupposes a view of experience as immediately accessible, a stance which has been the subject of much criticism (Michelson 1996, 1999; Johnston and Usher 1997).

These North American approaches share with the French principles underpinning the VAE the same belief in the power of RPL as a tool for greater integration (Feutrie 2003) into the world of work, or greater access to a formal education system. In that respect, the RPL - VAE projects share a humanist ideal (Edwards 2003) which believes in the empowerment of individuals through the development of non-formal, continuing education as a means to greater equality and social inclusion. Such dominant perspective will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

1.5 Ideals of social justice; origin of continuing education and of the *validation des acquis* in France

This section intends to show how the introduction of the VAE in France was an effect of that country's history of social policies based on a certain ideal of social justice.

It is possible to trace the origins of the *validation des acquis* within the French historical and political landscape. It represents a 'natural' evolution of an earlier principle and tradition of the *éducation permanente*, or continuing education. Terrot (1997) charts the concept's appearance

from the 1789 French Revolution's philosophical ideals. It was the philosopher and mathematician Condorcet who stated in 1792 that education had to be a continuous activity for people of all ages (*ibid.*). He had the premonition to foresee the necessity to offer some form of further education for those workers engaged in tasks which even then were becoming ever more routine in the new manufacturing industries, while also associating continuing education with good citizenship.

This ideal of social justice was heralding an 'egalitarian' approach, where, for the first time in French history, the links between learning, work, social justice and technological progress was explicitly put forward as an objective of educational policy (Dif 2000). The principle and its justification, having been expressed, will find their strongest expression much later, after the Second World War. However, following Condorcet's report on the need to establish museums of technologies, the CNAM in Paris *(Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers)* was created in 1794, to become a teaching centre where, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, engineers could attend evening or Sunday classes to update their skills and follow technological advances. With a few bursaries offered to those without means, it could be said to be the first 'further education' institution for workers (*op.cit.*). In the twentieth century, engineers without professional or higher education qualifications, but with more than five years experience, benefited from a law passed in 1939 which allowed them to present a dissertation based on their work experience in order to gain the official title of 'engineer' (Feutrie 2000), making it perhaps the first known example of accreditation of prior experiential learning in France.

 It is in the aftermath of the Second World War, however, through economic imperatives and obvious social needs, that the concept of an equality-based lifelong education began to emerge.

This post war period has been identified as a period of social promotion (*promotion sociale*) (Jallade 2000) or workers' promotion (*promotion ouvrière*) for workers to upgrade their skills.

1.5.1 Employability, the role of the '*diplôme*', and the state as legislator

The fact that France used the legislative route in this (and other) instances is perhaps not surprising if one is to accept Algan et Cahuc's (2007: 15) analysis about a French social model where the state regulates in great details most aspects of French civil society, as a result of "weak social dialogue and lack of trust towards the markets [which] make the state's intervention necessary".

Added to these historical and structural factors, one has to include the role of diplomas in France, a recurring topic in this study. Maurin (2009) analyses the way in which possessing a diploma is not only crucial in terms of labour market penetration by young people; he also highlights how the impact of being *diplômé* (qualified) carries on for the duration of people's careers. The *diplôme* is therefore a fundamental tool of career advancement in French society (Pouget and Osborne 2004). Although contested by both trade unions and employers, official statistical data show that diplomas are still the best protection against joblessness in France (Aubret 1999; Maurin 2009). In this context, therefore, it is not surprising that something had to counterbalance the overriding importance of the diploma in the labour market for those who do not have any, as the labour market demands new kinds of skills.

In this respect, the *Haut comité éducation-économie-emploi* report (HCEEE 2004: 28) is unambiguous about how it sees the VAE's role:

"a tool for the development of competences, enabling them to be adapted to the evolution of jobs in the labour market, […] an approach capable of responding both to the needs for qualifications felt by the economy, and of reducing the phenomenon of exclusion from the labour market brought about by outdated competences".

1.5.2 The *validation des acquis de l'expérience:* a very French affair

The first *VAP – validation des acquis professionnels*

It is, anyhow, possible to chart the development of social advances in France through the enactment of legislation. The landmark legislation for the validation came with the 1984 Savary Act, and the decree of 1985 which allowed access to (higher) education at all levels for those over 20 without the pre-requisites for entry, and who had interrupted their education *(formation initiale)* for at least two years. Then came the Act of 20 July 1992 relating to the *validation des acquis professionnels* (VAP) in Higher Education, followed by the decree of 1993. This latest legislation introduced the possibility to deliver a diploma, bar one unit, based on the candidates' prior knowledge and professional experience, (excluding some professions such as medicine) for candidates with up to five years experience, in the given field of the sought curriculum (MEN 2010).

Social Modernisation Law and the new *VAE – validation des acquis de l'expérience*

It was, however, the following Social Modernisation Law[1] which, on 17 January 2002, introduced a new legal basis for the *Validation des Acquis de l' Expérience*. This law was an all-encompassing

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[1] The whole text of the law (n° 2002-73) can be found on the government website legifrance.gouv.fr , specifically under Titre II: *Travail, Emploi et Formation Professionnelle*, then under *Chapitre* II Section 1: *Validation des acquis l'expérience*
http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=05880761F02B5BCEF63911CF6804C9B9.tpdjo04v_1?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000408905&dateTexte=&oldAction=rechJO&categorieLien=id Accessed 24.04.11

piece of legislation which either amended, or introduced new 'articles' in various *codes* or statutes – in France legislative texts (regulations, laws) covering specific areas are grouped into *codes*, such as *code du travail* or Labour statutes, code of Public Health, Social Care and Families, Social Security, Education.

The impetus for change had emanated from the Ministry of Labour, with the view to put some order into an array of certifications and professional qualifications offered by a wide range of providers (Ministries and private or semi-private training bodies, usually managed through a social partners[2]' agreement).

The VAE in Higher Education and the rewriting of standards

Universities had also been regulated by the 1968 Loi d'orientation sur l'enseignement supérieur, (orientation for Higher Education) officially defining the status of Continuing Education in French universities, setting down their obligation to provide formation to anyone desiring it irrespective of age, social background, or profession. This was reinforced in 1984 by the second "orientation law" establishing Continuing Education as one of the three missions of French universities, (other than teaching and research) leading to, in 1985, the creation of a specific service of *formation professionnelle* in each institution.

The new law encouraged universities to present their diplomas in terms of competences, aptitudes and knowledge linked to professional activities, in order to enter their

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[2] In the vocational-professional sector, these social partners are represented in local professional branches (gathering companies of a similar manufacturing, commercial or service sector). Other social partners are always Trade Unions and government representatives, and specific local education institutions

(professional) qualifications into the *répertoire,* while making them more easily adaptable to the world of work and available to VAE candidates (Pons-Desoutter 2005).

The new objectives are meant to facilitate academic judgement concerning the 'value' of both non-formal and informal learning in respect of university curricula.

However, Pons-Dessoutter (2005) concluded that the results of the survey she conducted did not produce a clear pattern about the various ways universities rewrote their objectives, and showed little agreement as to what constitutes competences, capacities, or pluri-disciplinary and transversal competences.

It appears too that the rewriting of objectives in terms of competences is strongly supported, if not engineered, by the universities' departments of *formation professionnelle*; this is not surprising, as those departments have a direct responsibility for the VAE and direct links with private companies to deliver professional development programmes.

What is a more stable classification is the *ROME (Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois),* a directory of professions and trades, giving a detailed description of the professions, with definitions, skills, qualification requirements and types of activities for that particular occupation. It is a reference tool for employment agencies but also for VAE advisers in universities.

The VAE as an effect of French political and social governance
The validation can be said to be a product specific to the French political and social organisation and governance, emanating from the legislator, and enacted through a complex web of agreements reached by the social partners, who make decisions on a whole

range of subjects, including training, professional standards and qualifications, and the management of the VAE.

The French validation can be said to have evolved in a context where the *formation continue* is provided by a range of organisations, classified as: public providers (universities, ministries - Education, Agriculture, Youth and Sports); semi-institutional structures (Chambers of Commerce, Guild Chambers, the Association for Adult Vocational Training (AFPA)); and private training structures.

The regulations governing the financing of the VAE also originate from historical developments, in particular the law of 1971 on Continuing Professional Education which obliges employers to contribute to the cost of staff training and VAE preparation.

The VAE was embodied in both the Labour and Education *Codes* (Arquembourg and Pouget 2003), and established a national repertory of professional qualifications (*Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles, RNCP),* including those delivered in Higher Education, ensuring that, in Blachère's words, "the social benchmark represented by the professional qualification is the outcome of a real agreement between the State and the social partners" (Blachère 2002: 101).

For a certification to be recognised it has to be registered in the repertoire, and by law all certifications registered can be obtained through the *validation des acquis*. The law also specifies the conditions for employees to receive a specific paid leave in order to prepare for a validation.

It establishes the existence of VAE jurys and their composition, and the role of VAE advisors to support candidates in their applications.

The fact that the legislation states that "the validation des acquis produces the same effects as that of other modes of assessment of knowledge and aptitudes" (Article 134) may be considered as a potential revolution in the world of qualifications, within the French context, (Aubret 2003), as well as having wider implications for universities, and the role of the professionals within them.

1.6 The mysterious ways in which the French model works

Feutrie (2003) and Lenoir (2003) identify the changes introduced by the new law as a 'rupture' of the traditional link between *formation* and qualifications, rendering it unnecessary to follow a programme (*formation*) to gain a qualification. Moreover, the panels or *'juries'* charged with evaluating the VAE applications have a new role, that of *"prescripteurs"* (Feutrie 2003: 24); they can and should prescribe a complementary programme - individual modules if necessary - when deciding on a partial validation. This has created a recognised need (HCEEE 2004) for an appropriate guidance mechanism for learners; a new profession was born, the VAE adviser or *'accompagnateur-rice'*.

At this point it is worth giving a short description of how the validation process is practically carried out, specifically within a Higher Education Institution.
The whole process could be described as follows:

- Stage one: candidates identify a diploma (or diplomas) within their occupational field, and approach the administrative office dealing with VAE applications; they may already have attended information sessions given by the FC department.

- Stage two: they complete the initial *'dossier'* or application form.

- Stage three: they have a first meeting with a VAE adviser in order to check the feasibility of their application and the relevance of the diploma chosen. The VAE adviser helps the candidates to determine their 'project', check the source of funding, and …

- Stage four: … may direct them towards the appropriate member of academic staff, who will check the candidates' experience against the qualification sought. In some instances candidates may approach the academic staff first, who will then inform his/her VAE colleagues.

- Stage five: the candidates and the VAE adviser, through a series of meetings, will then start working on a 'portfolio' (the *dossier*)*,* a document structured into headings, covering the candidates' experience (personal as well as professional), career progression, including descriptions and analysis of tasks, responsibilities, skills ands competences, as well as an analysis of situations requiring problem-solving skills, and the proofs: documentation to support the learning claims (employers' certificates, copies of projects accomplished, etc.).

- Stage six: once completed, the portfolio is formally submitted, along with a formal application to the diploma, to the Chair of the validation panel. The panel is usually set up by the University's Vice-President in charge of the FC, who may also chair the panel; or, as was the case for this study, the panel may be chaired by the director of the programme targeted by the candidate. The jury must include a minimum of three members, with a majority of

academic staff, and at least one external professional. The adviser will communicate with the Chair if necessary during the portfolio construction process.

- Stage seven: VAE jury. The candidates appears in front of the jury to give a short presentation, followed by questions and answers. The adviser is usually present and may, just before the jury sees the candidates, remind the panel of its legal duties and responsibilities, and summarise the candidate's application. The jury (not the advisers) will decide the award of a (full or partial) validation. In the case of the latter, it is under obligation to advise the candidate on the steps to be taken in order to attain the full diploma.

- Stage eight: Diploma is awarded, or, if diploma is not awarded fully…

- Stage nine: supplementary programmes (modules) are suggested by the jury; application to those modules followed by second validation.

The VAE, however, continues to pose problems at implementation level, reflecting complex issues pertaining to the nature of the knowledge being validated; issues of equality of access and equity between different groups of learners, (Mayeux and Mayen 2009); issues of the availability of quality guidance and support systems at all stages of the process; issues around the composition of 'juries', and finally issues of juries' impartiality in respect of employers' participation. Most important for this study are issues of process and micro-practices in the identification and narration of the experience deemed to be able to generate valid knowledge.

1.6.1 The role of *accompagnateurs/ accompagnatrices* (VAE advisers)

The French validation could not have happened without a structured guidance process, which necessitated the involvement of a new profession, as said earlier; the VAE adviser has become

an essential actor in the process of the validation. I have chosen the word 'adviser' in English as a bland, generic term to cover all the distinctions given below.

Of the numerous authors writing on the meaning and role of '*accompagnement'* (advising process) it is Lerbet-Sereni (2003: 305) who alerts us to the etymology of the word *compagnion* (companion), "the one who shares the bread (*cum panis*)". This pleasant image conjures up exactly the sense of friendship, the sense of a companion who walks along, side by side. It is also a reference to the old French tradition of '*compagnionnage*' whereby, after his apprenticeship, the artisan would follow his (always a 'he' then) master before becoming a master himself. So indeed there is also a sense of guidance, of learning along with another person.

Le Bouëdec (2001) draws our attention to this role, while identifying possible distinctions: the adviser-cum-educator with a directive role (traditional), or with a role to provide a *'suivi'* – follow up or feedback (the nearest to an adviser's role), and finally the role played by the *accompagnateur-trice*, where the educator-adviser's role is to be 'alongside'; a non-directive person, attentive, open and available. Moreover, Le Bouëdec identifies the role of 'mediator', one who combines the adviser's function of listening with empathy. Here Le Bouëdec uses the metaphor of *'cheminement';* from *chemin*, a country path; or from the expression *'faire son chemin'*, to make one's own way; *cheminement* carries a notion of the walking pace, taking one's time; the feeling that the journey is as important as the destination.

He highlights, however, the importance of the adviser-mediator being part of a formal structure or institution, and the need for that person to possess professional competences which also put the adviser in a position of authority in the broader sense of the word. We will see that this

representation of 'institutional authority' is part of the many representations discussed in this study.

Indeed the advisers were central to the conduct of this research, as they were the principal contact points between all the other actors involved, gate-keepers safeguarding the learner-candidate's interests, as well as those of the institution. (I will use the word 'candidate' to designate the person applying for a validation).

1.7 A study on the VAE in one Higher Education institution

This study is concerned with the processes involved in the formalising of experience for the purpose of validating *'acquis de l'expérience'* (VAE) within French Higher Education, in the context of the new legislation described in the previous sections. It is the aim of this research to explore the representational processes taking place, the ways in which the narration of experience goes through several stages of translation, to be 'ordered' into a homogeneous 'product' capable of being 'read', or understood, by the evaluators.

The research was at first conducted within an ethnographic perspective, relying on a life history approach, which uses biographical interviews as part of a learning activity. Its methods were to conduct recorded semi-structured interviews and recorded observation of interactions between principal actors. Thus there were recorded interviews with twelve candidates, three advisers, six members of academic staff involved in the VAE (including two members of the jury session observed), one professional-researcher, eight interactions between candidates-advisers, and two juries 'sessions'. Documentary evidence such as portfolios, application forms, *référentiels* or

Standards courses descriptors and the ROME, already mentioned, were used when necessary to support the interview analysis. The nature and timing of the fieldwork did not allow for a longitudinal study, which was not at any rate the purpose of the research, but instead sought to gather a 'picture' of candidates' experience of the VAE, who were available at the time, at whatever stages they found themselves. The methods and methodology will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.

This study sought to give priority to the actors' voices, in particular to the candidates' and their advisers', including some accounts from academic staff. The study evolved and shifted, through the recognition of the central place taken by non-human elements (Law 1992) particularly the portfolio, and all the documentation already mentioned.

The metaphor springing to mind is that of a 'cacophony' of sounds resulting from the intensive time devoted to interviews, while thoughts emerged that the research was becoming an 'analysis of struggle', whose object was "to explore and describe local processes of patterning, social orchestration, ordering and resistance." (Law 1999b: 5). It became an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) story.

1.7.1 The structure of the thesis

The thesis will be articulated in six chapters (including this introduction), which I am now going to introduce.

Literature review

Chapter Two will present a literature review of RPL, focusing at first on the literature from an Anglophone perspective, as most RPL practices have evolved from the North American tradition, as mentioned earlier, of the reflective circle of Kolb (1984) or the theory of the reflexive practitioner (Schön 1983). Recent developments in the theorisation of RPL will be used in order to arrive at an overview of the critique, which emerged on traditional concepts around experiential learning (Fenwick 2000), exploring in particular the postmodernist analysis on experience, learning and knowledge. It will review the French literature on the life history approach, which influenced the research methodology, while presenting some current research work undertaken in France on the validation, the jury's process of evaluation, and the role of the VAE advisers (Mayen 2004, 2008). It will highlight the uncertainty created by the realisation that neither postmodernism nor biographicity (Alheit 1994) provided completely satisfactory answers to the issues around the research methodology. The story of the literature review ends therefore with the introduction of Actor Network Theory, a theory "about how to study things, or rather how *not* to study them - or rather, how to let the actors have some room to express themselves" (Latour 2005: 142).

Methodology and methods

The third chapter on methodology and methods will present the research questions, the original aims and specific objectives of the study. It will trace the changes made to the original design plan, and the evolution of the approach taken for the analysis and discussion of the results. It will highlight the issues raised by this particular study, questions raised about research "as a social practice" (Usher 1996: 34; 2001: 52) and the gradual understanding around the research processes and its evolution, along with the realisation that "when we write about ordering there

is no question of standing apart and observing from a distance. We're participating in ordering too" (Law 1994: 2).

It is a recognition that ANT provides a way to reflect on the "normativities" (Law 2004: 4) attached to standard research methods, while agreeing with Law's statement that "it is that methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices, not only describe but also help to produce realities that they understand" (*Ibid*.: 5). I will also engage in a reflexion about interviewing as the method chosen, and its implication.

Actor-Network Theory

Chapter Four will introduce ANT, and the reasons leading to find an alternative analysis of the results. This Chapter will introduce Callon's (1986) four moments of translation as they will be used to discuss the VAE processes, as the logical conclusion to the 'quest' for a theoretical understanding of the power relations observed in the validation process. It will explore how in ANT actors are those who "make everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own contexts, their own metaphysics, even their own ontology" (Latour 2005: 147).

 I will introduce the idea that I, the researcher, will try not to impose an analytical framework, but "will follow the actors in order to identify the manner in which these define and associate the different elements by which they build and explain their world, whether it be social or natural" (Callon 1986: 201). I will also show the portfolio's role, as an actant or an actor; indeed ANT considers humans and non-humans as equal actors, rejecting the dichotomy of the social and the physical worlds (Law (2000: 1). I will introduce some of the possible themes to emerge out of the interviewees' accounts. This chapter will lead to the following, where the actors will be given their voices.

Findings and analysis

Chapter Five will present the findings and let the actors tell their stories, heard through the lens of ANT. Thus the candidates, their portfolios, the advisers, the members of the jury, and other members of staff will join their voices to form an ANT account of the heterogeneous networks meeting at the confluent of the VAE interviews.

This chapter will combine results and running analytical commentaries in a deliberate choice to weave the story of the research into the stories told by the actors.

Discussion and conclusion

Deriving from the previous presentation, Chapter Six will discuss the findings, focussing on the issues of translation from an ANT perspective. It will highlight some of the themes which bring the greatest understanding on the working of power relations within and outside the process of the validation in France. It will also comment on the research itself, discussing alternatives choices that could have been made in terms of the research approach. It will identify what contribution this piece of research may have made to this particular field of study.

The chapter will include the general conclusion by summarising what has been created through these pages, and by opening up the discussion to the availability of other concepts to think about multiplicity and complexity.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the context of the research, both in terms of the developments of RPL-VAE's theoretical background but also in terms of the implications of the influences from North American thinkers, and the role given to RPL-VAE towards social and economic policies. I explained the connections too between European policies on the validation of informal and non-formal learning and national policies.

I introduced the development of the *formation continue* in France, a context which led to the enactment of legislation which has made the validation a 'mainstream' object for all sectors of education and economic activity. I explained the emergence of a new profession, and its role as a mediator and adviser within the VAE process.

I have also set out the broad aims of this study, which is concerned with the processes involved in the formalising of experience for the purpose of validating Prior Learning (VAE) within a French Higher Education institution.

Finally I set out the thesis structure. The next chapter will review the literature on experiential learning and the practices of RPL – VAE, indicating the theoretical perspectives chosen for this study.

Chapter 2: The story of RPL through the literature, and the story of a research pursuit

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"Learning from experience is a kind of writing that creates a world, a fictional text in which we are the central character of the story. [....] In effect, learning from experience is a process where we textually create and recreate ourselves but without being confined to the textual strategy" (Usher 1993: 175).

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will chart some of the milestones in the journey through the literature of experiential learning, and through the story of this particular search for a theoretical and methodological framework which breaks with traditional views of the recognition of experiential learning.

At the beginning of my particular journey, well over a decade ago, RPL seemed such an innovative way to challenge traditional views on knowledge acquisition, and to offer prospects of introducing new, 'non-traditional' students access to higher education. Indeed, the literature of adult education and experiential learning of the 1970s and 1980s was, and still is, influential, as was the literature on reflective learning at work (Schön 1983; Boud & Solomon 2001). At a time when I was a practitioner with adults returning to education and training within the UK Further

Education system (in the late 1980s and 1990s), it seemed important to give value to people's experiential learning outside formal education. It felt important for those adults, and for me as a facilitator (a common term in those days). With fellow practitioners we were very much influenced then by Rogerian practices (Rogers 1969) and emancipatory forms of adult education, encompassing, more or less implicitly, critical pedagogy (Freire 1970). There was an optimistic sense then of adult education as an individual and collective empowering tool. APEL, as it was most commonly referred to, seemed to offer a means of social redress of educational and social inequalities (Cavaco 2008).

It is not too difficult to argue that RPL practices have taken centre stage in RPL literature to the detriment of theorisation (Andersson and Harris 2006). To review the literature of RPL is to chart the links between 'traditional' perspectives on experiential learning, the North American perspective (Dewey 1938, Kolb 1984), with the development of practices in the Anglophone world along with French developments in the field. RPL in France – or VAE – is of a quite different practical nature and based on different legal processes; however, it could be said to have followed similar epistemological routes if one considers the aims and final objectives of the VAE processes.

Harris (2006) summarises, in her introduction, the way in which RPL practices developed to satisfy various imperatives; a desire for greater social justice, and a more democratic participation in formal education (United States), or the recognised need to focus on competence acquisition and further education and training (UK, Australia) or the involvement of government and Trade Unions (South Africa) to achieve the 'policy of National Transformation' (Evans 2000: 22). Harris also highlights the link between RPL approaches and the introduction of

qualification frameworks; such a development can now be observed in recent European Union developments on Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning (CEDEFOP 2009b).

She also remarks that " RPL offers a generative site in which to research changing socio-economic conditions and their effect on education" (*op.cit.*: 9). Indeed RPL practices cannot be dissociated from their social, political and economic environment, and their development has always been underpinned by, and linked to, diverse epistemological perspectives; however, Harris also points out, "experiential learning theory has become so internalised as *de facto* desirable in RPL that practices are often seen as unproblematic and not in need of explanation" (*ibid.*: *9*). It is "both a philosophy and a method" (*ibid.: 8*).

These social, political and economic environments, not to mention historical and national perspectives, have given rise to characteristic tensions, in both English and French speaking contexts; tensions born of inherent complexities revealed in the practices of evaluation of learning derived from experience. Those tensions have much to do with what Pouget & Figari (2009: 215) have called the *"paradoxe de finalité"* or the paradox of objectives, although with retrospect perhaps the word conflict might be more appropriate. Young sharply highlights these contradictions, between RPL's "emancipatory goal" and its needs to give experiential learning "equal value to formal academic learning, and thus validate the latter as a criterion for recognising the former[?]" (Young 2006: 322).

This chapter will therefore summarise the initial goals of RPL practices, encompassing the 'traditional' societal imperatives just mentioned. Furthermore, those driving forces have been allied to specific practices derived mainly (but not only or always) from Dewey's legacy on

experiential learning, and from followers such as Kolb (1984) or Schön (1983) regarding reflective learning. This essentially North American influence has been felt too in the French literature and practices (Rivoire 2006; Mayen 2008).

The chapter will weave its way through the perspectives which have underpinned APEL/ RPL, then will present some of the more recent critiques which have highlighted the under-theorisation, and, to borrow Harris' words the "unproblematised commitment to the 'authenticity' of learning from experience" (2006: 8).

It will also introduce how, in the course of the research on the French validation practices, the 'continental' school of thoughts around the life history paradigm was 'discovered' as a relevant perspective from which the research might be conducted. It is referred to here as 'continental' as there exists a strong French speaking perspective (Pineau, & Jobert 1989), an equally strong tradition based at the University of Geneva (Dominicé 2000, 2002; Josso 2001), with parallel developments in Québec (Desmarais & Pilon 1996). Life history practices were developed in the context of the *"formation continue"* or continuing and professional education, whereby it is possible to identify the learning acquired through particular life experiences, or "to elicit processes of *'autoformation'*"(Desmarais and Pilon 1996: 7) or 'self-training' for want of a better translation. All these writers use a life history approach in different contexts, such as teacher training for Masters students (Dominicé 2000), or family and group work coupled with action research (Dominicé *et al.* 2000), with a specific aim to combine research and adult and continuing education practices (Finger 1996; Pineau 1996). Moreover, the concept of 'biographicity' (Alheit 2002), and the work of Bertaux (1997) on life narratives or '*récits de vie*', suggested the life history perspective as a potentially useful frame of reference for conducting

the research interviews. French sociologists Dubar and Demazière (2004) provided their own specific methodologies to think about analysing biographical interviews.

It will finally conclude with the realisation that a life history approach felt unsatisfactory in explaining what was observed. The recognition of the portfolio's importance in the candidates' lives and in the whole process led to a reappraisal of the framework for analysis, as the interviews transcriptions unfurled processes of representations and translations which needed to be unpacked. The issues raised through the biographical approach, regarding the nature of the main actors' narratives seemed to open themselves up for another kind of analysis through the perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT). This perspective will be developed more fully in Chapter Four.

2.2 A review of the traditional perspectives on the practices of RPL, and experiential learning

This section aims to summarize the theoretical bases upon which RPL practices have developed, whether it be in the Anglophone or French speaking worlds. It will introduce a critical review of the traditionally accepted practices inherited mostly from humanistic and constructivist theorists (Harris 2006). It starts therefore with what Harris (*ibid.*) calls the first serious attempt at theorising RPL by Weil and McGill's (1989) who provided a good overall review of the issues surrounding RPL.

It is my view that Weil and McGill's model for analysis has remained pertinent to discuss claims around RPL' s role in promoting social inclusion, an issue of particularl prominence in France. The second part of the section will therefore focus on the French case, since France has

mainstreamed VAE practices through its legal framework, and has the most explicit social, political, and economic objectives concerning its outcomes (HEEEE 2004; CEDEFOP: 2007).

The third and last part will discuss what is still a useful model of presenting two main paradoxes of intentions (Pouget and Figari 2009) underpinning RPL practices. The divergent credit exchange and development models of RPL (Butterworth 1992) provide a useful way to think about the role RPL is intended to play in Western economies, and specifically in the European arena of Lifelong Learning policies (EC 2000, 2001), a role which also determines its practices.

2.2.1 Making sense of experiential learning

Weil and McGill attempted to gather the different strands of experiential learning under the metaphor of four villages, each village representing the main 'clusters' of "interrelated ideas and concerns about experiential learning" (Weil and McGill 1989: 3).

The first theme represents RPL as a means for learners to regain self worth through assessment and accreditation of experiential learning through the identification of learning outcomes, irrespective of how and where knowledge was gained. This tradition takes its roots in the examples afforded by the North American Council for Adult and Experiential Learning or CAEL (Weil and McGill 1989; Evans 2000) with the emphasis on providing access into formal education and training.

Village One is characterised by the use of autobiographical elements for the construction of a portfolio evidencing the skills and competences gained. This approach is that of the 'second chance', aiming to redress social inequality while increasing adults' employability (Evans 2000).

Village Two represents RPL's aim to challenge and even transform institutional pedagogical practices, by favouring real life situations such as work-based learning, as sources of learning; it emphasises learning (to learn) techniques, with the learner firmly at the centre of the learning experience, and focusing on the development of learners' capabilities, rather than on their emotional or social development. Reflection upon learning is equally at the centre of such practices.

The third theme places RPL as a social change agent, aiming to raise adults' awareness of the way in which the social, political and institutional context value some knowledge over others. This perspective challenges the dominant discourse and "oppressive structures" (Brah and Hoy 1989: 73) about the interpretation of people's own experience, while refusing to have that experience validated by formal institutions. It is an approach familiar with Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), who advocated ways for the 'oppressed' to become aware of inherent social contradictions – the process of '*conscientization*'; dialogical and reflective, collective participation would lead them to empowerment through community action. Action, in this model, coupled with reflection becomes not just activism but a praxis, or informed action.

Finally, Village Four is about personal growth and interpersonal experiencing. The emphasis is very much on the psychological development of people as individuals, rather than as social actors. It is concerned with change, but in ways which "stress personal autonomy, choice and self-fulfilment, and interpersonal effectiveness" (Weil and McGill 1989:19). The emphasis is on

group dynamics and its healing capacity, led by a facilitator, and much less on accreditation and assessment, recalling Roger's encounter groups (1970).

The common theme emerging from the four villages can be summarised as one of RPL as a source of transformation for the individual, for the institutions, for society. Each village is part of a common discourse of emancipatory aims and effects; of redressing inequality of access; of individual or social empowerment; of interactive effectiveness and social cohesion. Learners are 'autonomous', capable of reflecting upon and articulating their learning, often in a language alien to their own experience, and divorced from their cultural and social capital (Presse 2008). There is a belief in the potential of personal and social 'advancement' through RPL that belongs to a humanistic view of the world and of education (Dewey, 1938; 2005), reflected in the policies and practices across Europe (EC 2004a). This humanistic heritage is highly visible in French research on the practice of the VAE (Lainé 2004; Mayen 2008; Mayeux and Mayen 2009). It is for this reason that this perspective will be given some space in the following sections, before introducing an emerging critique in the Anglophone literature.

2.2.2 RPL for social inclusion; the French case

In this section we will explore how the French VAE is positioned as a tool for social inclusion in the labour market. The VAE's visibility is partly due to the fact that it is mainstreamed (MEN 2011) and part of a coherent legislative strategy (Feutrie 2000).

As we have just seen, RPL has been generally attached to an emancipatory perspective or, in the French context, to the humanist ethos of second chance education or *l'éducation permanente* (lifelong learning) which placed the learner, and personal development at the centre of the

educational activity (Canário 2006). Arquembourg and Pouget (2003) discussed at length the historical development of Continuing Education in France, and the place of validation within it.

In France, *"education continue"* turned into *"formation permanente"* or *"continue"* (FC) (literally continuing training) when policies focused, in the late 1950s to the 1970s, on vocational training to enable workers, and young people, respectively, to upgrade their skills and access professional training (Jallade 2000).

The *Validation des Acquis de l'expérience,* residing both in the statute books of labour and education legislation, as has been already seen in the introductory chapter, is firmly part of the discourse on the '*formation continue'* and social inclusion, and is designed to create links between education and the world of work (Feutrie 2000).

As such, however, it does have its critics, as it is seen as an instrumentalist approach (Presse, 2008), with an emphasis on training and the needs of the labour market. Canário (2006) is very clear about what he considers a descent from "a humanist ideal of *l'éducation permanente*" with its central concept of "the construction of the person", to an "educational orientation functionally subordinate to the production of individuals who are defined by their capacity for production, competition and consumption" (Canário 2006: 31). He adds that the practices of validation and certification of competences are oriented "towards production and human resources management' " (*ibid.*: 31).

In this sense, Canário is right; the new perspective on the validation of experiential knowledge is part of a more market-oriented approach on lifelong learning, social inclusion and employability;

a stance that can be traced within a European discourse (as well as national ones) on training and employment policies (EC 2003a, 2011). At the French national level, the policy document (HCEEE 2004) undeniably locates the validation within a context of socio-economic policies with the twin aims of improving competition on the global market place while re-skilling a low-qualified workforce through the development of competences, to respond to the changing nature and demands of the labour market.

It would be easy, therefore, to see the VAE as a mere instrument designed to mould the workforce to the need of the economy; or as a tool to redress the inequalities on the labour market in a country where the lack of a "*diplôme*" or qualification not only affects young people's entrance on the labour market, but equally affects their social and professional development throughout their lives (Maurin 2009).

The Validation may be described as another 'prophylactic' tool destined to limit the "nefarious effects of the transformation of the global labour market on social and industrial relations" (Clot and Prot 2003: 188). Alternatively, it may be one of those 'learning technologies' which are part of an ideology of enterprise where individuals become customers in the learning market and where the notion of learning society has been displaced by "a more powerful discourse of a lifelong learning market in which individuals are constructed as having to take responsibility for their own learning" (Edwards and Boreham 2003: 416).

In this respect, the French Validation fits well with current European concerns around a 'learning-for-all-culture' discourse where humanist notions of self-fulfilment jostle with economic arguments of employability and adaptability (EC 2000, 2001). Among the many

priorities identified in the Memorandum for Lifelong Learning were suggestions for finding new forms of assessments and identification of learning through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the development of innovative pedagogy designed to address the "shift from knowledge acquisition to competence development" (EC 2001: 5). These objectives have been finally formalised into Validation Guidelines for Informal and Non-Formal Learning (CEDEFOP 2009b). It may be added that the Guidelines present the concept and application of validation as rather unproblematic; certainly, its supposed economic (and individual) benefits are discussed in an untheorised and rather optimistic language from no less an organisation than the OECD (Werquin 2010).

From this contextualisation of the Validation, it is possible to have a sense of the paradox into which its practices have developed. Pouget and Figari (2009: 216) called it a *"paradoxe de finalité"* or a paradox of objectives*.* The validation, in France, having started as a humanist project, is now found oscillating between a human capital enterprise perspective and the remnants of a social capital philosophy encapsulating notions of equity and 'social promotion'. The rise of measurable systems, through the setting up of credit transfer systems and the identification of measurable outcomes, leave unanswered questions of process relating to the actual translation of experience and learning into certifications and credits, compounding issues of codification and formalisation of experience.

These issues of process will be developed further in this chapter; however, it is thought useful to summarise these two approaches into the following models of credit exchange and developmental models, as a way of thinking about the practice, and theory, of RPL.

2.3 Two models: credit exchange and developmental models

Butterworth's models (1992) of RPL give us another, more synthetic way of thinking about the apparent tensions between purpose and practices, encapsulating the paradoxes of objectives which are emerging within the literature (Canário 2006; Presse 2008). Butterworth argued that APEL processes could fit into either a developmental model or a competence-based credit exchange model.

2.3.1 The Credit exchange model

This reflects what has been said earlier about the development of competence-based approaches, and is concerned with assessment (Wailey 2002), and credit-transfer mechanisms based on proof of past achievements.

In the United Kingdom for example, the survey carried out with HEIs members of the Southern England Consortium for Credit and Transfer (SEEC) on RPL practices (Johnson 2002) indicates that a humanistic view of experiential learning based on self-directed enquiry and personal development (Knowles 1970) has been subsumed by preoccupation about tariffs, levels of credits, and institutional regulations legislating on allowable percentages of credit for admission or credit equivalence. In this respect Davies (1999) talks about a qualification culture or an accreditation epidemic in the UK; such a phenomenon, however, could said to have spread to the European Union thanks to its export of the European Qualifications Framework model (EQF) (EC: 2008).

In France, Lenoir (2002) warns against a qualification inflation, which might create a "deregulation of qualifications and of remunerations" (Lenoir 2002: 7). This can be taken as a reference to the French highly regulated and protected labour market, where remuneration follows levels of qualifications, and where to be unqualified is to be at risk of unemployment, even unemployable (Maurin 2009).

However, Lenoir's fear is not borne out by research as Maurin (2009) explains in his study of French society's recent surge of fear about *"déclassement"*, (fear of social 'downgrading' for the younger generation). Indeed, he reports that the increase in qualifications has not been attended by their depreciation; on the contrary, "the process has reinforced the benefits bestowed by the social status to which [diplomas] give access for their owners" (p. 55). His study confirms two points which are relevant to our subject; one is that diplomas do provide access to the labour market (as opposed to having the right experience or competences) and that in time of economic crisis, the value of the 'diploma' explodes, thus increasing inequalities between those who have it and those who do not.

This point will be raised again during this study as it constitutes one of the main historical and cultural particularities of the French validation. It could be said that the importance of the 'diploma' has necessitated the development of the VAE as a safeguard measure against unemployment and social exclusion in ways which would not have been possible in other European countries.

In several countries, including the UK (Davies 1999), Australia (Wheelan 2006) and France (Charraud and Paddeu 1999) a qualification culture emerged coinciding in the seventies with governmental worries about workers' employability with the parallel growth of modularised curricula. This in turn has seen the development of learning outcomes (LOs) Evans (2000), along with credit accumulation. The most recent definition of learning outcomes comes from the OECD who, along with CEDEFOP (2009a) defines Learning Outcomes as "the knowledge, skills and competences that people have acquired as a result of learning and can demonstrate if needed in a recognition process" (Werquin 2010: 26). Storan (2000) called this development a growing quality assurance culture.

Even in France, where the concept of Learning Outcomes, previously barely translatable, is rendered as '*acquis de l'expérience, objectifs'* (CEDEFOP 2009a: 85), credits were introduced as « *unités de valeur capitalisables* » at the end of the sixties (Madoui 2002), thanks to curriculum modularisation. The term *"capitalisable"* fits in with the notion of a credit exchange system, and illustrates metaphorically the fact that RPL - VAE operate within a system seeking to transform outcomes of experience into something which can be quantified into a 'capital'. This can 'accumulate', and become convertible not into cash, but into a 'diploma'.

However, it would appear that programmes have broad objectives or *'finalités'* rather than strictly speaking LOs, as shown by several studies on the decision-making process of French validation juries (Mayen 2008; Mayen and Savoyant 2009; Tourmen 2008), and as we will see during the course of the research.

2.3.2 The developmental model

The credit exchange model is in direct tension with the more traditional vision of RPL, the development model, (Pouget and Figari 2009) based on a humanistic paradigm of individual self-development, with individual learner at the centre of the learning process. It is based on the assertion that only learning derived from experience can be assessed, and that the experience be interpreted and analysed though a reflection-conceptualisation process. This model highlights the importance of reflection-in-experience and on-experience, supported through the intermediary of an RPL adviser-educator. Butterworth links the value of written reflection-on-action (Schön 1983; 1991), and the process of reflexive enquiry, seen as an integral part of professional development and learning dialogues (Wildermeersh 1989), to educational action-research, as part of a phenomenological view that knowledge is socially grounded. Self-reflection, Butterworth adds, will "integrate the knowledge acquired with the individual's sense of identity" (Butterworth 1992: 49), recalling Rogers' approach where learning engages the whole person, feelings and intellect (Rogers 1969).

This perspective owes much to Dewey, who broke away from traditional views of education which imposed knowledge from an external authority position, and who saw in action a tool for knowledge (Mougel 2006). His idea of 'progressive' education concerned the search for new and "more effective source of authority" within experience (of the educators and of the pupils) (Dewey 1997: 21). The fact that Dewey's and the early pragmatists' theory was later considered as too focused on "accommodation and compromise" (Crotty 1998: 61), does not detract from their critical stance about the social world with which the individual was interacting.

Dewey's innovative contribution was to develop the concept of an "organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey *op. cit.:* 25). The issue for Dewey was that "basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature [the educator] and the immature [the young] than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others". This was a new role for educators, that of facilitators in educational practices. All human experience" says Dewey, "is ultimately social: [it] involves contacts and communication" (*ibid*.). For Dewey and constructivist theorists, the emphasis is on "the meaning making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty 1998) whereby individuals "construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from his or her own action in the world" (Fenwick 2000).

It is not intended here to conduct a full critique of Dewey's influential and at the time, innovative, philosophy of education. It was felt necessary, however, to highlight how his ideas, and those of his 'followers' such as Kolb, still have deep repercussions on educational practices, and in the context of accrediting experiential learning. His continuing influence can be seen in the French literature and VAE practices in relation to reflection, or the 'distancing' process between the lived experience (lived subjectively and 'in-time') and experience as an object for reflection and analysis (Mayen 2008, 2009).

This wide spread humanistic approach which favours reason and intellectual distancing (*distanciation)* makes it worth remembering that for Dewey, there were two types of experience: the good quality experience which is "educative" and the bad, which is "mis-

educative" (Dewey *op.cit.*: 37). According to him, deliberate discrimination will determine which experiences are not conducive to making the right sort of judgement or decisions about future experiences, and which will deliver the necessary continuity with the past, thanks to their sufficient depth and meaning to be reflected upon. This is where Dewey insists on "intelligent activity" instead of the impulsive kind (1997: 69); where he stresses the importance of "complex intellectual operations", such as "observation" (of surrounding context), of knowledge (of past experience and their consequences), and of judgement over the preceding two operations (1997: 69). In this way judgement overrides impulsive desires to act. Reason, in other words, overrides emotions and other factors which may influence decisions; "mere activity does not constitute experience" (Dewey 2005: 83). One can trace the origin of contemporary experiential learning practices in the following:

> "Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something" (Dewey 2005: 83).

For Dewey, reflection is the central tool with which to discriminate, in order to resolve problems, between good and 'bad' experience inspired by impulsive behaviour, which in turn promotes further "careless behaviour" (Dewey 1997: 26).

There is much in Dewey's writing which comes out as judgemental, as to what constitutes a good experience, or human (intellectual, spiritual) growth in the wrong direction. The question which comes to mind is, 'who really decides what is good or bad experience'? Whose criteria determine the value of experience? As Fenwick remarks, referring to Michelson's feminist perspective:

> "it ignores the possibility that all knowledge is constructed within power-laden social processes, that experience and knowledge are mutually determined, and that experience itself is knowledge driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings" (Fenwick 2000: 251).

It is possible to see how much the French VAE processes rely in effect on 'discriminatory' judgements as to what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate experience in relation to the demands of the *'reférentiels'* (diplomas descriptors) (Mayen 2008). Those determine what constitutes 'acceptable' experience, via intermediaries' negotiations and judgement (the VAE advisers and the jury). Mayen is very specific about this; a VAE candidate may regard particular bits of experience as significant and even have an emotional attachment to them, but their value has to be negotiated in order to decide whether they are indeed valuable regarding the certification targeted. Indeed, what Mayen calls "social validations of experience", whereby candidates' past activities have been valued by others, may actually "come into conflict with the validation criteria of the diploma" (*ibid*.: 107).

Ignoring the social dimension of learning, and concentrating on individual and cognitive meaning making of experience, Kolb (1984) developed a rational and 'pragmatic' theory of experiential learning – 'pragmatic' in the way in which it has been so easily and widely adopted and adapted – with its apparently logical and cyclical model positing the sequence of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation. This model is supported by a widely used Learning Styles Inventory; a recent example of its use can be found in the Scottish Qualification Authority's RPL resource pack (SCQF 2007). Such a pragmatic approach seems to result in an instrumentalist approach (Boud *et al*. 1993) focusing on those learning technologies mentioned by Edwards (2002).

Kolb's model continues to be quoted and implemented widely, including in France (Thibault, 2006) in spite of consistent and serious scrutiny of its validity (Coffield et al. 2004). Bergsteiner et al. (2010) not only find flaws in Kolb's modelling but also critique his conceptualization as "highly muddled typology of what constitutes concrete and abstract learning" (Bergsteiner et al. 2010: 32). Furthermore, they critique Kolb's "bi-polar dimensions 'active experimentation-reflective observation' and 'concrete experience-abstract conceptualization'", as posing "fallacies in discourse". For example, they say, "[…] the construct 'active experimentation' is, strictly speaking, tautological. After all, there can be no such thing as inactive experimentation" (*ibid.*: 42). It is not the purpose of this work to analyse Kolb's model in detail but it is important to highlight the fact that it is not as flawless as its widespread use might suggest.

Others in the Dewey tradition have shaped adult learning practices, and in particular have contributed to the construction of the notion of the 'autonomous learner'. Knowles (1970), like

Rogers, (1969, Rogers and Freiberg 1993) was influential among adult educators in the seventies and eighties, as he believed in the emancipatory and self-development power of education for mature learners. Knowles' andragogical principles were based on what he calls four 'assumptions', namely that people become independent and self directed as they grow into adulthood, drawn to learn for practical application in order to fulfil their social roles. Experience becomes a 'reservoir' for learning (Knowles 1970). There is an obvious similitude to the notion of experience as an object at the heart of French analysis (Mayen 2008, 2009).

Knowles echoes Dewey, and reminds us of Kolb's 'reflective observation' when he talks about "unfreezing and learning to learn from experience", a process whereby adults operate an objective analysis upon themselves and their experience, and learn how to take responsibility for their own learning through self-directed inquiry (*ibid*).

However, it is Schön (1983, 1991) who has had the most influence in Higher Education and within professional training areas when it comes to discussing reflection and reflectivity upon experience; reflection-on-action, a retrospective movement of looking back at experience, and reflection-in-action, "an intuitive reflectivity involving the prospective, where thinking and doing coincide in a moment-to-moment adaptation" (Bleakley 1999: 322). Schön belongs to what Bleakley calls the humanistic emancipatory interpretation underpinning the notion of reflection, a direct legacy of Dewey and his followers.

The other three interpretations, identified by Bleakley, are the technical rational, an approach using reflection as a 'technique' and linked to vocational areas; the deconstructive, in reference

to Usher and postmodernist critiques; and the radical phenomenological, which he defines as "post-Heidegger" (Bleakley 1999: 328). He comments on the appropriation, in educational discourses, especially in adult and professional education, of reflective practice "[…] by an ideological position that seems to pass as 'natural', or is unacknowledged by its adherents – that of emancipatory liberal humanism" (Bleakley 1999: 317). Indeed RPL and the VAE operate within such emancipatory paradigms where learners are supposed to achieve autonomy (another catch-all phrase) and "take control of their own learning and its assessment through empowering facilitation" (*ibid.*: 317).

The concept of the autonomous and self-reflective learner continues to underpin RPL practices, in the UK, in France, and indeed in Europe through the publication and wide dissemination of the Guidelines (EC 2009b), as indicated early on in this chapter. The following part of this chapter will review some of the critiques of the approaches just discussed; those critiques were influential in the way the research was theorised.

2.4 Issues with the dominant discourse on experiential learning

This fourth section seeks to examine critically the dominant discourse of experiential learning, focusing on the concept of the self-directed, autonomous learner, and the continuing influence of Dewey and Kolb (1984). It will focus on a critique of the belief in a universal knowledge inherited from the Enlightment (Michelson 1996; Usher 1997). It will examine the role of the RPL portfolio as a means of representations of the reified experience (Fenwick 2000), along with the

reflective process demanded of RPL candidates and the transfer of experiential knowledge into

credits (Porkony 2006).

2.4.1 The disappearance of experience, and the affirmation of the autonomous self-reflective

learner

Fenwick's influential article on the five contemporary perspectives on cognition (Fenwick 2000)

explores alternatives to the dominant reflective constructivist perspectives. Her analysis is

relevant as it opens up ways in which to consider the "relationship between experience, context,

mind, and learning" (*ibid.*: 246). Similarly, Young highlights other conceptual relationships which

remain to be probed between "knowledge, authority, qualifications and different types of

learning" (Young 2006: 326).

The main areas being discussed by the critiques of the humanistic approach to RPL focus around

the meaning of 'experience', and of experiential learning. Fenwick (2000) considers the

phenomenon whereby any learning could be viewed as being non experiential; she points out

that if the 'category' of experiential learning refers to learning that is not formal or 'school'

learning, then this in itself would indicate that some kinds of learning do not incorporate

experience, "an absurd proposition from any definitional point of view" (*ibid.*: 245).

This might explain the difficulties that Boud *et al.* (1993: 9) recounts as editors, when setting out

to define what learning from experience meant. They suggested that experience contains within

itself a judgement, an interpretation which produces meaning; hence for them the importance

of self-reflection. They continue by arguing that experience does not necessarily lead to learning;

for it to happen "there needs to be active engagement with it". Moreover, in order to "shift into"

knowledge, experience has to be "negated" (Criticos 1993: 161). One could say that experience

is therefore occulted, to be transformed into this other intellectual 'product', divorced from its

actual making. Fenwick's counter argument is that experience and reflection upon it cannot be

dissociated; they happen in a "kinesthetic activity, conscious and unconscious dynamic, all

manner of interaction among subjects, texts, and contexts." (Fenwick 2000: 245).

2.4.2 The autonomous or self-learner

I have already mentioned how experience in the French VAE is considered an object to be

elaborated upon, a model mainly derived from constructivist psychology – Dewey and Piaget and

Inhelder (2004), Mezirow (1991) and Schön (1983). Fenwick's analysis rightly points out how

these models portray "learners as independent constructors of their own knowledge with

varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions [...] A learner is believed to

construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning

derived from his or her actions in the world" (Fenwick 2000: 246).

Moreover, the discourse around the independent or autonomous learner makes much of the

empowering effect on learners of those adult education practices, who become able to express

their true 'selves', and develop their own self understanding, unimpeded by the barriers of

formal education; a stance that is very much taken in opposition to formal school learning (Harris

2006). Adults' experience is considered 'authentic' in the andragogical tradition and, as Usher *et*

al (1997: 96) point out,

"[T] he rejection of otherness means that andragogy cannot have a conception of

experience as culturally constructed, pre-interpreted, complex and multi-stranded.

[…] The self of andragogy is the self of the Enlightment. […]. [People] are pre-given

and decontextualised and, although they are accorded a biography since without it

they would have no experience, the assumption is both that they can distance

themselves from it […]".

They go further by highlighting the humanistic tradition's 'binaries' between the authentic self

and the social world, from which the self has to liberate itself in order to become autonomous.

They also argue that this approach, by "enabling humans to 'open up', and provide access to

their inner world", create paradoxically the possibility of "an infiltration of power by subjectivity

and a complementary infiltration of subjectivity by power" (*ibid.*: 98).

This infiltration resembles the interplay between what Mayen calls a "subtle work of de-

subjectivisation and of re-subjectivisation", during the interaction between the candidates and

their advisor, who have to let candidates' subjectivity and emotions express themselves, in order

"to act upon them with the candidates" (Mayen 2008: 107). The advisers support this activity

upon the self, contribute to it, become part of it; but to what extent is this kind of 'infiltration'

also an infiltration of power, power of the prescribed criteria determined, through the

institution, by the socio-economic context in which candidates find themselves? Fenwick talks of

"a process of […] disciplining experience, a process that inserts governance as a matter of course

and naturalizes hierarchies of knowledge and skills" (2000: 244).

Mayen (2009) indeed explores to some degree the conflicts candidates face between the need

for rational analysis and their emotional response to their own experience. He highlights the fact

that the activity of 'distancing' and re-elaboration in relation to experience can only be achieved once the individual has shed her/his affective attachment to the first hand experience, or when it has been "rendered affectively neutral". The work candidates have to do - take their experience as "an object to be acted upon" (Mayen 2009: 105) - engages their intellectual self during what Mayen himself calls an 'instrumental system', involving pre-defined documents which candidates have to produce. They will have to translate the 'right' experience into an elaborated form that fits with the *référentiels,* and which is acceptable to the jurys. As Mayen clearly states, this is a process whereby "identification and appropriation of the use of the *référentiels*, as well as identification of the way to express oneself, are the essential points in the construction of capacities to act with and upon one's experience during the VAE" (Mayen 2008: 63).

It is a paradox highlighted in many of Mayen's research writings (Mayen 2002, 2009). The subjective element is recognised as it shapes, not only the experience itself, but the 'product' of experience, in the way candidates describe, analyse, select or deselect aspects of the experience they wish to put forward. Indeed Mayen points to the way in which the construction of meaning [of experience] is strongly affected by emotional responses to life events, one of the difficulties created by the "inseparability of emotion from cognition" (*ibid*.: 69). According to him, the paradox continues with the jury, who want to see the whole person behind the candidate, and behind the predetermined documents created by him or her. Therefore, it would seem that subjectivity is considered unavoidable (since it is there anyway) but distrusted and in the end overcome. This is a subject to which this research will return.

2.4.3 The portfolio, representations and translations

The elaboration of experience goes through the *'dossier'* (portfolio), which will take a central role in this study. It is the embodiment of the ordering and objectifying of experience (Fenwick 2000), by those evaluating it, and their institutions. The knowledge thus articulated is presented through the portfolio.

Michelson further focuses on the normative characteristic of the APEL portfolio, and the quantification of knowledge. Portfolio writing operates a translation of the candidates' human, social and cultural capital into recognisable 'universal' knowledge, through an acceptable language or formal literacies. According to her, the act of writing the portfolio reveals a fertile terrain for 'dysfunctionality' of purpose. Michelson highlights the distinction made about experience and knowledge, and says that

> "[….]Experience always happens first, knowledge is the latter product of experience acted upon by reason. [….] Because knowledge will be assessed, not for its immediate relevance, but for its similarity to academic ways of knowing, the university replaces the original site of production as the place from which knowledge is valued and meaning assigned" (Michelson 1996: 189).

It is the dilemma about the re-presentations of experience within the portfolio which this research will seek to explore; as Johnston and Usher (1997: 141) comment, "experience is always mediated (represented or re-presented) [….] inherently capable of many significations because it

can be presented in many ways, although some representations are more dominant (powerful) than others".

As the research unfolded, attention focused on the issues to do with the 'reification' of experience, with the process of representations and translation into something which must conform to pre-established norms. To quote Michelson,

"[…] There is nothing disinterested or innocent about the process through which knowledge is given value. Its valuing takes place through concrete social practices in which specific knowledge - and, therefore, specific knowers – are publicly and institutionally valued and in which questions of epistemological authority explicitly confront questions of power inequality. APEL relies on the power of the academy to determine what kind of knowledge "counts", and translate epistemological legitimacy into currencies –credits, degrees, professional credentials – that lead to social status and material rewards" (Michelson 1996: 192).

This is echoed by Presse (2008), who gives a startling illustration about the way in which all experiences are not equal, and all knowledge not valued in the same way. She tells the story of what she calls recognition denial', that of a young woman who took care of her grand-parents at home, for two years, the quality of her care having been being recognised and valued by the people around her. However, this experience of care could not be recognised through the VAE because it was being considered as 'family experience'; a professional activity carried out in conditions which did not conform to the expected model.

A rather lone voice within the French context, Presse (2008) also argues that the idea of self reflection or *"auto-reflexivité"* is articulated around a conception of individuals who are free to make their own choices, ignoring a context which structures the very decision-making processes involved. Her argument, based on her research with immigrants and people with low literacy level, is that the formalisation of experience requires the adoption of what she calls a linguistic secondary genre, (referring to Bakhtin's work on language (Bakhtin 1997)). It is this genre which enables the reflective stance, as opposed to the primary genre, which uses everyday language. What is expected from the candidate is the translation of their experience in the secondary genre, the evaluators' language, who will only "accredit the familiar" (Porkony 2006: 273).

Madoui (2002: 122) also notes that what is evaluated is a "re-composed, de-contextualised experience", while words such as transposition, transformation (Cavacao 2008), translation (Cherqui-Houot 2006), recur persistently through the French literature. " To translate", says Callon (1986: 223)

> "is to displace [...]. To translate is also to say in one's own language what others say and want, why they act in the way they do and how they associate with each other: it is to establish oneself as a spokesman".

It is true that the VAE candidates are the ones to translate their own experience, but they do so through the prisms of others' judgements and others' classifications, even using others' words. That is at the heart of this research.

2.5 Postmodern moment, and doubts, in the research process

In this section I chart moments of doubts as the research process unfolded, using the postmodern stance to review accepted practices of reflection and of categorisations of experience, and to reflect on the process of research and on the role of the researcher.

The postmodern analysis seemed to offer "responses across the disciplines to the contemporary crisis of representation, the profound uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate depiction of social reality" (Lather 1991: 21). This postmodern argument, Lather continues,

"is that the dualisms which continue to dominate Western thought are inadequate for understanding a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in a complex and non-linear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities" *(ibid.:* 21).

At the beginning of the research, it appeared that postmodern thought could offer a way to talk about the messy (Michelson 1996; Fenwick 2000) and fragmented reality of people's experience, as it "commits itself to ambiguity, relativity, fragmentation, particularity and discontinuity" (Crotty 1998: 185).

What did these different perspectives, humanistic emancipatory and postmodern, mean for my research intentions on the VAE process at the time? Indeed I was beginning to see that the VAE process was imposing a categorisation of people's life, sometimes resisted by the candidates I interviewed, before submitting to the demand of the classifying portfolio. Foucault had this to say about categories:

> " The most tenacious subjection of difference is undoubtedly that maintained by categories. […]categories create a condition where being maintains its undifferentiated repose at the highest level. Categories organise the play of affirmation and negations, establish the legitimacy of resemblance within representation, and guarantee the objectivity and operation of concepts. They suppress the anarchy of difference, divide differences into zones, delimit their rights, and prescribe their task of specification with respect to individual beings" (Foucault 1977a: 186).

It is this 'prescription' through the portfolio's categorisations which seemed at odds with my previous idea of the VAE as an 'emancipatory' project. The existence of paradoxes within the VAE (Pouget and Figari, 2009) became more obvious as the research and analysis developed. It was course possible to see the effects of the validation in humanistic terms of self-actualisation if not of social 'empowerment'. In other words, it was difficult not to consider, prima facie, the validation as part of this emancipatory humanistic project (Madoui 2002) its natural epistemological habitat. On the other hand, there was undeniably an alternative way to consider it, and postmodernism seemed, in the words of Scheurich "Western civilization's best attempt to

date to critique its own most fundamental assumptions, particularly those assumptions that constitute reality, subjectivity, research, and knowledge" (Scheurich 1997: 2).

However, postmodernism also presented its own limitations around the question of action, or 'what to do', which, according to Lather (1991: 12), "is largely underaddressed in the postmodern discourse"; a matter, for Lather, to salvage the "discourse of emancipation" through a "reconfiguration using strategies of displacement rather than strategies of confrontation in order to multiply the levels of knowing and doing upon which resistance can act" (Lather 1991: 13). This, she continues, opens up the era of 'self-reflexivity' within the "sociological project" (*ibid.:* 15), which meant, for this researcher, looking at my position as an interviewer, and at how I reported the interviews, in order to avoid "the indignity of speaking for others" (Foucault, 1977a: 209).

On this subject, Deleuze, in his conversation with Foucault, says, "[W]e ridicule representation and said it was finished, but we failed to draw the consequences of this "theoretical" conversion – to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf" (*ibid.*: 209).

That stance had been at the heart of the way in which I wished to conduct this study. The theoretical implication for this piece of research of 'not speaking for others', inferred a deliberate choice to 'suspend disbelief' induced by the postmodern perspective (or silence some of the postmodern voices) in order to try and let the validation 'speak for itself' through the candidates' voices. This realisation came simultaneously with the exploration of the life history perspective and biographicity as a means to get nearer to the candidates' narratives and

candidates' own representations of their experience, as well as other actors' involved in the validation process. That was the consistent thread running through the initial stages of a somewhat hesitant methodology. However, I was also most aware that "it is precisely when researchers try to make themselves invisible in the text, to let the subject 'speak'- as good researchers should do - that they are at their most interventionists: the appearance of artlessness is a rather artful business" (Stronach and MacLure 1997: 35).

2.6. The theoretical issue for this study. Search for a methodology

Following on from the preceding, this sixth section discusses issues around the research methodology. It introduces the life history perspective, which at the time of the research seemed to offer a way to listen to the VAE candidates' voices without the classifying interference of the researcher. It seemed that the candidates' narratives were close to the *'récits de formation'* (Dominicé 2002) (educative, training narratives) or even *'récits de vie'* (life narratives) analysed by Bertaux (2005).

The last part of this section exposes the dissatisfaction with the life history approach, as it did not address the essential question of what was being evaluated during the VAE process. It seemed to go through various stages of 'translation' in which I, as a researcher, was also concurring in the most practical and basic way through my own translations from French into English. This section therefore introduces Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a way to think about the VAE process differently. The connection of ANT with the VAE process is further developed in Chapter Four.

2.6.1 Life history perspective

My concern of not 'speaking for others' found some answers once I became aware of the 'Geneva school' of life history (Dominicé, 1996, 2000, 2002; Josso, 2001), which seemed to present an alternative way to approach the validation. Although, as has been already outlined, the French experience of RPL labours under similar tensions as that encountered in the United Kingdom, e.g. between developmental and credit exchange models or economic necessity (Mougel 2006), it seemed, at the time of writing the research proposal, that it had integrated some elements of a biographical methodology which offered a different, more 'existential' (Pineau 1994; Leguy 2001) approach to the RPL process. By existential, Pineau means an approach to adult learning which encompasses a *"projet de vie"* (project of life) even a philosophical stance about understanding the meaning of one's life (Pineau 1994: 309). This philosophy, according to Leguy (2001) originates from the *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), an eighteenth century movement seeking to oppose the positivism of the time, through the definition of the concepts of 'comprehension' and the 'world of life', whereby "lived experiences, expressed through language, were objectified in narratives, sayings, proverbs, maxims […] incorporated through the tradition" (Leguy 2001: 48).

Lainé (2001) also makes the link between life history as a form of pedagogical tool, and the biographical approach used in the social research on the life and culture of immigrants to the U.S. pioneered by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) of the Chicago School of Sociology.

It certainly appeared that the French approach gave preponderance to narration as a learning methodology or the '*récit de vie'* (Bertaux 1997; 2005). Bertaux (1989: 36), on the one hand, identifies the *récits de vie* as belonging to the research arena, whereby the interviewees are the

means by which the researchers' objective, "*l'élucidation du social*" (the elucidation of the social) is reached. On the other hand, he identifies the objectives of the *formation* as one residing in the adults undergoing the learning process, 'pro-jecting' themselves in the future, while using a retrospective methodology (Bourdieu 1994) of going back through their lives. The *récits de vie* become *récits de formation* (stories for and of learning), where the *formateur/rice* (trainer - educator) has the power to influence the direction of the *récit de formation* (Bertaux 1989; Leguy 2001).

It is also felt that, 'falling into' the continental life history approach with its emphasis on narratives, constituted a practical compromise to approach the research, between an emancipatory form of understanding and a postmodern frame of mind intent on deconstructing realities and representations, while at the very least trying to let the actors speak on their own behalf.

The belief in the "value of the knowledge each individual, even the most ordinary, possesses" (Lainé 2001: 30) had sustained my practice in teaching adults in the past. Dominicé (1989) reinforces this point when talking about research, developing the idea that research (into adult education) cannot ignore the "interlocutor's knowledge", making the research process a "participative" one per necessity. Further he says that

> "the biographical approach exposes processes because it activates them. The
> learning processes *[les processus de formation]* can thus be considered as an object
> of research which reveals itself within the learning effects of the biographical
> approach. The biographical learning of the interlocutor, in the educational meaning

of the term, becomes then one of the methodological conditions of the research"

(*ibid.*: 59).

Similarly, Pineau (1994: 309) explains that a "methodological participative orientation consisting in integrating the interlocutors directly concerned [learners and researchers-adult educators] *(my note)* to the conduct of a research becomes an epistemological option". Pineau contrasts this approach, a 'co-investment' in the production of knowledge, with an interpretative human sciences tradition, which demands objectivity and distancing with the 'subject', this 'other' being studied (*ibid.*: 308).

The life history approach therefore resonated with the claims being made that the French validation was a learning process *(formation),* as well as a certifying tool. In fact, Chakroun (2009) wrote his doctoral thesis based on the premise that the VAE was located in a 'zone of proximal development', a concept drawn from Vygotsky's (1999) which is "the difference between the level of current development observed in the way a learner solve problems without help and the level of potential development that can be determined when the learner is assisted or collaborate with other learners" (Chakroun 2009: 28).

It appeared therefore that a methodology, 'loosely' based on a life history paradigm, would respect the fact that VAE candidates were telling a form of partial life history, or, in the words of Dominicé (1989: 64) were channelling their memory on *"zones de vie spécifiques"* (specific life zones), which, in our context, would be their working life zones, albeit not exclusively. It also seemed that we were closer to the concept of *"biographies éducatives"* (educational or learning biographies), which revealed "socio-cultural norms and expression of uniqueness of a life

history" (Dominicé 1989: 60). These *biographies éducatives* might be considered an educational tool with continuing education student to validate their experiential learning (Dominicé 2000).

2.6.2 Life history, biographicity, dialogic practice

The emphasis within the life history paradigm on a dialogic methodology appeared to have similarities with the interaction between the candidates and their adviser. The candidates' 'narration' of aspects of their life experience amounted to a *récits de vie;* according to Bertaux (2005: 14): "… there is *some* récit de vie as soon as there is a description in a *narrative* form of a fragment of the lived experience". Pineau (1994: 367) clearly portrays a biographical "model" in adult education which emerges as a challenge to traditional formal education, whereby all actors are involved in a "dialectic, dialogical of *co-formation"* (co-learning) exchange.

However, for Bertaux, within what he calls an ethno-sociological perspective, this form of narrative is directed at the researcher who is orienting the *récit de vie* towards an "account of practices within situations" (*récits de pratiques en situation)* in order to "understand the social contexts in which they are inscribed and which they contribute to reproduce or transformed" (*ibid*.: 13). In other words, Bertaux's emphasis is on the structural relations and processes of the social (or macro social) as discovered through the interviews, and the life narratives of his 'subjects', at micro level, or even at meso level in the way in which the macro social has a way to be diffused into smaller social structures, such as, for example, the family (Bertaux 2005).

This study, on the other hand, focuses rather on what these narratives tell regarding the candidates' own perceptions about the process. It is about locating the series of "t*ransformations* - translation, *traductions*- which could not be captured by any of the traditional

terms of social theory" (Latour 1999: 15) occurring within their narratives and during the interactions observed. Or, to take up Latour's argument, Bertaux's stance might reflect what Latour calls social sciences' "dissatisfactions" (Latour, 1999: 16), and oscillations between the micro and macro levels, or the *va et vient* between the "local sites" or the "flesh and blood local situations", and a search for social structures (*ibid*.: 17). In other word, Bertaux's work might be at the edge of a sociological tradition, although he obviously distinguishes between *"histoire réelle"* (real story) (Bertaux 1997: 32) of a life and the *récit* (narrative) which is made of it; Bertaux explains that there is a reality to a person's history which precedes the way it is told and is independent of its telling, thus calling it a "realist proposal" which can help to advance "the understanding of objective social relations" (*ibid*.: 33).

Nevertheless, for this study, the interest of Bertaux's methodology is that he relies on "oral, more spontaneous dialogic forms" (Bertaux 2005: 38). Altogether a methodology which will influence the way this study is conducted.

Alheit has also introduced the concept of biographicity, close to what might be defined as a learning situation, and therefore equally close to this study's purpose. "Biographicity", says Alheit (1994: 290),

> "means that we can redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as "shapeable", and designable. [...] The main issue is to decipher the 'surplus' meanings of our biographical knowledge, and that in turns means to perceive the potentiality of our unlived lives".

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There is a sense in Alheit's words of the iterative process with which the VAE candidates engage, as they shape and reshape their portfolio. This process is carried out through the biographical communication which Alheit also discusses and through the transfer of this biographical knowledge to the 'other', or in our case, to the VAE adviser.

This was the main attraction for selecting a biographical approach for methodology. The interaction between the candidates and their advisers seemed to fall into de Villers' analysis (1996: 114), whereby "a message is sent by, and returned to, the narrator, as, as soon as a narrator speaks, he/she is addressing an Other and expect the Other that something of his/ her own message comes back".

It was therefore decided that the VAE process could be construed as drawing on a life history approach through a participative practice, predicating the acceptance of plurality, where dialogue unveiled different realities of knowing, and where learners were considered as social actors, researchers and narrators of their own history (Josso 2001).

2.7 The appearance of Actor Network Theory (ANT)

However, the life history paradigm is also part of an interpretative, hermeneutic approach (Dominicé 2000) which, in spite of its claim to being a participative methodology, nevertheless separates in some ways the narrating subject from the 'other', be it the researcher, or the educator. It did not satisfactorily answer questions around the position of the researcher-educator, who could either be too directive, or not enough (Dominicé 2000). It did not answer

sufficiently questions about what was being evaluated, such as the 'real' stories behind the narratives (with no answer as to what this 'real' was), or the narratives themselves and their presentations or representations. These were being codified into the portfolio, which itself became the third person within the interactional candidate-adviser space.

Codification is a form of ordering which "*depends* on representation. It depends, that is, on how it is that agents represent both themselves, and their context, *to* themselves" (Law 1994: 25).

I, as a researcher, was also telling stories about those stories. Furthermore, the issue of translation was more than a theoretical question; I was translating the candidates' stories into another language, while they had already translated their stories into a language acceptable to academia. When Law tells his stories about the laboratory (Law 1994: 19), he says:

"The stories that I tell are not 'objective'. Indeed, the very notion of objectivity is problematic for history is the product of interaction between story-teller and subject-matter, an interaction in which we wrestle with the double hermeneutic. […] *stories are more than stories*; they are clues to patterns that may be imputed to the recursive sociotechnical networks".

The malaise at the interpretative stance of the life history paradigm and the role of the researcher is best expressed through Latour's words:

"Far from being a theory of the social or even worse an explanation of what makes society exert pressure on actors, it [ANT] always was, […] a very crude method to

learn from the actors without imposing on them an a priory definition of their world-building capacities" (Latour 1999: 20).

So it seemed that Actor Network Theory might provide a way to think the VAE process differently and to consider all actors, including the portfolio. This will be developed further in Chapter Four.

2.8 Foucault's concepts of disciplinary writing and governmentality

I wish to add a few words about my use in this work of Foucault's concepts of disciplinary writing. Foucault, according to Law (1994: 7) "describes the rise of disciplinary techniques – strategies for ordering human bodies, human souls, and the social and spatial relations in which we are all inserted". I introduce the notion of disciplinary writing in Chapter Three when I talk about the issues of identity and self-representation, because it became apparent to me that candidates were reshaping their subjectivities to conform to the demands of the portfolio for an ordering of their experience, in a process reminiscent of what Foucault calls "documentation accumulation", in an "age of the infinite examination and of compulsory objectification" (Foucault 1977b: 189).

In Chapters Five and Six I return to the 'apparatus' of disciplinary writing, analysed by Edwards as belonging to current discourses of lifelong learning, and "as a strategy of both governmentality and a technology of the self" (2003: 55). Foucault' concept of governmentality is useful for this study in analysing how governance shifts to the organised practices of the VAE - which include portfolio writing and candidates-advisers interactions - through which the actors are being

governed, in what becomes a self imposed and a continuous search for self-improvement within an 'enterprise of the self' discourse.

Law (1994, 2004), Edwards (2003) Porkony (2006) all have all highlighted the way "power is an aspect of concrete practices" (Porkony 2006: 264). Law adds that "[…] if agents are network effects, then we aren't going to make too much sense of those effects, unless we look, too, at other materials. I want to press this relational materialism, and argue that other materials perform and embody hierarchical ordering modes too" (Law 1994: 127). Those materials in our case include the portfolio where subjectivities are being ordered and codified, and as Porkony *(op.cit.)* remarks, the focus in ANT is on processes, as is this research.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have given an overview of the development of RPL practices and theorisation. I have paid particular attention to those writers, such as Weil and McGill (1989) who discussed the extent to which RPL might promote social inclusion, and to Dewey and other North American thinkers on APEL-RPL who have so obviously influenced practices to this day. I have made connections with European lifelong learning policies now driving developments in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, while pointing out the epistemological tensions between a humanistic and emancipatory stance and a credentialisation and market-driven use of RPL. I traced the historical and social origins of the validation in France and analysed its theoretical underpinnings, pointing out Dewey's (1997), Kolb's (1984) and Schön's (1983) legacy.

I charted the development of my thinking through this literature review by highlighting the contributions of recent critiques of the humanistic conceptions of experiential learning, including the postmodern analysis of the traditional concepts of the reflective, autonomous learner and of the nature of 'universal' knowledge.

I introduced the life history perspective as a possible way to approach my research, to turn, finally, towards ANT as a way to analyse the VAE process under a new light.

ANT seemed to offer a different way to consider the relations between the different 'entities', including the portfolio, and to propose a way to talk about the process of representation and translation occurring during the validation interactions. This will be developed fully in Chapter Four. Finally I also mentioned how Foucault's concepts of discipline and governmentality will complement my ANT analysis.

Next chapter will present the story of the research itself and the research questions; it will discuss the concepts and themes emerging, and will reflect on the decisions made about methodology and methods.

Chapter Three: **the story of the research: the *problematics*, methods, and more questions**

"[…] the observer must consider that the repertoire of categories which he uses,

the entities that are mobilized, and the relationships between these are all

topics for actors' discussions. Instead of imposing a pre-established grid of

analysis upon these, the observer follows the actors in order to identify the

manner in which these define and associate the different elements by which

they build and explain their world, whether it be social or natural" (Callon 1986:

201).

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, we have seen the development of the French *Validation des*

acquis and how the development of RPL-VAE has been influenced by various theorists.

Here in this chapter I will introduce the research location and context and the issues and

questions I considered to conduct the research. This chapter intends to be a reflection on

research methods and their implications for the results as well as for the actors involved.

First of all, I shall return to the French VAE, in the context of Higher Education (HE), as the

research was conducted in that sector. I have already introduced in the first chapter the

way the VAE implementation has developed in the French HE sector since the new 2002

legislation (MEN 2010) was introduced.

This study focuses on the micro-level, on the actors involved and their perception of the process, within the context of one institution, the University B, a relatively small university with between seven and eight thousand students. This new university was created in the 1990s as part of the economic development of a semi rural and maritime region known for its earlier economic decline. The university had invested enormously in the infrastructure necessary to the mainstreaming of the VAE through the development of a dynamic VAE section within its FC strategy.

This study does not claim to represent all practices throughout the French HE sector. French universities have some autonomy to set up their own VAE practices; indeed, in 2009 for example, the number of VAE *'dossiers'* examined annually by VAE juries in universities could vary from 10 to a 100 (MESR 2011), as long as they remain within the regulations set by the legislation.

3.1.1 The research location

University B did present with particular characteristics which, while not making it representative of all French universities, nevertheless made it a good example as an institution at the forefront the VAE implementation, having already established its strong commitment to the principles of the *formation continue* and to the economic development of its region. It was also part of a 'quartet' of universities in that region, which altogether had formed a virtual VAE access centre, mainstreaming their approaches and methodologies at regional level. Recent figures for that institution show that for 2009, it examined 60 portfolios, with forty-seven receiving a positive result, fifty-five per cent of

which were awarded the whole diploma (MEN 2010). The MEN results also show that these figures are slightly above the national average (fifty-three per cent), in terms of a total validation. Additionally, thirty-five portfolios were examined under the old VAP – *Validation des acquis professionnels* - 1985 decree*,* with thirty-one receiving a positive outcome.

It must be noted here the existence in French universities of University Institutes of Technology (IUTs or *Instituts universitaires de Technologie*) and of University Professional Institutes (IUPs or *Instituts Universitaires Professionnalisés*) (MESR 2011), as most of the candidates interviewed were being validated through those structures. IUTs were created in the 1960s to respond to the need of industry for trained technicians. Now part of universities, they also offer, as in University B, professional degrees or *Licences professionnelles* (Bac+3, or level of *Baccalauréat* plus 3 years of studies), but are still very much anchored into the world of work. Obtaining a BTS (*Brevet de Technicien Supérieur*) or a DUT (*Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie*) both at level Bac+2, is an almost guaranteed way for students to find work, as their programme involves a number of weeks spent in industry. The IUPs, created in the early 90s, offer higher levels of qualifications, from professional Masters (Bac+5) to specific Doctorates; like the IUTs, they have substantial links to industry (Davies 1995).

This university was chosen thanks to a professional relationship between the researcher and the VAE unit Director, established through a European action research project (Pouget *et al* 2004) involving the use of 'learning biographies' with community groups at risk of social exclusion. The Director enabled the research to take place, by obtaining approval

from the Continuing Education Vice Principal, and by identifying, through the advising staff,

which candidates would be available for interviewing in the research period earmarked.

Practices and procedures may differ between institutions. Cherqui-Houot's own research

(2001, 2006) or Rivoire's accounts (2004, 2006) may present different institutions' practices

but the legislative framework in France provides for unity in the overall understanding of

the legislator's requirements, leading to concerted efforts and debates as to best practices;

research activities focus on specific areas, such as the emerging advisers' profession,

candidates' reflection on action, or evaluation issues and the role of the *'référentiels'*

(Mayen 2004; Mayen 2009a; Figari *et al.* 2006; Daoulas 2009).

Unlike many countries in Europe (Collardyne and Bjornavold 2004; EUCEN 2010) where RPL

involvement is often patchy and problematic, as it certainly is in the UK (Storan 2000),

France offers an opportunity to study RPL in the making. Moreover, most research on the

VAE is actually written in French (Aubret 1999, 2003; Lenoir 2002; Madoui 2002; Ollagnier,

2003; Lainé 2004; Lauriol *et al* 2004; Figari *et al* 2006; Mayen 2004, 2008; Mayen and

Savoyant 2009), with notable exceptions (Davies 1995; Barkatoolah 2000; Feutrie 2000),

making access to debates and research difficult in Anglophone countries, and indeed in the

rest of the world, apart from Québec, Belgium or Switzerland. One of the intended

outcomes of this study is therefore to widen the scope for reflexion on the issues arising

out of a well established and widespread practice such as can be observed in France, and

make its findings accessible to the English speaking academic arena, thus adding a

dimension not otherwise available.

3.2 Issues to consider, research questions, themes and analysis

This section aims to set out the main questions which the VAE practices and processes

raised for this research. The intention is first to summarise the central issues, for this study,

of transformation, representations and translation, already highlighted in the Literature

Review, which seemed to emerge from the practices involved in formalising experiential

learning into a qualification. The other point for discussion relates to learners' identities,

which are shaped and reshaped through the way experience is represented and mediated

(Johnston and Usher 1997), as seen in Chapter Two, through the act of writing the portfolio,

and the ways subjectivities can be seen as problematic (Mayen 2009b). I will then consider

the tensions (Pouget and Figari 2009) which appear to be the effect of a wider power-

knowledge (Foucault 1977b) relation involving accommodation and resistance on the part

of most of the actors, not just the candidates. This section will then present the research

questions and aims emerging from the original research proposal, as well as the subsequent

themes elaborated through the research development.

3.2.1 Representations and translations

"Accessing the past requires some form of ordering and classification, a process

that is far from unproblematic" (McLean and Hassard 2004: 505).

From the very beginning of my involvement with the VAE and RPL, as discussed in Chapter

Two, it was quite clear that learners operated on their experience through a process of

representations (Johnson and Usher 1997). This later became closely linked to and

articulated as a process of translation, in order to make their experience 'receivable' by the

jury. The word translation appeared early on in the first research proposal drafts, although its significance in relation to ANT had not yet been pinpointed; hence the importance given in this study to the interaction between learners and advisers, the 'translators' and mediators (Chakroun and Mayen 2009), and to a lesser extent to the role of the jury.

The main question of the research therefore was always around this issue of transformation of something (the experience) into something else entirely (a qualification); it is indeed a process of translation, "[F]or translation is the process or the work of making two things that are not the same, equivalent" (Law 1999: 8). It is also about ordering, and codification (Michelson 1996) as the portfolio has its own demand for categorising experience. I have previously referred to the 'alchemy' metaphor used by Cherqui-Houot (2006); indeed, no amount of reading could quite answer the questions "what is actually happening? How is it done?"

It was precisely because of the apparent lack of explicitness around the question of equivalence, that the French VAE process appeared to offer much to be explored. Pokorny (2006: 275) has noted the difference between UK and French validation practices as she singles out, within the French VAE practice, the joint efforts of candidates and their advisors, through dialogue, to "seek equivalence with a curriculum framed by inclusive criteria rather than tied to predetermined syllabi". Here she suggests that the French process encourages a greater inclusiveness of the complexities of candidates' experience, supporting her contention that the focus should be back on the experience itself; this concurs with Fenwick's critique (2000) of the traditional experiential learning perspective

where experience is short circuited in favour of the learning derived from it through reflexion.

3.2.2 Identities under stress

"Experience is not an orderly sequence of events but the narrated reflection of being" (Starr-Glass 2002: 228).

The French validation process is indeed based on a series of interactions, and mediations - negotiations (Mayen 2009b). I sensed "flows of movements and choices in space and time" (Fenwick and Edwards 2010: 4) as candidates moved back and forth between the past and present, in space and time (Nespor 1994). However, there were also concerns about the way in which the VAE process was operating an appropriation of individuals' experience, or even of their life history, as narratives reshaped themselves through the construction of the portfolios, as was discussed in the literature review (Michelson 1996); a concern about the way in which the VAE process made the individuals – and therefore their sense of self or identity - conform to acceptable norms and narratives. The idea of the learner with individual needs to be met has been comprehensively discussed by Edwards (2001: 40) who says "learning is linked to our identity and needs as individuals and reinforced through diverse pedagogic practices". One could therefore say that the pedagogic practices, like the VAE and the recognition of experiential learning in general, are engaging in a writing and reorganisation of the self and its representations; this is a troubling subject which has been discussed in France, as was mentioned in Chapter Two (Mayen 2009a; Presse 2008).

The story of Piau (2009), a guidance counsellor who decided to go through the VAE process herself, is illustrative. She describes her personal experience and feelings arising out of her engagement in the process. She talks of the destabilising effect of the experience of writing, and her confusion in naming these feelings. She explains that she became aware of what she calls her "internal disorganisations" (Piau 2009: 56) only when she was able to apply reflection on those disorganisations. She talks of her realisation that, before she engaged in the writing of her "life history", she had "no representation of my person"; [...] In fact she says, "I am searching for my identity through the questions about my potential knowledge – capacities" (*ibid.:* 57). It is as if this person feels that the reflection and writing processes are giving her back an identity which, she now realises, was lost within her "internal disorganisations". Earlier Piau had commented on how she had prepared an oral presentation for the jury, a text where she presents herself "as another". She asks: "distancing with the lived experience, or was it that "I" was another? At the end of this experience, I was not myself, and not yet another" (*ibid.*: 56).

It brings to mind what Foucault had to say about the "apparatus" of disciplinary writing "in an age of the infinite examination and of compulsory objectification" (Foucault 1997b: 189); having remarked that autobiography was a sign ("rituals") of a position of power, he added that:

> "The disciplinary methods reversed this relation […]. It is no longer a
>
> monument for future memory, but a document for future use. And this new
>
> describability is all the more marked in that the disciplinary framework is a
>
> strict one: the child, the parent, the patient, the madman, the prisoner, were

to become […] the object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts. The turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization: it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection" (*ibid*.: 192).

This process raises issues of identity and of self-representation through the objectification of the 'lived and felt' experience ('*le vécu'*). Candidates engage in a restructuration of their subjectivity so that it conforms to the world of work (Usher and Solomon 1999) or, here, to the world of the VAE's normative demands.

This question of subjectivities and identity, and what is made visible, and how and for what purpose, is also linked to a wider question about the nature of knowledge, as highlighted by Fenwick and Edwards (2010: 37):

"[W]hat, then, becomes visible and distinct as an object of knowledge? To whom is it visible, and under what circumstances? […] The question of the recognition and valuing of knowledge, what and whose knowledge counts and what is rendered invisible, illuminates the practices that become manifested in educational privilege and exclusion. […] For education, this question is important also in considering subjectivities, how certain identities are constrained by educative practices, and approaches to knowledge and other possibilities enabled".

This encapsulates the epistemological dilemma presented by the validation itself; an emancipatory project mired in surveillance through the ordering of candidates' experience

and a process of normalisation which, along with "documentary accumulation" could be described in Foucault's terms as an "essential part in the mechanism of discipline" (Foucault 1977b: 189). The subjectivities or identities therefore appeared to be enmeshed and enacted by the processes of normalisation as I came to analyse the VAE process. Therefore, hearing the actors' voices took on a different meaning as the research analysis progressed.

3.2.3 Power relations

"Those who are powerful are not those who 'hold' power in principle, but those who practically define or redefine what 'holds' everyone together. This shift from principle to practice allows us to treat the vague notion of power not as a cause of people's behaviour but as a consequence of an intense activity of enrolling, convincing and enlisting" (Latour 1986: 273).

This brings me to the further explanation that, even at the beginning of the research, I was aware, if not totally explicit about them, of issues of power and surveillance, emerging as they did out of the portfolio construction. These concerns however articulated themselves more clearly, later on, around what the VAE practices and the candidates' narratives revealed about the ways actors were effects of networks "[…] an actor is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network. […] An actor is also, always, a network" (Law 1992: 2). Moreover, it was the sense of 'struggle' taking place between the candidates and the demand for order from the portfolio categories and the adviser's gentle but firm insistence to comply that drew me towards ANT.

"Thus analysis of ordering struggle is central to actor network theory. The object is to explore and describe local processes of patterning, social orchestration, ordering and resistance. In short, it is to explore the process that is often called translation which generates ordering effects such as devices, agents, institutions, or organisations" (Law 1992: 6).

What I sensed were these "correlations" or, to use Fenwick and Edwards's (2010: 5) ANTish explanations " 'effects of networks' in term of agency, power, identity and knowledge"; although at the beginning I was not ready to identify these effects, I knew that that there was more than mere power play between the candidates and the institution, representing a culture of educational practices within a specific historical and political context. This culture and its context underpinned the way in which processes were meant to occur and informed both the content of the candidates' portfolios and the manner in which they proceeded. Indeed, as Foucault said

"These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations" (Foucault 1977b: 27).

The last sentence is significant in relation to the tensions identified with the VAE process (Pouget and Figari 2009). However much the VAE might prove emancipatory for some

candidates, it might be an effect of these 'power-knowledge relations', in the same way as the candidates and their portfolio were too. One could envisage that the knowledge constructed through the candidates' portfolio and institutional interaction was enabled – enacted, to use ANTish terminology – through the power-knowledge relations established thanks to the VAE process. Foucault goes on to say that:

> "[I]t is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (*op.cit.:* 28).

It is within that power-knowledge space that incidence of acceptance *and* resistance to the processes was observed from all actors, in different ways and directions, even from those representing the institution or, by proxy, speaking in the name of the national legislative framework.

So these were the issues I finally identified as the research progressed, which I wanted to confront through my analysis. However, I still intended to hear the candidates' stories undergoing this rather mysterious process, and those of the people with whom they were interacting. I do not think I that could have chosen a different methodology.

> "Stories", says Law, " are part of ordering, for we create them to make sense of our circumstances, to re-weave the human fabric. And as we create and recreate our stories we make and remake both the facts of which they tell, and ourselves. So it is

that we seek to order, and re-order, our surroundings. So it is that we formulate, we

try to sum up" (Law 1994: 52).

How was the summing up enacted through the dialogic process, the portfolio, the jury, and

the negotiations? How was I going to find out? In the latter part of this chapter I shall

return to the way I turn my interviews schedules and themes around in order to give those

thoughts a shape that gave the VAE process a different 'explanation' through the medium

of ANT.

3.3 The Research questions, themes, aims for analysis

I seem to operate in this chapter a similar oscillation to the VAE candidates' retrospective

and prospective movement, back and forth; back - to the origin of the research and its first

hesitant steps; forth - to the present, writing the story of the research; with the journey in-

between, overwhelmed by the awareness of layers of stories within the stories I was

hearing and I am telling - recalling the cries of help of Latour's student in his 'dialog', "But I

have lots of descriptions already! I am drowning in them" (Latour 2005: 146).

This section is therefore an attempt at 'fixing' the questions which at first influenced the

choice of methods and at articulating the aims which will determine the way the results will

be analysed.

The writing of the research story goes from articulating the questions at the beginning, then

reframing them, to their final form. I have already said that the main question of the

research focused on the issue of transformation of something, the experience, into something else, a qualification. So the first, very general question was, "what are the processes involved in 'transforming' and formalising experiential learning into a qualification?" However, this was deemed too general, requiring a better, more specific question focused on the issue of representation and translation, such as, "how are the representations and translation processes mediated through the interaction with the advisers, then with the jury?", thus highlighting the importance of the relational processes at work.

As has already been discussed, I understood that there were issues around identities and subjectivities – this is a recurring theme in Mayen's research (Mayen 2008; Mayen and Savoyant 2009). I have already said in Chapter Two that I accepted a postmodern stance in relation to what constitutes reality, rejecting the universalist conception of human nature. I agree with Usher (1996: 28) when he says that that "subjects cannot be separated from their subjectivity, history and socio-cultural location" and with MacLure when she states that "[I]identity is a constant process of becoming – an endlessly revised accomplishments that depends on very subtle interactional judgements, and is always risky" (MacLure 2003: 19). This seemed a relevant point, as the candidates' identities were also being enacted through many other people' s judgement. It also pointed towards another question, as another theme for my interviews, which was: "what role does the VAE process play in relation to learners' experience and identities?"

Here I should try to be explicit about my epistemological location. If I follow Crotty's (1998) taxonomy, it emerges that I have mixed theoretical perspectives such as hermeneutics, and

postmodernism. In relation to the former, Usher (1996: 18) talks about

"hermeneutics/interpretative epistemology" which according to him, focuses on "social

practices" and "meaning" within those, in the context of social and educational research,

while Erben (1986: 160) talks of the biographical method as being "concerned with the

hermeneutical investigation of the narrative accounts of life and self". This epistemological

perspective requires a framework for interpreting those meanings already given by the

actors themselves, driving us to the double hermeneutics referred to already (Usher 1986;

Law 1994). Indeed, as Law explains, actors are not only influenced by "social scientific

descriptions of social processes" but are also themselves engaged in reflexive activities (Law

1994: 67) as part what Giddens (1990) calls the reflexivity of modernity.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, as we have seen in Chapter Two, refutes the existence

of the universality of human experience and what Usher calls the "totalizing knowledge and

the discovery of deep underlying meaning", because the contemporary condition is

"unthinkably complex" (Usher 2001: 50). Postmodernism sees "knowledge-generation as a

practice of 'languaging', a practice of textual production" (Usher 1996: 27); or, as MacLure

contends, experience is "produced through discursive practices" (MacLure 2003: 19) and

the words which attempt to describe it do not reflect a simple reality out there ready to be

understood.

Notwithstanding what I felt were epistemological tensions in my approach, I used the two

questions thus articulated to start constructing the interview schedules (see Appendix B)

They did not, however, seem to address those 'tensions' reflected in the VAE process where

the fluidity, ambiguity and complexity of the candidates' lives were in tension too with the

process of objectification and ordering of the candidate's world. Moreover, I had to take into account the central place taken by the portfolio, which, as I have already mentioned, became the catalyst to explore ANT as a new explanation for the VAE.

I had to identify specific aims rather than questions, to serve as elements of analysis through an ANT perspective. I will explain in the following chapter, how ANT came to form a 'framework' for this research's analysis, and I have already used ANT terminology in this chapter when discussing the process of ordering taking place. It is useful now to point out the ANT's role in this research, by referring to how Law describes it (1992: 6):

> "This, then, is the core of the actor-network approach: a concern with how actors and organisations mobilise, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed; how they are sometimes able to prevent those bits and pieces from following their own inclinations and making off ".

Indeed the research quickly became populated by all these bits and pieces 'making off', as I explain in the next chapter, while a 'centring' effort to reassemble them into a coherent whole went on all the time. Therefore, I had to give a place to ANT questions; articulating aims for the research based on 'ANT thinking' was intended to create a bridge between the methods chosen and the results' analysis.

The following table is an attempt at clarifying the purpose, aims and themes emerging as the work progressed.

3.3.1 Table 1: Research questions, areas and themes covered by questions

Research questions	Areas covered by the interview questions (candidates)	Themes emerging from candidates' interviews
What are the processes involved in 'transforming' and formalising experiential learning into a qualification	1. Prior knowledge of VAE and expectations 2. Thoughts about what types of knowledge or competences from experience s/he wanted to be validated for, including 'extra' professional knowledge?	Prior knowledge of VAE Expectations Types of knowledge Issue of personal – non professional knowledge visibility
How are the representations and translation processes mediated through the interaction with the advisers, then with the jury?	3. Feeling about the interaction with the VAE adviser? The subject expert? 4. Feeling about importance of the adviser's role 5. Feeling about the experience of writing the dossier /portfolio – how was it?	Interactions with: advisers; academics Their role Dialogic process The narration and the writing: The portfolio categorisations Resistance-accommodation Norms & categories
What role does the VAE process play in relation to learners' experience and identities?	6. Motivation and reasons for starting the VAE? Personal and/or professional decision regarding the programme targeted? 7. About past personal background and personal-professional experience and training 8. About family, friends or people at	Emancipatory project Agency and structure Self representations Temporarility: the trajectory Sense of self; Retrospective movement Life history Heterogeneous networks Prospective movement –

	work, their influence? *Role of significant other (added after first pilot interview)* 9. What does VAE process means to the candidates - its impact on life? 10. Context of the world of work	*projection into future – the subjectivities of 'progress'* The heterogeneous elements of work-life
ANT questions: aims for elements of analysis	**Key ANT concepts**	**ANT themes**
To tell the story of the ordering of heterogeneous networks and the story of how the equivalence between their networks and those of the VAE-institution is enacted To tell the stories of the subjectivities enacted through the VAE	Actors as relational effects Centring and de-centring Associations Material heterogeneity Subjectivities: the mobilisation of agents Controversies Immutable mobiles Stabilised networks	The principle of symmetry: order and disorder: how the VAE translates disorder – the messy reality of experience - into order through the 'power of writing' and 'documentary accumulation' – (Foucault) "Playing the game" *Subjectivities of progress Metaphors of the future - betterment* *The VAE as a 'boundary object'*

I shall return to the ANT concepts and themes, in next chapter and Chapter Five, where new concepts will be discussed as they unfold through the stories told. However, the two main aims for analysis are to do with the ordering and translating (equivalences) and the stories of subjectivities being enacted through the process. I must admit to some cheating, in my

right hand side column, having added in italics themes that emerged retrospectively from the results; retrospective, prospective, a choreography between future, present and past, like my stories.

3.4 Questions about methods; the research 'black box'

Having set out the questions and the aims underpinning the research's rationale I will discuss in this section my decision to choose interviews as my main research method. I will seek to engage in a reflection directed not at my own personal identity as a researcher – although that is important too – but at what Usher calls "the 'identity' of the research" (Usher 1996: 37), as I am aware that research is performative (Law 2004) in the way that it produces realities or a certain "kind of world" and that a certain "kind of knowledge" is constructed by the questions asked and the methods used (*op.cit.*: 37). I wish to remain aware that interview interactions bring with them what Scheurich (1997: 73) calls "indeterminacies" and that the "interview always exceeds and transgresses our attempts to capture and categorize" (*ibid.:* 73). Uncertainties, "elusive realities" (Law 2004: 6) are therefore an accepted outcome of this research. As Law says:

"Thus when I make voices speak, as I sometimes do, I do this because I want to expose and explore some of the places where I feel vulnerable or uncertain, the places that I experience as sociologically or politically (as well as personally) risky. For a modest sociology, whatever else it may be, is surely one that accepts uncertainty, one that tries to open itself to the mystery of other orderings" (Law 1994: 18).

3.4.1 A little piece of 'modest' reflexivity

I have already discussed in Chapter Two, and here, my decision to give priority to the actors' voices, thereby turning initially to a life history method, as there were connections between this approach and the VAE process, close to what Bertaux calls the *'récits de vie'* (Bertaux 1997, 2005). I have also already highlighted the capacity of the life history approach, within learning biographies paradigm (Dominicé 2000, 2002; Josso 2001), to engage in a dialogic co-construction of meaning, which, in this present case would take place between candidates and advisers, and between candidates and jury.

I therefore chose interviewing as my main method, as it seemed the simplest way to hear the process in action from the mouths of those engaged in it. It was later in the life of the research that I was able to refer to Latour when he speaks of ANT as a

> "social theory that would not claim to explain the actors' behaviour and reasons, but only find the procedures which render actors able to negotiate their ways through one another's world-building activity" (Latour 1999: 21).

For Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), interviewing is a craft and a social practice where interviewees and interviewers are engaged in an interaction which can be problematic in itself; according to Scheurich (1997: 72), a "dominance-resistance binary" is at work, as the interviewer is the one setting the questions, making decisions about the research and methods, and doing the interpreting in a way that is not reciprocal. Scott talks about an "asymmetrical relationship" (Scott 1996: 65). Moreover, the issue of the 'authentic voice'

remains; as Scott explains, the actors give their own accounts, embedded in the present, about themselves and their past activities, referring to Ricœur's "notion of narrativity" (*ibid.*: 66).

This leads me once again to the issues around the researcher's interpretation of the interviewee's identities constructed through the interview's interaction, as Alvesson points out:

> " The meanings span from 'linguistic constructions made in close interaction with the researcher' to clear and straightforward indicators on how the identities of those being studied are actually constructed in practice. The distance between the former and the latter can be considerable, partly fuelled by a possible wish to present oneself in a specific way" (Alvesson 2011: 36).

There are many ways 'subjects' of study may present their experience and their own interpretation of their experience, leading to the 'double hermeneutic'. The researcher has to deal with her own interpretation which itself is based on the interviewees' own interpretation of their lives and experience, or indeed the identity they choose to project for the interviewer according to what they think are appropriate responses, or simply according to the role they are reporting from their lives. Or, as Law remarks: "[...] maybe it is the post-modernist hall of mirrors, for we are here concerned with ordering accounts which go to work upon ordering accounts which work upon yet more accounts" (*ibid.*: 29).

Holstein and Gubrium (2003: 15) talk of the "multiple subjects" lying behind interview participants; equally, their comments about interviewees "working up experiential identities" (*ibid.*: 15) during a research interview is certainly applicable to the VAE dialogic sessions candidates share with their advisers, highlighting to some extent the difficulties lying behind my original claim to hear the actors' voices. "Whose voice do we hear?" ask Holstein and Gubrium (*ibid*.: 20). A tentative response might be, multiplicity is acceptable to this researcher. We shall return to this question later on.

I have already discussed here and in other chapters how I had not, initially, formulated my research questions around ANT. I knew, however, when I embarked on the research process, that I did not intend 'to mine' the actors for 'objective' data they might possess on the VAE process, or on the effect this was having on their self-identity as individuals, with the purpose of bringing my own interpretation of their meaning or my meaning of their interpretation, thereby eschewing aspects of the interpretivist approach, which, according to Crotty (1997: 67) "[...] looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" . Indeed, unlike Bertaux's methodology (2005), I did not wish to confirm social categories of the macro world which I, as a researcher, would have identified prior to the research.

I spoke intentionally of 'mining' for data, a recurring metaphor in qualitative research. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) identify the interviewer as either "a miner" or " a traveller"; the first being a metaphor for an interviewer intent on not "polluting" the interviewee's answers by her/ his own leading questions, while the "nuggets [of knowledge] may be understood as objective real data or as subjective authentic meanings" (*ibid.:* 48). Mining is also to dig for

covered, pre-existing truths, or helping subjects to reveal their 'true or inner self', pertaining, according to Kvale and Brinkman, "not only to positivist and empiricist data collection, but also to a certain extent Husserl's search for phenomenological essences, and to Freud's quest for hidden meanings buried in the unconscious" (*ibid.:* 49).

In contrast, the metaphor of the interviewer as a traveller, according to those writers, belongs more to a "postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research" (*ibid.:* 49). There is a process of self-reflexion too on the part of the researcher who leads to uncover "previously taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveller's home country" (*ibid.:* 49).

Even as I identified myself as a post-modern traveller, I had chosen a life-history approach as a method, putting my research near a theoretical perspective belonging to the hermeneutic tradition. As discussed in the previous sections, life-history research as used by the French speaking researchers mentioned before (Dominicé 1989; Lainé 2000; Josso 2001; Pineau and Jobert 1989) leads to the definition of a "hermeneutic knowledge" which is "the result of a personal reflexion, that is, the passage from an immediate consciousness which is that of sensations, of the *'vécu'* experience, to a reflexive consciousness (*'réfléchie'*)" (Finger 1989: 245). In other words it sets the research within an interpretivist perspective, focusing on the individuals' subjectivities and interpretations of their experience, which, as Fingers points out, includes "historical, social and cultural factors which have been determinant in their life trajectory" (*ibid.:* 245); rather than focussing on the negotiations that took place between actors, thus taking the research back to the self-reflection paradigm from which I attempted to dissociate my thinking in the first instance.

I am aware that it might take me back to the role of researcher as the one who "*does things to the raw data offered by the story giver – 'mines'* it, interprets it, cuts it into themes, strips away its surface layers, refines it, distils its essence" (MacLure 2003: 120). MacLure also talks about "irreconcilable desires - for mastery and surrender" inherent to the life-history approach, and ambivalences which reflect "two contradictory desires (or fears) – to intervene, analyse, interpret, or to let the narratives 'stand' on their own terms" (*ibid.*: 120).

In the end I had to accept that I would keep a "critical stance towards the practice of sense-making and sense-taking which we call research" (Usher 1996: 31); that I would not to fall back into the security of interpretative or hermeneutic traditions, but instead would seek to make a contribution towards the theorisation and the practice of the validation, by making more visible how "[…] power/ knowledge becomes literally embodied in the technologies adopted, included those of policy" (Edwards 2004: 71), and attempt to bring a more reflexive approach to the practice of research on the VAE, embedding an "ecological reflexivity" (*ibid.*: 77).

3.4.2 My role as the interviewer; "warm and romantic"? (Alvesson 2011)

Alvesson applies a "sceptical review" (2011: 9) on one interviewing method, which he qualifies as romanticism. By this he means to cover techniques where the interviewer tries to establish a "warm" situation (*ibid.*: 14) where the interviewee feels at ease and therefore more likely to engage freely in the 'conversation'. He notes that for romantic interviewers establishing personal contacts is important, and that they may not refrain from providing

personal opinions, as in a 'real' conversation where two people might meet as equals. Holstein and Gubrium talk about "activated interview subjects" (2003: 14), including the researcher as well as the interviewee. The idea of the researcher as a passive recipient of answers, obliterating self and remaining neutral is at odds with a trend where researchers are considering themselves as practitioners in the co-construction of meaning (*ibid*.: 2003).

I do not view researchers as disembodied and pure "reasoners" (Usher 1996: 36) and agree with what he calls "personal reflexivity", or the importance to acknowledge the researcher's own autobiographical history which will colour, if not direct, the kind of research undertaken, the kind of data collected and the kind of outcomes which will emerge.

My own style as interviewer has emerged from a substantial experience. I have already introduced in the first chapter the reasons which led me to be interested in the recognition of experiential learning, and the emancipatory approach I took in the past towards adult education.

While I often felt that I was an apprentice researcher, I certainly was not a novice interviewer. Trained as a Careers Adviser, I also engaged early on in therapeutic training over a period of two years to do with my work with long-term unemployed people at a time of economic crisis and increasing unemployment. The legacy of that time has been a recognition of the power of active listening, that is, the ability to mirror back and summarise what people are saying, using their own words rather than putting my own in their mouth, drawing on Heimler's work on Social Functioning (1975) - influential in the

eighties with the Probation Service in the UK - as well as the Rogerian client centred

tradition (Rogers 1967). However, another legacy of that time has been to make me weary

of the use of therapeutic interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), delving into and helping

to articulate sometimes painful stories with no proper therapeutic outlet to deal with it. As

Richards (2009) shrewdly comments, an interviewer might cringe when listening to her

interventions while transcribing, and I did, but I also recognised those listening techniques,

the secondary questioning Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) mention, or, in common language,

the 'picking up' on cues. This is important, as it shaped the way my interviews grew and

lengthened, took a life of their own while still remaining within the thematic questioning

envisaged a priori.

I accept that *w*hat I will describe and analyse will be dependent on my conception and

representations of the world. As Usher says:

"[…] if research is a social practice, a practice of producing certain kinds of

knowledge that are socially validated, then as such it is a set of activities that

constructs a world to be researched. […] In other words, research is not simply a

matter of representing, reflecting or reporting the world but of 'creating' it

through a representation" (Usher 1996: 34-35).

3.5   Design of the study: opening the "black box"

Kvale and Brinkmann warn that often the readers of interview results or reports are left in

the dark about the specific steps and contexts which produced those results. They

therefore talk of "methods as a black box" (2009: 270). So I intend here to open my black box of tricks, and set out the steps I took in order to carry out the interviews and other necessary research activity.

3.5.1 The interviews and interviewees

The research does not make claims of universality. As has been highlighted in Chapter Two, it wishes to borrow from a postmodernist stance which refutes any such claim, but instead emphasises that "knowledge is contingent and perspectival and on the situational features of research practices" (Usher 1996: 27).

It combines qualitative methods of gathering data, such as recorded semi-structured interviews conducted with core informants, (keeping in mind all the caveats about the interview interaction already expressed in this chapter), recorded observed sessions between participants, and analysis of documents. This constitutes the usual array of research methods, not innovative per se, but available to the qualitative researcher who becomes, according to Denzig and Lincoln (1994: 20) a "bricoleur", a metaphor bringing up the DIY panoply of tools to be used according to need, or according to Alvesson (2011: 70), a metaphor bringing to research work an "eclectic, relaxed and playful process".

These methods are typical of a small qualitative study which combines qualitative methods of data collecting, such as interviewing, observing, documentary search, also called 'triangulation'; "not a tool or a strategy for validation, but an alternative to validation" (Denzin and Lincoln1994: 2), or a strategy for increasing breadth and depth to an

investigation through the combination of multiple methods which complement and support each other (Kane 1995).

I briefly described, in the introductory chapter, how the interviews were conducted with twelve VAE candidates, three VAE advisers, six members of academic staff, two of whom were members of a jury session which itself was observed and recorded, and one member of staff member of that jury, a researcher, who also had the dual identity of a 'professional'. I also observed eight sessions between candidates and their adviser. All these interviews and sessions were recorded on an electronic voice recorder and immediately transferred onto my computer. Appendix A shows a list of the interviewees, and recorded sessions, with details about the candidates (validation aims, qualification targeted, stage they were at in the process). All have been given new first names, on the principle that first names are personalised, instead of numbers or anonymous letters. Wherever possible details, which might identify them, have been removed or changed. A more detailed presentation of those interviewees whose accounts were influential for this research will be given in Chapter Five, during the results analysis.

These voices stayed with me to be consulted over and over, along with the notes taken during and after the interviews. I also had access to the candidates' portfolios (with their consent), which were photocopied for me, and to the programmes leaflets describing programmes targeted.

The objects surrounding my research have accompanied me ever since, have become representations of my thinking process; the actors are distributed through them; they have

become an extension of who I am. They represent a material and temporal baggage, accompanying my process of writing; more than that, this material world is also my data, like the computer holding the participants' voices like a treasure chest; and the A4 bound notebooks, verifying and commenting the interviewees' words in my atrocious handwriting, my lists, my grids, the erasures; *the objects* of the research, like the bits of colourful page markers sticking out of my books, themselves decorating the floor around my desk, beckon and repel at the same time, as the struggle to lay down my story on the screen continues. All these objects and the disembodied voices are pulling in different directions across space, and time. The people have taken a mythical reality; their words, their world are the data;

> "[…] what we call 'data' and 'interpretations of the data' [….] are the product of a process in which both simplification and translation play heroic roles. […] But in addition to simplification, there is also translation. As they become data, events out there, in the Laboratory, are translated. That is, they are converted into representations in other media – for instance into fields notes, memories and working drafts" (Law 1994: 49).

3.5.2 Serendipity

Before delving any further into the black box I need to say a few words about the context of the research, in its beginnings. There was an element of serendipity in the choice of candidates. Serendipity is a useful, and for this writer, meaningful concept, which may not be only about chance encounters (Fine and Deegan 1996).

It must, however, be clarified that much correspondence had taken place between the Unit Director and myself in order to prepare the research activities. I had written to the University Principal, explaining the research aims and methods, to ask for the University's collaboration with my research. I had prepared and sent in advance to the VAE unit letters and consent forms to be signed by the candidates who had appointments during the research period, and to the President of the VAE jury which I knew to take place during that time. There was therefore a degree of selection, in the pre-research stage, on the part of the advising staff in choosing the candidates, in order to obtain as wide a picture as possible of the different stages of VAE process. The strongest criteria remained, in the end, the candidates' availability and consent.

These candidates presented a pattern of involvement with the VAE which was far from linear. I mean that they were at various stages of the process: some were at the beginning, others well into it, some had completed it.

It happened that the jury for two candidates was planned to take place just within two days of my arrival. I therefore attended the session, and was able to interview one candidate straight afterwards, while it took a week to interview the other.

What did this mean in terms of the research design? It provided what I would come to call later a 'snapshot' of various VAE situations. I am, however, aware of the danger of such an approach. Indeed, Kvale and Brinkmann, emphasising ethical research behaviour through "thick ethical descriptions", or contextualising and describing events or narratives in their social and temporal context, remark:

"[L]ooking at a situation in a "snapshot", outside its temporal and social narrative context, […] will make it hard to judge and act morally. If one is not provided with the kind of information necessary to narrativize – for example if the interviewer has never met the participant before and does not know her larger life story – then it is ethically wise to be lenient about one's interpretations and generalizations […]" (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 78).

In reality my 'snapshot' were elaborated and constructed pictures of the candidates, (although of course by no means whole pictures), as they were supported by their lengthy sessions with their advisers, which I attended and recorded, coupled with the data forming itself in the portfolio, to which I had access.

3.5.3 Alternatives

There were other ways in which I might have conducted my study. I was clear at the time that I did not intend to carry out a longitudinal study, although that of course would have been a legitimate method to obtain a different kind of results (see Chakroun 2009).

Comparing this university's VAE practices and procedures with those of another institution was considered; indeed another institution was approached. However, I decided that it would have generated too much and disparate data, broadening the nature of the enquiry to an unmanageable extent, without necessarily serving the purpose intended. It would have been unrealistic too, involving longer and more frequent stretches of time spent in France. It was also felt that the nature of the other institution, a higher education

institution in engineering, was too professional and specialised in comparison to University B.

3.5.4 The content of the methods black box

First of all the interviews took place within the Centre's offices, located near the centre of town, where I had access to an office with secure storage to keep confidential data. In itself this matters only as it made the practical conduct of the research easier. More importantly, location was familiar to the candidates, and easy of access.

I had hoped to capture an immediate feedback from the candidates following their session with the adviser; this was not meant to divulge one 'truth' about the session but a representation in time of that interaction, and engage in a dialogue with the candidates to hear their representations of the session.

When possible there was also an informal interview with the adviser about her feedback from the session, as well as some question around her experience of the session and of her position in general.

The questions to candidates, advisers or academic members of staff were all open questions, 'process' questions, and meant to deliver data in the form of fragments of life stories, processes of identification or resistance to categorisation, multiple voices and presences, dialogues, discourses; they sought to interrogate the use of 'learning technologies' such as the portfolio, learners' files, and other texts.

3.5.5 Pilot

The first week had been meant as a 'bedding down' time, familiarising myself with the documents and the copies of portfolios available. I had intended to pilot the questions for three to four candidates, in order to test the equipment and the questions prepared, and to review them as the interviews progressed. The first interview with the senior adviser after her session with a candidate was also designed to check with her any negative impact of my presence during her session, and to capture her immediate feedback about it while engaging in a 'conversation' about the VAE.

In fact, serendipity was at work again; we did not have complete control over the timing of my interviews with the candidates after their session, as some were not free to stay any longer, requiring an appointment for another day. Or, the adviser was not free to spend much time with me straight after a session which might have overrun.

I did manage to test my questions, but even that was not straightforward. My very first candidate, Luc, revealed himself to be completely atypical compared to the other eleven I subsequently saw. He was at the very beginning stage of the VAE process; therefore his interview with the adviser was a feasibility study. His story too was very unclear and confused, and his session with the adviser felt very unsatisfactory (for both). His interview with me was also the shortest and the least 'productive'. The second interview with Christian proved much more useful as a pilot. He was ready for the jury, having completed his portfolio. However, with him I quickly lost the 'order' of my questions, following his lead while trying to keep an eye on my 'list'. This was when I realised that I was following some

general themes through the more detailed, often 'clarification' questions I was asking (see Table 1 in section 3.3.1 for the general themes).

During that first week I attended the only jury session available, for two candidates, one of whom, Raoul, I interviewed straight after his (successful) jury. Since he had just been through the process, he had a lot to say about its meaning. The next candidate I interviewed that week was Denis, who had also 'passed' his validation successfully a short time before; he and Raoul were therefore in a similar situation, but their perspectives on the VAE differed, as did their life course, rendering any further attempt at 'piloting' or comparing rather unconvincing.

I felt that I had to follow those voices, intervening when they were erring too far from my purpose, but listening to the stories pouring out of worlds populated by families, mentors, work teams, machines, bridges, systems and vast amounts of documents. However, through those disparate but fascinating encounters, common threads were emerging, both in terms of my 'methods' (clarification and probing questions, summarizing questions, conversational interludes), and in terms of content. The results of these encounters are narrated in Chapter Five.

3.6 Transcribing

I was faced with a real dilemma when it came to transcribing my interviews and sessions. It is the Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009: 189) 1,000 pages question! What to do with all this material? As these authors remark, the question 'how' to transcribe should come after the

question 'why' or 'what' (*ibid.*: 190). I knew the why and the what, but I was still faced with many hours of recording.

The other issue came at the analysing stage, because I wanted to use the words of all candidates' and staff, but the result inevitably has been to lose some of the narrative richness of the actors' accounts, instead resorting to snatches of statements which illustrate the points I, as a researcher, wanted to make. As these writers note, it is "analyze versus narrate" (*ibid.*: 193); analysis means fragmentation. In the end I have no choice. The structure of this thesis is limited. I have to do what I did not want to do, to select and exclude.

I accept Kvale and Brinkmann's argument that the "interview statements are not collected, they are co-authored" […] and that the "analysis of the transcribed interviews is a continuation of the conversation that started in the interview situation" (*ibid.*: 193). I will use my commentaries, interrupting the interviewees' narratives, as a form dialogue with the actors' accounts.

Finally I had another decision to make, whether to use QSR NVivo data analysis software. I attended a training programme, thought it was a tool with so many possibilities that I began to lose myself into the tree nodes, climbing and getting lost in their branches. In the end I decided that I would do my coding and identifications of the themes manually, not minding the physical attachment to paper and learning to resist the sensation of drowning in the data and its physical manifestation. I also felt that the logic of NVivo (Gibbs 2002) would be a barrier between my interviewees and myself. I could see the potential for spending much

time working out, enjoying the intricacies of the system, and losing sight of the human voices inhabiting the transcripts, truly getting lost in the world of coding and categories, which may have worked better had I chosen a discourse analysis methodology.

I resorted to the simplest of all the lessons of NVivo, using colour and font for screen viewing and ordering of the interview transcripts. They have become a colourful kaleidoscope, reflecting the candidates' rich and heterogeneous experience.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the context of the research and the issues it intends to explore, such as representations and translation, power, issues of identities and subjectivities. I presented it as a story in the making, starting with a life history perspective, which emphasises the dialogic process of learning biographies; it was thought at the time to constitute an aspect of the VAE process. This perspective influenced the research questions and the research conduct. I introduced the ANT aims, which were added during the research process and analysis, including the ANT concepts emerging from the research. I also describe the research context and open the 'black box' of the methods used during the research period.

I have not, up to now, focussed on Actor network Theory, while having mentioned its importance several times. The next chapter will expand on the way in which ANT became the theoretical frame of reference to analyse the research results.

"Traduction, trahison, translation, betrayal – though the pun works best in the Romance languages it is important to understand that data may stand for what it claims to represent, but that claim is always open to contest. Data are not only simplifications, but imputations too. There is, in short, no empiricist way out, no bedrock of hard facts" (Law 1994: 48).

4.1 Introduction: the discovery of ANT

I 'discovered' Actor Network Theory through discussions while searching for a way to deal with all the "data" I had collected, and because of a certain frustration with the life history or biographical approach I had decided to adopt to conduct my interviews. As I explained in the previous chapters, it provided the backbone to my research approach, thinking and philosophy - as John Law puts it "we are all social philosophers" (Law 1999a), with our own way to explain not the world around us but the world in which we move and live.

4.1.2 Dissatisfactions with the life history approach

My own experiential understanding and belief were that adults learn from their life course and the biographical approach seemed to offer a field of learning (Alheit 1994). Alheit notes that "life

course seems to be turning into a "laboratory" (Alheit 1004: 284) which brings us back to the practices of educational biographies developed by Dominicé (2000) and others (Pineau 1984; Josso 2001). However, as I listened to my interviews while transcribing, there was the issue that, as Dominicé himself says, a biography is always an "interpretation", (*op.cit.*: 62) a constant theme in his book. As I reflected back while listening to my candidates' voices, the picture of what was being evaluated and finally judged, became more confused, rather than clearer. I became aware of the many heterogeneous components springing up from all the narratives, invading the conversational space in which the candidates and their adviser were immersed, or the space created through my own interviews with those candidates.

4.2 ANT's world

I heard the way in which candidates brought to life their worlds, complete with their team mates, managers, hierarchies, machines or places, how they re-created through a narrative their own achievements or creations, beyond time and space (Nespor 1994), or at least their own 'interpretation' of their achievements; such as the case of a civil engineer, who talked about his "*ouvrage d'art*" – literally a work of art – which in the French language is an accepted metaphor referring to a bridge, as a complex (and indeed sometimes beautiful) engineering structure.

4.2.1 The role of the portfolio

My interviews became populated with these other lives, objects and actors, all jostling for attention, engaged in the struggle to be 'fixed' or centred' in spite of the chaos and the complexity of 'disparateness', into a single, most powerful object, the portfolio; a portfolio which

embodies "the struggle to centre and order from a *centre"* (Law 1999: 5). This same portfolio was to take on such a major presence during all the interviews.

It was the realisation of the centre stage position occupied by the portfolio which turned my attention so completely towards ANT. It is possible to argue that the portfolio represents the kind of tension highlighted by Law in relation to the naming of actor-network; actor - network, says Law, is "intentionally oxymoronic" (Law 1999a: 5) and embodies tensions "between the centred 'actor' on the one hand and the decentred 'network' on the other" (*ibid.:* 5).

I refer here to the way the portfolio reflects two contradictory intentions: it is a heterogeneous product, consisting of different elements representing a whole set of heterogeneous networks - but it is meant to 'centre', to organise, to put in order the typically disparate, messy reality of candidates' professional and non-professional lives, a reality which is essentially 'de-centred' to use John Law's terminology.

4.2.2 Agency and Structure

Law's argument (Law 1999a) is that actor - network 'performs' the difference between agency and structure, rather than analyse them into separate entities; entities who, according to Law (*ibid.:* 4), "achieve their forms as a consequence of the relations in which they are located. They are "performed in, by and through those relations", in a "semiotic approach" whereby each entity is identified in terms of its relationship with each other or through a "trail of associations" (Latour 2005:5).

Additionally, Latour talks about the contradictions of the "modernist predicament" (Latour 1999: 16) which he thinks should not be "overcome, but simply ignored or bypassed". By this, he refers to the social scientists' "dissatisfactions" already mentioned in Chapter Two in relation to Bertaux's *récits de vie* (1997) between the assurances of the macro-social, with its notions of "society, norms, values, culture, structure, social context, all terms that aim at designing what gives shape to micro interaction" (*op.cit.:* 17), and its opposite, the micro-social of local situations, from where all sociological investigation starts. According to Latour, ANT is providing a means to bypass this social science paradox by offering an alternative to consider the social as

> "not being made of agency and structure at all, but rather of being a circulating entity" where the analysis is on processes, a sociology that treats agents, organisations, and devices as interactive effects" (*ibid*.: 17).

This throws me back to *my* dissatisfaction with my original plan for analysis, the life history paradigm, where the subjects or agents, while firmly engaged in the processes of their own lives (micro-social), also situated themselves clearly within a broader social context (macro-social), to do with employability, social status and institutional recognition; a dichotomy which did not seem to take me further on the road of understanding what was 'really' going on, and led me to search for an alternative way of considering the VAE process.

As my interviews and interactions developed with the candidates and the university staff, the boundaries became increasingly blurred between actors. It should have been obvious as to where the locus of power resided (with the institution and what it represented in terms of official networks); however, it seemed to shift like sandbanks, helped by the iterative

characteristics of the processes involved. Indeed the process was this endless to and fro movement of continuous negotiations, between candidates - advisers, candidates - subject specialists, between the academics themselves, and between the portfolio and the human actors.

Going back, however, to the representations constructed by the VAE candidates, it may be helpful to sum up the story I am trying to tell. This is how I might present it.

In France, there is a law: it enables French citizens to have their professional and non-professional knowledge and competences validated, partially or in their entirety. Many people apply to different institutions or training organisations, become 'VAE candidates', and produce a portfolio which will 'represent' their competences, which in turn will be judged against pre-established standards – the *référentiels*. The 'transformation' of experience into a set qualification has been described an act of alchemy (Cherqui-Houot 2006).

I may add that it is "my" story of confrontation with language at many levels; not only the uneasy circular routes from French to English and back again, but from meaning to meaning: what are these notions of representation? Interpretation? Translation?

4.2.3 Representation, interpretation, translation

Within the tradition of educational biographies, Dominicé (2000: 63), instead of speaking about representation, consistently talks of individual, then dialogic and collaborative interpretation:

> "Whatever form a biography takes, it is always an interpretation. People speak about themselves; people write about themselves; people answer questions about

themselves. Basically, they socialize the life story they have been telling to

themselves by telling it to others".

According to official definitions, to interpret is to explain or elucidate. It can mean conveying or representing the spirit or meaning of something, and, interestingly, going back to its Latin origin, it contains the idea of someone who negotiates and explains. Similarly the verb represent contains the idea of explaining but the emphasis is on acting for another: to stand as an equivalent, or substitute, delegate for something or someone, while the noun 'representation' referring to performance (theatrical).

Are these two terms therefore identical? Dominicé's use of interpretation is significant, although his students do a form of negotiation over the meaning of their own story with their group (by reading it aloud, discussing it, returning to it and transforming it as they go along (Dominicé 1994; 2000). It is rather a hermeneutic process where the focus is less on acting in lieu of something else, of moving from one thing to another, but more on understanding the 'true' meaning of their lives in order to draw 'learning' from it. The idea of movement, on the other hand, is found in the meaning of translating. Although translating can be similar to interpreting, in as much as it is about expressing something simple, or in another language, the emphasis is about transforming and converting, moving from one place or position to another. The Latin etymology gives us the notion of transfer, and even a metaphysical meaning of transferring (a person) from one place or plane of existence to another, as from earth to heavens.

In ANT representation and translation are main concepts. John Law (1999b: 1) exposes his dilemma about having to be 'representative' for actor network theory, and "what it might mean

to 'represent' a theory that talks of representation in term of translation"; a theory which, he says, "seeks to undermine the very idea that there might be such thing as fidelity. [...] Which stresses that all representation also betrays its object".

Therefore, instead of talking about interpretations like Dominicé, my story talks about people's (my VAE candidates) ordering through representations - first through their oral, then written narratives – and about their own sociological meaning-making of their experience; about what they decide to tell, and how. It is, as Law (1994: 25) says, that

"[...] ordering, or at any rate self-reflexive ordering, *depends* on representation. It depends, that is, on how it is that agents represent both themselves, and their context, *to* themselves. The argument, then, is that representations shape, influence and participate in ordering practices: that ordering is not possible without representation. This, then, is one expression, a reflexive expression, of the recursion that we witness everywhere in the social".

The portfolio thus becomes another representation. I realised that the candidates' narratives were the candidates' own representations of their experience rather than *the real* or *true* experience – in Chapter Two we saw how the concept of experience can be a contested terrain (Fenwick 2000; Mayen 2008) – these representations were all, and everything, I was going to have. Those representations (and in ANT I will talk of translations) are what will be judged; they are not just an inconvenience obscuring 'reality'. As Law says:

"Representations are far more than a technical problem. […] I believe that we need to treat representations in the same way as other stories. Representations are not just a necessary part of ordering. Rather, they are ordering processes in their own right. Seen in this way, the study of representations, and in particular how it is that representations are generated, is an important part of the study of ordering *tout court*" (Law 1994: 26).

This represents a shift from a hermeneutic interpretation to a different kind of analysis about how the candidates' own representations were going to be "massaged" into a portfolio ; the latter already had its own pre-ordering categories. The candidates were offering mini-stories about each of the jobs they had held, or about their schooling days, and about the roles they had in their place of work; not just representations but translations, as a transfer was taking place from their worlds onto the paper of the portfolio. But transfer means change as Law (1992: 5) points out:

"Thus analysis of ordering struggle is central to actor network theory. The object is to explore and describe local processes of patterning, social orchestration, ordering and resistance. In short, it is to explore the process that is often called translation which generates ordering effects such as devices, agents, institutions, or organisations".

It is perhaps easier now to see why it seemed possible to see the VAE as an ANT story; we find ourselves completely inside translation processes where things stand for others. Where, by the very act of narrating their experience, transforming it and their world onto a portfolio, the candidates collude with an institutional ordering, while at the same time reclaiming ownership

by contorting the portfolio to suit their needs, and their vision of themselves; conforming, yes, to the institutional demands; 'play the game' was a recurrent comment, but subverting the game too by reliving, imposing, recreating the intensity of their involvement (workplace, for instance) through their resolve to explicate all in the smallest details.

4.2.4 The ordering struggle

They are many ways to talk about the validation from a perspective of power relations, as we have seen in Chapter Two. Experience is translated into institutional dominant knowledge and into familiar academic language, recognisable to the assessors (Pokorny 2006). In her exposition of Callon's translation process, Porkorny (2006: 273) relates, as I am about to do, each stage of translation to the validation process transposed into her UK context, or, relate them, as she says, to the "ways in which the candidates' prior knowledge is moved into academic networks" (*ibid.:*). However, she submits that the APEL advisors or academics become the *'obligatory point of passage'*, OPP, when the candidates arrive at the point of acceptance that the advisers and academics define the problem and the rules to resolve it. They are like the three researchers in Callon's story who "determine a set of actors and define their identities in such a way as to establish themselves as an OPP in the network of relationships they were building" (Callon 1986: 204).

That is not quite the way I first analysed 'my' experience of the French VAE. I understood that the actors-candidates participated in the ordering practices through their self representations, gradually realising that they also shared in, or rather, (re) appropriated a form of distributive power; that power did not reside solely within the institution, its representatives and official networks. Of course, the various members of staff, and through them the institution, were the

keeper of the rules and defined who could or could not achieve the VAE, or even who could begin the process. However, I believe that it was more complex than that; power was contested and reclaimed precisely because the candidates battled with the pre-formatted portfolio and managed to reshape it to a format they could recognise. The rules of evaluation, while well-established, left room for a flexibility of interpretation, for lack of a better word, which will be analysed in greater details in the following chapters.

This divergence of analysis may not, however, be so surprising after all: it is true that Pokorny (2006) and Colley *et al.* (2003) use the French practices of validation to suggest that alternative models to the UK audit model are possible; that perhaps the French validation model is not yet tainted by audit and quality assurance obsessions, and is comfortable in using dialogic methodology as a means to explore and understand the candidates' experience, thereby recognising its contextuality.

Therefore, working in a different context may explain why I saw things differently from Porkony, and others, writing on APEL from a UK, or even from a North American perspective. But when I started exploring my stories as actor network stories, I first turned to Callon's four stages of translation and thought I had found a 'model'. It may well be that I will have to revise my initial analysis in view of what I observed and found, results which will be presented and analysed in the next chapter.

I am, however, reminded of Law's (1999b: 6) remarks, that the ANT studies of the 1980s were "tackled as matters to be controlled, limited, and mastered. To be 'drawn together', centred".

He contrasts this with Cussins' story (Cussins 1998 in Law 1999b: 6), which is concerned with showing that "decentring may be crucial to centring", and that

"[S]he is concerned with temporality. But not simply with movement through time or the creation of irreversibility (concerns crucial to the project-studies of ANT in the 1980s). Instead she attends to the exquisite work of **prospective/retrospective interpretation**. […] Ordering is momentary. So here is a difference: Cussins' study reveals a concern with reflexive repair that has no problem with inconsistency precisely because it is temporal as well as spatial. For there is no need to draw things together, except for a moment – and that moment will pass […]. The concern with what, perhaps, we should no longer call 'inconsistency', has been displaced, into what she calls ontological choreography. Into dance instead of design".

It seems to me that the story of the VAE, as I witnessed it, is indeed very much a story of prospective and retrospective dance. A continuous, iterative *va et vient* between then and now and a relation to the future, indeed, perhaps, an ontological choreography.

But before I can make more assertions, I need to start from the beginning, and this is how I began exploring and constructing my own explanation of the processes.

4.3 A first attempt at analysing the VAE process through ANT: Callon's four moments of translation

When I first tried to make sense of ANT in relation to the VAE, I attempted to see Callon's 'four moments of translation' as a model to engage in similar thinking about my VAE processes: these moments which he describes in his story of researchers' attempts at imposing their views on the problems of dwindling scallops population faced by Breton fishermen in the St Brieux Bay, wanting to find out if what they had observed in Japan with another species of scallops was transposable to the Breton context. Model is of course an inadequate word, which, even then, I knew to be so. The very nature of ANT contains this paradox: the naming of ANT, and, argues John Law (1999) its very success, pins it down where it never really intended to go, that is, to become another theory of the social.

On this subject, both Law (2003; 2007) and Latour (2005) refute ANT as a model to be applied. In the dialogue of the Professor of the London School of Economics with his student (Latour 2005) Latour represents actor-network as a theory which is useful only if one does not apply it to something – "it's not a tool, or rather, because tools are never 'mere' tools ready to be applied: they always modify the goals you had in mind." (Latour 2005: 143) It is essentially "about how to study things, or rather how not to study them, - or rather, how to let the actors have some room to express themselves" *(ibid.:* 142).

The temptation to turn Callon's own formulation into a model of translation was nevertheless too strong to resist, as is evident from the work of others (for example Nespor 1994; Ogilvie-Whyte 2004; Hamilton 2010). So it was that I used his identified 'moments' to characterise the

iterative process whereby the object – i.e. the portfolio – is seen as the result of a negotiation between actors, successively transformed according to the general processes of translation.

Callon refers to the researchers' attempts at domestication (of the scallops) as consisting of "four moments" which constitute

> "the different phases of a general process called translation, during which the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited" (Callon 1986: 203).

He suggests that his three biologist-researchers passed through these four 'moments' in their strategic efforts to impose themselves and impose their definitions of the situation to others (in particular of course to the fishermen), engaging in what ANT calls the 'controversy': it is through the controversy that facts are elaborated; controversy always precedes the emergence of a scientific proposition or an innovation - a term applied to the VAE process by Lauriol *et al.* (2004), who identified the VAE as a innovative policy object.

It is through the study of the controversy that it becomes possible to understand the processes which enable the facts to be constructed. The four moments of translation suggested by Callon are: problematisation, interessment, enrolment and mobilisation.

4.3.1 Problematisation

In order to find these four moments within the VAE process, it is worth reminding ourselves of the actors involved: the VAE candidates, the advisers, the portfolio, the members of academic

staff in charge of the FC within their academic department, the course director - Head of department, the members of the jury, and of course the offices where this process takes place, the programmes documents, the *référentiels,* and 'behind the scene' the employers, the machines, the offices, the candidates' colleagues and their teams, the employment agencies for those seeking work, their families, their houses.

Sometimes the boundaries between categories of actors can become blurred: the movements and networks of relationships are fluid between the institution and its internal and external environment, even between parts of the institution and the candidates themselves: such as the overlapping roles between some lecturers-researchers and the professionals from industry who work in the research department, but sit on the jury as professionals of that industry; or the blurring of roles when the VAE candidate is also the entrepreneur who collaborates with the director of the programme for which he is seeking a validation, by taking computing students as trainees in his company.

I chose to follow the candidates-actors as the starting point, considering 'intuitively' – differing in this with Pokorny's own analysis – that the candidates were the "primum movens", like Callon's researchers (1896: 203), who set the action in motion and identified the nature of the 'problem'. The problem here in ANT terms is the 'candidates' project'; they are going to mobilize a network of relations in order to transpose their experience into a qualification. The contentious question is this: how does the candidates' experience fit with the programmes' *référentiels?* From which question follow others; how is this experience to be gathered into a pre-formatted portfolio? How is it going to be evaluated and judged? What does the process say about the relationships, trials of strength (if they are any) between the different entities?

The VAE stages have already been charted in the introductory chapter, so I will only summarise them here. Having identified the appropriate qualification, the candidates may have an appointment directly with the subject specialist, who is usually responsible for the FC of that department, (i.e. the evening or block release programmes specifically targeted at working adults), and acts as the *liaison* between the academic department and the FC Department where the VAE unit is located. This is when the candidates pass initially through what Callon calls the 'obligatory passage point' (OPP), that is, the moment when the programme director establishes the feasibility of the project. Together they will agree on the target qualification or *diplôme*, the level targeted, through a discussion about the candidates' professional experience, responsibilities, previous qualifications and other training, and whether it might result in a whole or partial validation. Curriculum Vitae and qualifications documents will be presented to the subject specialist. Then the candidate will meet with the senior advisor at the VAE centre to set the process in motion.

In most cases, however, candidates' first meeting will actually be with the senior VAE adviser (after having filled an application form, the first document of the *dossier*), to be followed by a public information session. The senior adviser will set the paper work in motion (funding in particular), explain the VAE process as well as the regulations governing the VAE, and generally explore with the candidate his or her objectives, past and current experience and qualifications, and determine the appropriateness and feasibility of the claim.

Then, the senior adviser will refer the candidate to the subject expert. What is important about this last relationship is that a common understanding is reached between the candidate and the

subject specialist regarding the level of qualification to which the candidate may aspire. It is worth noting that, although the discussion involves two actors with different social standing and qualifications, one of whom represents institutional 'power' of decision over the candidate, a certain professional balance operates, as both persons are professionals in the same field, and therefore do share some common knowledge in that specific area.

Finally, the candidate is allocated an adviser, according to availability and geographical suitability. At the first meeting (up to two hours) the adviser sets out the pre-formatted dossier, the jury's requirements, and the process of matching the experience into the programme's objectives, using when needed the *référentiel*.

The adviser becomes a central actor in the process and the dossier becomes a presence, an actor which is physically 'handled', manipulated, transformed into an amorphous mass, or scattered into pieces of paper, bound into a binder, plastic folder or other devices to contain it, usually carried in a briefcase, or even in a plastic carrier bag, until the final 'product' is reached. The adviser may also contact the subject specialist to check that appropriate action has been taken, correct advice given, or check on the probable length of the procedure, on the identification of the jury, dates etc. What happens here is a centring process (Law 1999), a struggle, between the candidates, their representations and narrative of their experience, the portfolio and its pre-set format, the guiding 'will' of the adviser to bend all into a 'digestible' product.

In Callon's story, the researchers set the questions to be addressed in order to stop the decline of the St. Brieux scallop population; can the French scallops behave like the Japanese scallops, anchoring themselves to collectors while they develop into adults, thereby escaping the

attention of predators and currents? In other words, can the Japanese experience be transposable to France? While other questions presented themselves to the researchers (questions about the larvae's developments about which no research was available), they also knew that they could not resolve the problem by themselves. They had to overcome "obstacles-problems" (1986: 206), just as my candidates have to overcome a set of obstacle-problems on their arduous path to the validation. For Callon

> "the word *problem* designates obstacles that are thrown across the path of an actor which hinder his movement. [….] [T]hey result from the definition and interrelation of actors that were not previously linked to one another. To problematise is simultaneously to define a series of actors and the obstacles which prevent them from attaining the goals or objectives that have been imputed to them" (*ibid.:* 228).

Callon sees the problematisation phase, one of overcoming obstacles, as defined by what he calls the "dynamic properties" (*ibid.:* 206) of problematisation, which indicate the "movements and detours that must be accepted as well as alliances that must be forged" (*ibid.:* 206); a "Holy Alliance" of entities which must define what they are and what they want through a system of alliances and negotiations. It seems that the researchers' argument represents a battle to be won; they have to rally the other entities (fishermen, scallops, colleagues of the scientific community) to their argument, which is to know how the scallops anchor, and for the entities to understand that only through alliance can the answer to this question benefit all of them. Further on, Callon talks of a "series of trials of strength whose outcome will determine the solidity of the researchers' problematisation" (*ibid.:* 207).

I can see why I was able to see similarities between Callon's problematisation process and the VAE: there are such battles within the VAE processes and the battles lines are drawn in that first exploration stage where all the actors position themselves. If I were to draw a similar diagramme to Callon's (*ibid.:* 207), and I did try, (see Figure 1), I would identify first the entities as the candidates, the portfolios, the advisers, the subject-specialists, and the jury.
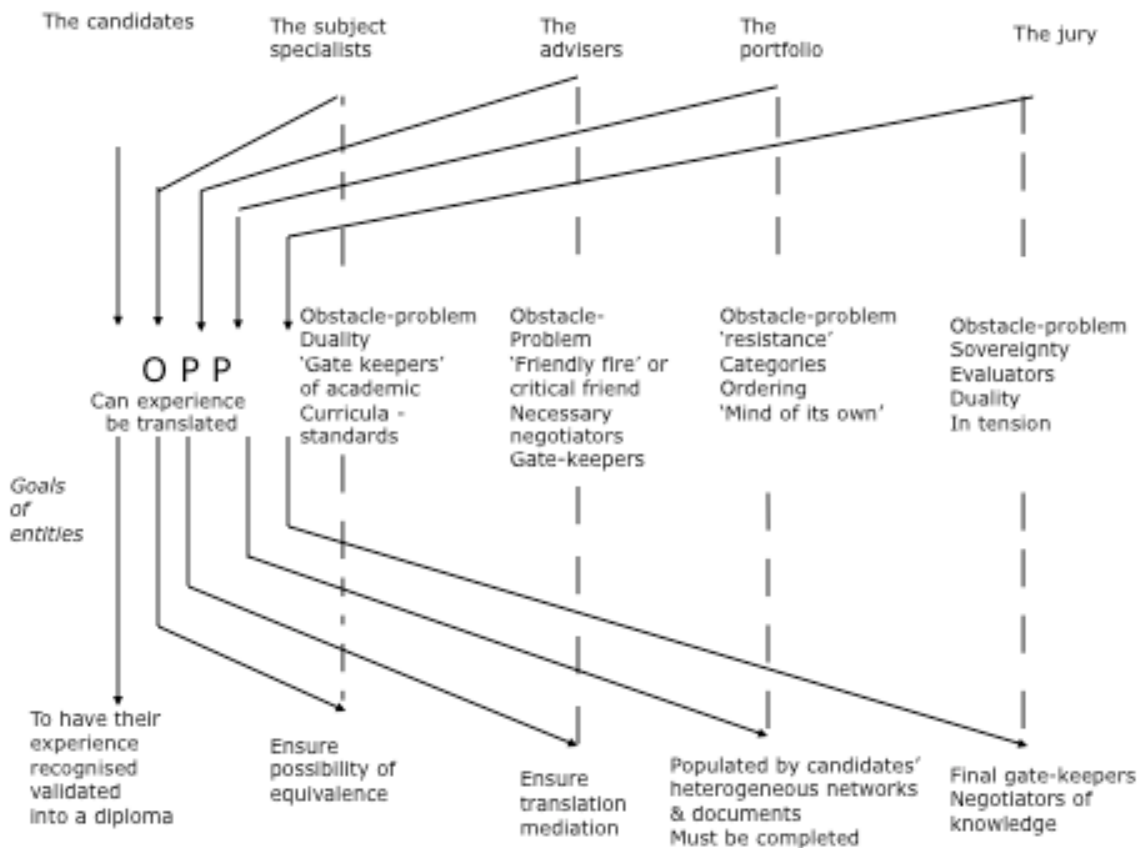

Figure 1: Adapted from Callon (1986: 207) "problematisation: a system of alliance, or associations, between entities"

- obstacle-problem 1: the subject specialists: 'duality': they have dual objectives: on the one hand most subject specialists want to help the candidates and offer advice, but they also have to maintain academic standards and listen to their own needs for academic rigour; they may also find the VAE process difficult as well as time consuming;

- obstacle-problem 2: the advisers: 'friendly fire': they want to help the candidate to succeed while at the same time they have to battle with the candidates' narrative and mould the candidates' will and resistance to suit the *référentiels* and the programme specifications, the portfolio, the needs of the jury, the institution's needs, and respect the terms of the VAE legislation;

- obstacle-problem 3: the portfolio: 'resistance': it resists the messy reality of the candidates' lives to impose its order on the candidates, and gains a life of its own;

- obstacle-problem 4: the jury: 'centring': the jury pulls it all together and needs to be convinced. The jury is "sovereign", a recurring term in the advisers' discourse; so the jury also oscillates between wanting to support the candidates' application and their duties as evaluators and guardian of academic rigour.

Does that work? Well, perhaps; as in all models it is possible to deviate and negotiate the template, if indeed template there is. Anyhow, it helped to define the problems and setting out the 'entities', who all have something to defend. As we will see in the following chapter, all entities have something to offer as well as to protect.

4.3.2 Interessment: one side of the coin

As Callon points out, "reality is a process" (*ibid.:* 206). Nothing is static, nothing is certain and the movement is perpetual. The real test of the VAE process rests in the second moment of

translation which he calls *interessment*. It is, according to Callon "a group of actions by which an entity (in his story, the three researchers) attempts to impose and stabilize the identity of the other actors it defines through its problematisation" (*ibid.:* 208). This interessment uses devices, which, in Callon's story, are the towlines and collectors used to attach the scallops.

"To interest other actors is to build devices which can be placed between them and all other entities who want to define their identities otherwise" (*ibid.:* 208). In the VAE case, the devices will be the portfolio itself and its different parts, the Curriculum Vitae and all the documents to be produced, and the *référentiels*.

This is where I have to deviate a little from a too faithful following of a model which is not really a model if it is not representative of a theory, as ANT is not supposed to be a theory (Latour 2005; Law 2007), or even a framework as Nespor (1994) calls it. Still attempting to reproduce another of Callon's diagrammes (*op.cit*.: 208), I show in Figure 2 how I have to shift from the candidates to the adviser (entity B) who acts as the entity through whom the first "elementary" interessment takes place - although the candidates remain in my opinion the primum movens (entity A in Callon's diagramme).
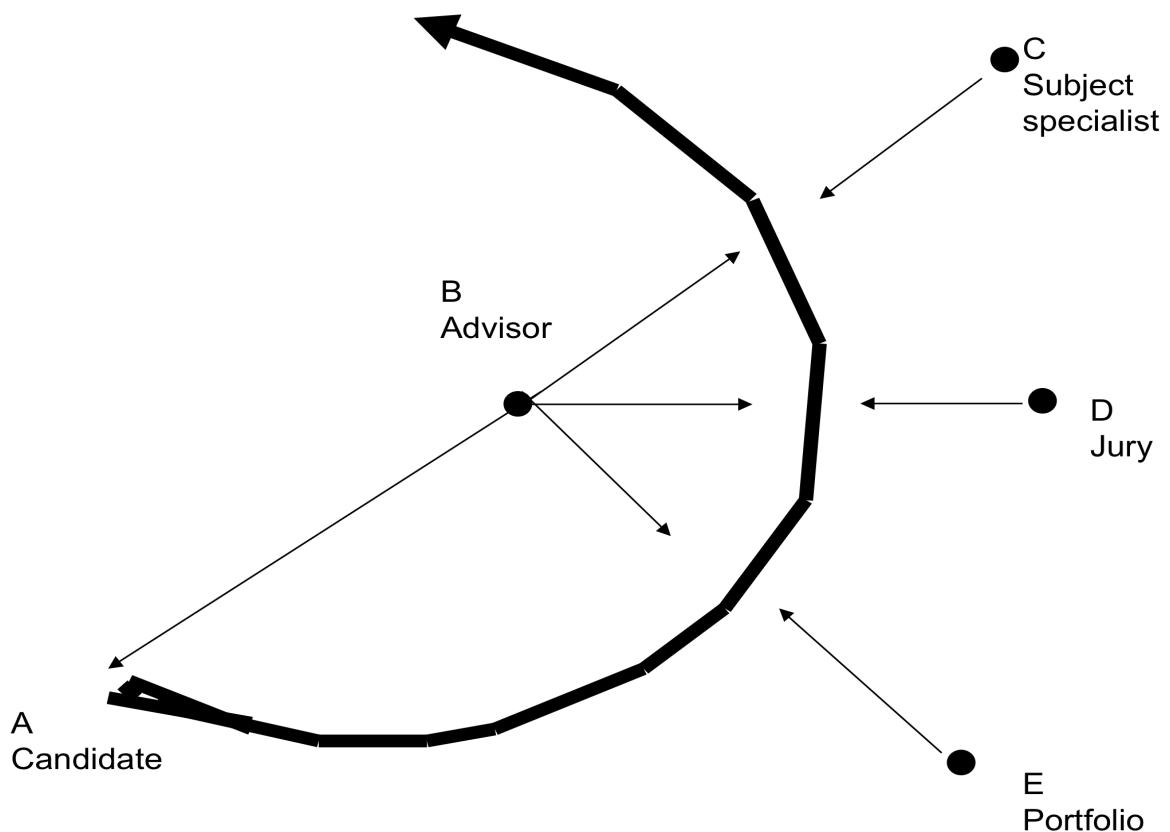
Figure 2: Adapted from Callon (1986: 208). The devices of Interessment.

The adviser can be considered as one of the most important actors; as we have seen, she represents the validating institution, speaks in the name of the legislator and by being the main mediator in the process of equivalence, translates the candidates' experience. At the beginning of the process therefore she is to be 'interested', from the candidates' point of view. She will be an advocate for them, and, in doing so, may find that she has to engage during the process in more or less arduous negotiations with the course director, or with the chair of the jury. Certainly, in order to coach the candidates into a finished portfolio, she will become their strongest ally; her allegiance is at that stage with the candidates, with whom she has forged a

more or less strong bond, depending on personalities. She wants them to succeed. To follow Callon's interessment process I would say that entity A (the candidates), having successfully joined forces during the problematisation stage with other entities - the course director- subject specialist, entity C; the various documents, référentiels, portfolio format, entity E - interests the adviser, not so much by cutting her off from the other entities, such as C for example, but by engaging her total support so that they can carry out the successful completion of the portfolio. In doing this they put the adviser into an ontological paradox: being 'on the side' of the candidates, while very much representing, and in some way warranting, the institutional processes, standards and the legal obligations of both the institution and the recipients of the VAE. This paradox is perhaps more evident in her relationship to the jury, entity D; she will act as an advocate for the candidate, summarizing for the jury his or her relevant experience, and the rationale behind the application, while at the same time reminding the jury of their responsibilities and duties towards the VAE legislation.

> "*Etre intéressé est être inter-essé*, to be interposed […]. To interest other actors is to construct mechanisms which can be placed between them and between all other entities who want to define their identity in other ways" (*ibid.*: 208).

The parallel between Callon's story and the VAE process does work, up to a point: the candidates use strategies – of resistance, of force, of seduction – in order to interest entity B, the adviser. It is the story of alliances, and sometimes of struggles. It explains Callon's view that "interested entities are modified all along the process of interessment" (*ibid.:* 209), just as the adviser gradually is 'won over' by the strength of the candidates' emotional commitment to their story, and to their objectives.

The interessment of the subject specialist or course director, entity C, is obviously essential, or the whole process might fail; as already mentioned, the fact that the academic staff involved are mainly responsible for the FC of their department make them 'allies' of the VAE practitioners, who work within the FC centre of the university. However, even as allies, experienced in teaching mature students, and vocal in their appreciation of those students' motivation and abilities, they also have conflicting loyalties towards maintaining academic standards, towards their responsibilities as academic researchers and or as Heads of their departments, and towards their 'traditional teaching' duties with mainstream students of the *formation initiale* (young, school leavers, full-time). They also have needs for rigorous evaluation; the competition for those academics' interessment come from other discourses about the meaning and role of university education, traditional assessment methods or from other colleagues or mainstream students, reflecting the unstable environment of the newly created VAE practices.

This is not to disagree with the idea that the process takes place within an overall recursive interessment from an institutional point of view, whereby the candidates are enticed to conform to a whole set of procedures and a way of thinking about and narrating their experience. Indeed, along with Mayen (2008) one could add that the VAE process objectives are essentially defined by those who are part of the evaluation system, therefore imposing a 'transformation' of the candidates themselves in order to join the academic order of their discipline.

There is interessment too from the point of view of entity D (the jury), who represents the institutional pressure on entities A and B, to conform to a system of presentation through the

portfolio, and who embodies academic judgement and institutional regulations, a process reminiscent of Nespor's "disciplinary constructions of students" (Nespor, 1994: 14).

Callon talks about successful interessment confirming "the validity of the problematisation and the alliances it implies" (*op.cit.:* 210). Here in the case of the VAE, we see a series of alliances being made, between entities who have different sets of objectives, whose allegiances keep forming and re-forming along a problematic, evolving dialogic process.

4.3.3 Enrolment: the other side of the coin

According to Callon successful interessment achieves enrolment. Nespor also finds that while "interessments succeed in fixing identities and memberships, enrolment interrelates those roles and fashions the identities into systems of alliances. Interessment and enrolment are two sides of the coin" (Nespor 1994: 14). Enrolment, for Callon, does not refer to set social roles, but rather "it designates the device by which a set of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them" (Callon 1986: 211).

The adviser and the candidate negotiate 'strategies' as to the format and the content of the *dossier* to make it comprehensible to the jury. By then the 'problem' is to translate the mass of written and oral information, memories of incidents and situations illustrating work-based or extra professional activities produced by the candidate, into the *dossier*. Emerging are the heterogeneous elements and unseen actors of the candidates' life experience, across space and time (Nespor 1994), jostling for the adviser's attention; she will help to decide where each piece of experience can be represented into which part of the dossier, which column, thus giving it value in the hierarchy of responsible roles held by the candidates.

The adviser has to enrol those elements successfully and they resist: she encounters 'enemy forces' in the form of the multiplicity of elements involved, their determination to have their say. Sometimes the struggle is in the shape of conflicts between time, work or family, all battling in the candidates' lives, jostling for attention. There is battle too within the portfolio, where actors are engaged in an iterative and interactive process where it is written and re-written, a process which will last over the three or four meetings. Each time a re-written portfolio is presented, each of its components is discussed at length. The *dossier* becomes the centrepiece, the prime actor for a successful validation, the ground onto which negotiations or hopes are formed through its content. Similarly to Callon's story, a "modus vivendi is progressively arranged" (*op.cit.*: 213) through "acts of enticements", to enrol the different VAE actors, through what Callon calls "multilateral negotiations, trials of strength and tricks that accompany the interessments and enable them to succeed" (*op.cit.:* 211).

We can say that the interessment has succeeded in as much as the candidates, and everyone involved, accept to 'play the game' in order to obtain a successful conclusion. Playing the game is a recurrent expression, and is an accepted part of the process (Mayen 2009a). Playing the game is to accept, for the candidates, the rule of engagement; the laborious process of narrating and ordering each and every bit of 'useful' experience.

4.3.4 Mobilization

The way I see the VAE process in term of Callon's last stage of translation is like a representational prism; "who speaks in the name of whom? Who represents whom?" (Callon 1986: 214). The candidates present and represent their own professional and informal networks

and experiences. The portfolio *speaks for* the candidates, their experience and their networks. The portfolio therefore becomes a spokesperson for the candidates. It brings into the room, in front of the jury, all the entities in the candidates' lives, the sum of relevant experience which then can be translated into a qualification. It brings to life the colleagues and the various teams they worked with, the different workplaces and employers, all through the discursive descriptions and analysis of work situations and interactions with those actors, including the machines they used and interacted with, or the products they made. These entities, originally dispersed in time and space throughout the candidate's life experience, have been rallied, mobilised into the portfolio's pages and into the twenty minutes presentation in front of the jury. Like the scallops in Callon's story, which are transformed into numbers and tables and academic papers, the candidates' heterogeneous networks and silent entities are transformed into grids, lists, charts, pictures of products, maps, marketing material, newspaper clips, summaries, dispersed parts mobilized to form a coherent whole, "easily transportable reproducible and diffusible sheets of paper" (*Ibid.:* 217). The networks have been displaced. The experience has been transformed, translated.

Moreover, during the actual jury, when the adviser summarizes the candidates' aims, she also becomes a spokesperson for them. When she reminds the jury of its responsibilities, about what it can and cannot do as a jury under the VAE legislation, she becomes the spokesperson for the state and its legislative network of rights and obligations. She also represents the candidates, as we will see in the next chapter, even acting as an advocate in their names.

The jury represents the academic institution, with its procedures, hierarchies and standards. The course director represents his/ her department, or his/ her professional field with its experts and researchers.

The academic staff mobilize their disciplinary entities; the diploma and the programme, their research expertise connected to colleagues, academic papers etc, as well as the institutional context in which they operate with its physical environment (for instance research units) and its more traditional or mainstream assessment methods to which they are accustomed; but also their sympathetic understanding of the principles of the FC and respect for the value of the candidates' professional experience.

As Callon (*Ibid.*: 218) explains, "[...] at the end of the four moments described, a constraining networks of relationships have been built" and the problems set out during the problematisation moment have been negotiated (or not), consensus achieved (or not). This reminds us of how Law (1999: 5) talks about processes of centring in reference to the "actor-network stories told in Paris in the 1980s". The VAE is surely a process of drawing together elements which are heterogeneous, and we shall see in the next section how one could view Callon's dissidence and controversies in the light of more contemporary reflexions on the subject of differences and inconsistencies.

4.4 Dissidence, betrayals and controversies

At this point, Callon says that "[C]ontroversy is all the manifestations by which the representativity of the spokesman is questioned, discussed, negotiated, rejected, etc." (*op.cit.*:

219). In his story there is controversy and dissidence, when the majority of scallops refuse to follow the few which did, and which ended up represented all of them; or when some fishermen ignored the agreements passed with their representatives and raided the scallops one night for quick gains.

Within the VAE process controversies are not as marked, or dissidence is of a different nature. It is possible, however, to say that there are controversies; in fact the whole process is characterised by controversies. I prefer, on the other hand, to follow Law (1999: 5) and say that the VAE "performs a lot of differences, differences in translation". These differences and inconsistencies are what characterise the VAE process. In Cussins' story (of infertility treatments in a Californian clinic), Law (*ibid*.: 5) comments that the "process of objectification [of patients], turning the patient into an array of objects [laparoscope, visualisation of internal organs, in vitro fertilisation and frozen embryos] intersects positively with the subjectivity of the patient" ; positively, because in the case described it may result in the desired pregnancy. Without going further into this particular example, it is nevertheless a useful metaphor for the VAE process where candidates do battle with the heterogeneous elements of their experience while at the same time do want to play the game and conform to the demands of the portfolio and of academia. Law says that Cussins "shows an interest in inconsistency between objectification and subjectivity […] (*ibid.:* 5)". I think that the VAE is, for me, a story of tensions and yes, a story of inconsistencies which, in the Callon's fashion, are drawn to the centre; "[A]t the end of the process, if it is successful, only voices speaking in unison will be heard" (*op.cit.:* 223).

It is a therefore story of centring and decentring too. Each actor has interests which may not converge. It will depend after all on the 'realism' shown by the candidates as far as their own

evaluation of their experience and knowledge is concerned, and on the course director's own

disposition towards the VAE, which may not be compliant, or may be ambiguous, or it may

depend on the depth or nature of the candidates' knowledge, and on other factors. This is a

point to which this study will come back in Chapter Five.

4.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to present ANT as an alternative to the life history perspective which

had been selected at the beginning of the research, in order to analyse the VAE process for this

study.

In this chapter I presented the main ANT concepts, such as representations and translation, and

ANT's position on agency and structure. I introduced Callon's four moments of translation and

'applied' those to the VAE process and actors. In Callon's words (1986: 223) "to translate is to

displace"; I attempted to show how a number of displacements occurred during the VAE. I

highlighted the role of the portfolio and that of the advisers as central actors in the process.

In particular I drew on Callon's own diagrammes to try and illustrate two moments of

translation, problematisation and interessment within the VAE. My two figures are

complementary in the way they show how alliances are created, or resisted, at both the

problematisation and interessment moments. In problematisation the resistances are both

potential or real: each actor might be an obstacle, each are their own actor-network with

contradictory objectives or intentions. Each too has to be interested, won over, enrolled. There

are resistances, controversies too, as each entity deploys devices to entice another (such as the

portfolio, CV, arguments), with the adviser pulling all other entities towards a common, unified

goal. Those controversies flow freely throughout the process, just as resistances can be found at

any time; nothing is fixed, as Callon says, all entities may be modified. I have also tried to show

the flow of controversies and resistances in a further Figure 3 in Chapter Five, through a

diagramme referring to the notion of circulating entities (Latour 1999). This next diagramme is

not focused, as the other two, so much on the alliances or possibilities for misalliance but rather

on the whole VAE actor-network as a "flat" (Latour 1999: 18) social domain, attempting to show

the heterogeneity, and fluidity of the VAE process.

The next chapter will set out the results of the research, using ANT analysis, exploring the stories

and controversies.

"Experience is not an orderly sequence of events but the narrated reflection of being"

Starr-Glass (2002: 228).

5. 1   Introduction: a story of ordering and resistance

In the previous chapters I set out my stall; I presented how the biographical approach, used to interview the VAE actors, did not appear to offer a satisfactory account, for the purpose of analysis, of the processes taking places, or of the tensions, controversies and negotiations criss-crossing the spaces I visited.

In this chapter I will attempt to tell actors' accounts, exploring ways of using ANT tools in order to develop a 'different' narrative to those already applied to the story of the validation of experiential learning, as explored in Chapter Two. I talk about exploration; indeed, I am not certain that it will work; or that I can 'pull it off', for that is what it feels like. This research has become personal, as personal to me as the experience of validation was to each of the candidates interviewed. I am far more uncertain or vulnerable than John Law could ever be (1994); attempting to write self-reflexively as he does is barely possible in the context of a doctoral study, as is made clear by one of his students "[I]t is al very well for you to write like this. You're a Professor. You're well established. But I'm not. I still have to do my Ph.D. So I can't possibly write like that" (Law 1994: 191). Along with his lesser colleagues, I cannot ignore the

laws of conventional academic writing, as Law recognises, describing his writing as a form of "elite game" (*ibid.*: 191).

I can, however, try to follow that other Professor, Latour (2005: 30), since I too want to give their voices back to the actors:

> "If I had to provide a checklist for what is a good ANT account […] - are the concepts of the actors allowed to be *stronger* than that of the analysts, or is it the analyst who is doing all the talking? As far as writing reports is concerned, it means a precise but difficult trial: Is the text that comments on the various quotes and documents more, less, or as interesting as the actors' own expressions and behaviors? If you find this test too easy to meet, then ANT is not for you".

Ordering and commenting my accounts, I try to reflect on Latour's words that "actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it" (Latour 1999: 20).

5.1.2 The moments of translation

In the preceding chapter, I presented Callon's moments of translation as a way of thinking about the moments of the VAE process. I will not, however, follow blindly this 'model' for the reasons that it is neither a model nor is the process linear, as Callon himself observes, and because I wish to highlight the tensions, or controversies, crisscrossing those moments, interwoven into the experience of the VAE whose characteristics have been identified as that of an *"objet frontière"* (boundary object) (Guérin *et al.* 2010). These authors suggest that the VAE can be seen as having

ill-defined boundaries, while needing "to interest and enrol a network of actors coming from different social worlds" (*ibid.*: 45), with various level of involvement and concerns, to define together its content so that it can establish itself as a known practice.

I will therefore present the actors' accounts starting with the moment of translation which Callon identifies as problematisation. I will turn to the interessment and enrolment moments together as they relate to the advisers' interessment and the enrolment of the dispersed elements of experience into the orderings of the portfolio, a major site of struggle taking place around the portfolio construction.

The mobilisation moment will gather concluding narratives and reflexions about the outcomes of the validation process as observed, focusing on the jury, the means by which controversies are stabilised (Latour 2005).

> "Thus analysis of ordering struggle is central to actor network theory. The object is to explore and describe local processes of patterning, social orchestration, ordering and resistance. In short, it is to explore the process that is often called translation which generates ordering effects such as devices, agents, institutions, or organisations. So "translation" is a verb which implies transformation and the possibility of equivalence, the possibility that one thing (for example an actor) may stand for another (for instance a network)" (Law, 1992: 5).

This story is therefore a story of ordering struggle, where the resistances, dissidence and controversies circulate within and around the VAE 'object'; the diagramme in Figure 3 attempts

to illustrate the way actors within the VAE are part of a "circulation, where time and space are understood to result from particular interactions of things" (Fenwick and Edwards 2010: 23); or part of "an exploration of the mundane masses, assemblages, materiality, heterogeneity and fluidity" (*ibid.:* 23).
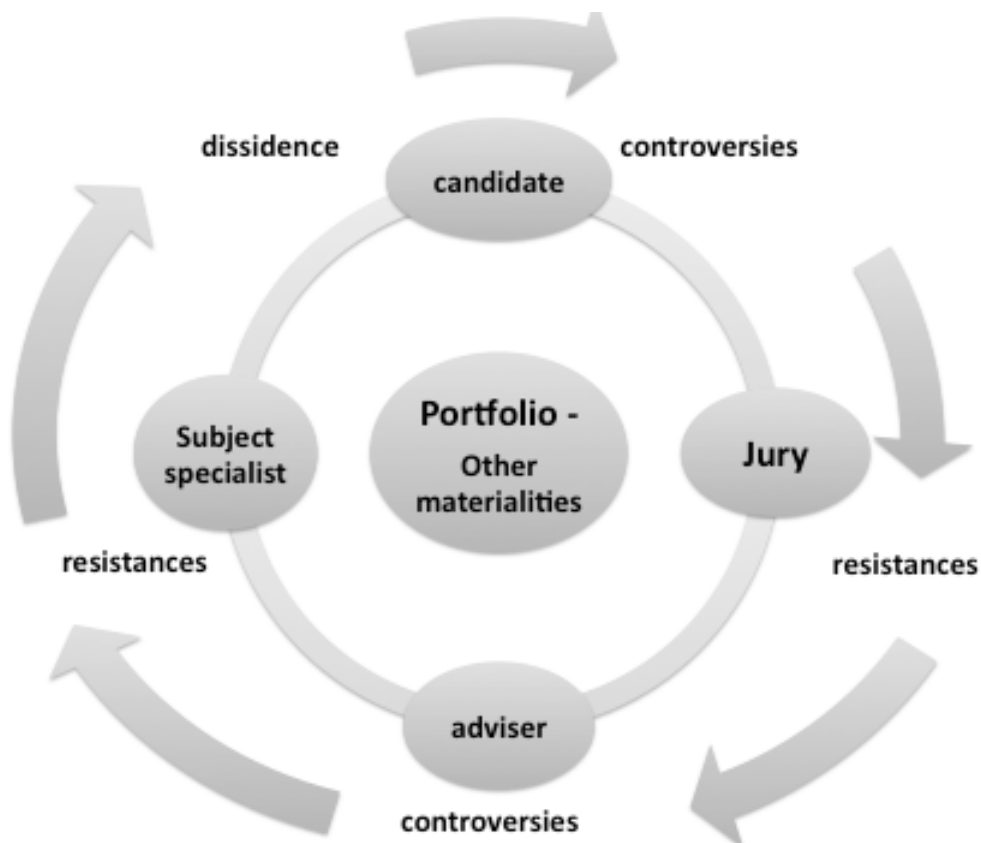
Figure 3: controversies and resistances

In this diagramme, I have tried to show how the actors are part of the circulating entity mentioned in Chapter Four; I have attempted to use Latour's concept to illustrate, maybe simplistically, how all actors are both agency and structure; or how the social world of the actors and the VAE can be transformed, through ANT analysis, "from what was a surface, a territory, a province of reality, into a circulation" (Latour 1999: 19), where actors are "interactive effects"

(*ibid.*: 17); and where in this case, controversies, dissidence and resistances flow and circulate between and within all the actors. I have also placed the portfolio and other materialities – the documents and the places where the VAE takes place, for example – in the prominent middle place in an attempt to counterbalance the way my methodology has centred the human actors.

5.1.3 Immutable mobiles

Throughout the stories will also be accounts of the documentation, the materiality, the 'immutable mobiles' on which ordering relies (Law 1994), those *référentiels*, the ROME descriptions and the other documents tied to the VAE. The immutable mobile, according to Law and Singleton (2003: 3)

> "is something that moves around but also holds its shape. […]it holds its shape in some relational possibly functional manner where it may, to say it quickly, be imagined as a more or less stable network of association".

Immutable mobiles would include the VAE legislation framework with its set documents, prescriptions, and financial arrangements; indeed one must remember that in France the VAE has been stabilized into two sets of legislation and specific "decrees", the bureaucratic state's 'long distance control', which regulates clearly what can and cannot be done, as the adviser's intervention during the jury will show. All those elements come into that category, and "depend upon a process in which networks of relations are built up to secure immutability on the one hand, and mobility on the other" (*ibid.:* 4).

In Figure 3, I have deliberately put resistance in the plural, to emphasise the local sites of these sometimes small, but definite, movements of 'resistances'.

5.1.4 The actors

I have listed, in Appendix B**,** the actors I interviewed, and the sessions I observed, including the jury for two candidates. I have also mentioned, in Chapter Three, that I planned to carry out a pilot for my interviews with the candidates, and I have explained how the order in which candidates were available, as well as the various stages those candidates had reached in the VAE process did not allow for a linear process of piloting or for an orderly review of interview questions; that reviewing did take place, however, aided by discussions with one adviser in particular, Alice, who was willing to engage in reflexive conversations about her role and about the process.

I had to exercise some selection, to avoid repetition and unnecessary descriptive reporting, and, as I have explained in the preceding chapter, because there was simply too much to fit in. This I do, aware of what Law says "writing is work, ordering work. […] When we write, we may conceal in various way" (1994: 31).

I will focus too on the interviews with the members of the jury, in particular Claude, the President of the jury and the Head of the Computing Science Department at the University institute for Professional Education (IUP). I will, when useful, 'use' the interviews of other members of academic staff. I have already briefly mentioned, in Chapter Three, the role of IUTs and IUPs in French Higher Education and in this university.

I will select some transcriptions, with a short paragraph to introduce the interviewee, and other relevant facts about that person, or the interview itself. I will interrupt the interviewees' accounts with my own analytical commentaries, following the example Laws provides in this analysis of the Laboratory (1994) and in Moser and Law's (1999), where the story is punctuated with their analytical commentaries, and attempting to engage in what Hamilton (2010: 2) describes as "a conversation between theory and data that is useful for analysing complex social phenomena".

Finally, it has to be reiterated that these transcriptions are also translations, from French into English. I use a literal translation method, relying on the fact that a number of words in both languages share a common Latin root. I have put into squared brackets the French word, or its translation, or a metaphor, or an explanation, when I feel that that it is important and cannot be given justice by translation. I might also replace a word not spoken but clearly implicitly meant.

Another translation decision had to be made relating to the impersonal *"on"* in French. It is equivalent to "one"; but this is cumbersome in English, where the impersonal "you" is more generally used on the colloquial register. Therefore, whenever candidates use *"on"* - in itself a meaningful linguistic way of depersonalising their experience or feelings - I used the English pronoun "you"; occasionally I keep "one" to render the depersonalisation effect meant by the interviewee; occasionally too I use "we", when the interviewee uses it as an inclusion mechanism for a peer group, or a team.

5.1.5 A final word about the analysis

In Chapters Two and Three I explained how I shifted from a life history approach to an ANT analysis, and in Chapter Four I used the four moments of translation (Callon 1986) to analyse the VAE processes in a way that deviates from a hermeneutic approach. So I designed 'meta' sections to follow the moments of translation, but within and across them elements of ANT analysis are criss-crossing the text in the form of commentaries; in true ANT fashion, there is no outside and inside social world, but as Latour says, *a flat* social world (2005). Had I been able to, on Figure 3, I would have depicted it as *a single* colour covering it all.

Some of the main elements interwoven in the text are that of controversy, and dissidence (Callon 1986) Latour (1999, 2005). Other elements of ANT analysis mentioned, such as the VAE as a boundary object, will be useful for concluding remarks.

However, I am mainly interested in the ordering and ordering modes (Law 1994), and their relational effect with subjectivities. The main focus of this analysis is not to discuss the way in which equivalences are negotiated between experiential learning and the programmes *référentiels*' 'objectives', as Chakroun (2009) has done with great detail, but to explore patterns of ordering and resistance.

5.2   Problematisation, the path of order through alliances

If problematisation is about forging alliances and negotiations, then my first story will illustrate the way alliances are not made, and problematisation fails. It would not have been my choice to start with a 'negative' example, but serendipity decided; this was my first encounter, and first

pilot, as mentioned in Chapter Three. It was the first session adviser-candidate I observed; it turned out to be a problematic interview. I interviewed the candidate straight after, and thought that it was not producing very useful data. It is only much later, re-listening to the session, in the light of ANT thinking, that I changed my mind.

The second and third stories are those of successful but either highly negotiated, (Christian) or reluctant OPPs (Benoît). This story of problematisation is also a reflexion on the 'ordering logic' of subject specialists (Law and Moser 1999), and of the institution's practices through the words of other actors, two academic staff, Paul and Claude.

5.2.1 The failure of negotiations: Luc

Session adviser-candidate (A1)

MP one-to-one interview with the candidate (A2)

Feedback interview between adviser and MP (A3)

I start by presenting the dialogue between Sylvie and Luc, but, as explained, I intersect it with my short summaries or commentaries. I will also 'interrupt' with Sylvie's own comments made during my 'feedback' interview with her, as a way to draw attention to the criss-crossing of perceptions and representations at play. I will finish this story with Luc's own words during my interview with him.

Luc is 30-year, unemployed for two years. His previous qualification levels are at Bac+2 with a DUT (see introduction of Chapter Three for explanation). His main work experience is in the oil industry, mainly as a maintenance technician.

His aim for his VAE 'project' is confused, and his manners confusing; he mumbles so much, both in the session and our interview, that I have difficulty understanding his answers on my recordings. He wants to find out about being accepted onto a Master degree in Physics in order to do a doctoral thesis.

This session turns out to be a 'feasibility study' session, as the adviser is the first person he has seen; it appears however that he has spoken by telephone to the "previous Director of the Physics degree programme", whose name he could not remember (or would not say).

The session is difficult from the start. Here is the beginning of the dialogue.

Dialogue A1.1 Sylvie with Luc (A1)

> Sylvie: so, what I am going to do, is to listen to you, around your project. You are going to explain to me what you wish to do…?
>
> Luc: so, me, it's to change my branch [of activity] completely
> Sylvie: Yes
> Luc: I worked in oil
> Sylvie: Ok
>
> Luc: But now, I'd like to work in hydrogen, hydrogen energy… it's mainly me, what I would like to do. Now, at my level, I won't manage to do interesting things, so that would be rather to do…
> Sylvie: at your level… it's what you would like to do. Ok. So, at the moment, your job, occupation…?
>
> Luc: I don't have a job anymore
> Sylvie: you don't have a job…You are a jobseeker? But your previous activity… ?
>
> Luc: It was called field engineer
> Sylvie: Humm…
> Luc: in fact I started with 'seismic', then I found myself in oil companies….with everything to do with measuring, on an oil rig, measure of the surface, measure of depth ….

Commentary 1

The candidate is vague, only offers short sentences, the adviser probes and attempts to clarify.

Sylvie delves further into the positions he held within the company, to find that he was never in charge of more than 5 employees, apart from just one occasion. It also transpires that he stayed in London for a year, working as barman. There, he said later, he met friends who, he says, had obtained funding for PhDs after having done a degree. Perhaps the idea of a thesis stems from there?

Sylvie attempts several times to get Luc to define his objective (a Master in hydrogen?). She notes that there is no such research Master programme at this university (but there is one in Physics). Luc suggests that he could go abroad, but of course Sylvie can only advise him on the French VAE. She explains the need for him to have a research Master, (as opposed to a 'professional' Master), or Bac+5. Considering a degree first to have access to a Master crops up throughout the interview, but everything remains confused in relation to the qualifications he is targeting, apart from the 'thesis' which remains his ultimate goal.

Sylvie explains in detail to Luc the path to follow:

Dialogue A1.2

Sylvie: Ok. So, your objective would be to enter a doctoral school, basically…
It is a goal, ok… but, it is not guaranteed that you can enter directly into a doctoral programme. So, that is the reality for a student who finishes his/ her studies… to register for a thesis, you have to have a Bac+5 and not just any old Master… you must have been at the level of a Master with a research orientation, and not a Professional Master…

Then Sylvie goes into a detailed explanation of the rights people have in France to have their professional experience recognised under the previous Validation des Acquis Professionnels (VAP) of 1985, to give him access to a Master, or to a doctoral programme.

Commentary 2: tensions and mismatch

I am an observer in this encounter and I can feel the tension between the adviser-expert, and a person of indistinct identity and of indistinct objectives. There is an apparent mismatch between the candidate's experience and his avowed goal. Luc is not managing to gather a coherent image of his objectives; he is not expressing himself clearly – something which Sylvie recognises, in her interview with me as "probable stress".

For him to succeed at this stage, he needs to make alliances with the adviser and with a subject specialist. He needs to gather facts, as evidence of a suitable programme, with standards and outcomes as reference points to his experience; his CV needs to represent the 'right' kind of person with the right kind of experience. He has not done any of those things, or not sufficiently. For Luc, the adviser represents his first, real OPP, and it is not going well.

That is what Sylvie said to me in our feedback interview:

MP interview with Sylvie (A3)

Dialogue A3.1 Feedback interview between adviser and MP

Sylvie: So, I went to see his activity before he came… His CV…So, it's a guy who has just 3 years professional experience, OK, as assistant manager, as oil prospector, and as field engineer…The question was to see in which context he had realised these posts…so, I went to see in his CV…where, basically, you had… assistant manager, that was barman, so he worked in an interim position; oil prospector, in fact he did it for a year, and field engineer, in oil production, that's where he acquired his greatest experience, except that he did for 18 months… basically, 2 years experience for a thesis, it's going to be complicated…

A second, contentious issue raised was the financing of his potential studies [Master, Doctorate].

A complicated discussion ensued about the two government agencies responsible (for different

kinds of jobseekers) for allocating training funds or income support for jobseekers. It turned out

too that sorting out the financial issue was Luc's main preoccupation, after all.

In our feedback interview (A3), Sylvie continues on the 'feasibility' of the candidate's project, the

dissention between his experience and his expectations, and his financial situation.

Dialogue A3.2

> Sylvie: so, you have the question of the intermediary stages…his environment…he receives the RMI[3]. Here, I ask myself systematically the question: it is that this "Mister" [*Monsieur in French, not necessarily derogatory, but emphatic*], he is in receipt of benefits. He has no income. He is in a precarious position. How can he manage with 3 years minimum to go for a Master, then do a thesis?
> He had a very preconceived idea that he would have automatic access… he had a very magical [*emphatic*] way…the way of presenting his project… he was already there, at the thesis stage…
> So it was necessary to find a solution to bring him back to reality… and the problem is, each time I talked to him about reality, the very concrete [*reality*], he erased it, you see? He erased things…
>
> However, one does not erase a degree year in Physics, and what degree! And one doesn't erase a Master, and what Master! There was a reality…and this Master, does it exist concretely here? Or did he need to travel somewhere? His benefit, would that follow him? All this reality, which he swept away…

Commentary 3: dissidence

So that was the first important dissidence, discordance. The lack of 'reality', anchored in

"concrete"- one of the many metaphors encountered in the interviews - between the

candidate's dream and his actual experience and social situation. His "magical way" of seeing

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[3] Revenu Minimum d'Insertion or RMI, a benefit for those who have no means of support, and are looking for work, now replaced by the RSA or Revenu de Solidarité Active. See Ministère des Solidarités et de la Cohésion Sociale (2011) at http//ras.gouv.fr   Accessed 14.04.11

himself arrived at the thesis. We will see later, with Benoît, how "desire" enters into candidates' vision for themselves, and the VAE can be seen as a particular ordering object, creating or transforming actors' subjectivities with "particular styles of desiring" (Law and Moser 1999: 5).

The question is not to judge whether Sylvie was right, but to see her intervention in the light of the VAE's logic, of institutional and legislative requirements.

But now, reading the transcript again, listening to Sylvie's voice of authority, I think of what Star says about the effects of stabilized networks – the VAE presenting itself as such, although it is more fragile than it seems –

> "Stabilized networks seem to insist on annihilating our personal experience, and there is suffering [...] The uncertainties of our selves and our biographies fall to the monovocal exercise of power" (Star 1991: 48).

Sylvie's professionalism is in sharp contrast to the mumbling demeanour of this candidate. Is he facing the monovocal exercise of power, the VAE stabilized network? A dynamic of resistance 'erupts' at some point between them, when Luc asks for the name of the Head of the Physics Department to discuss his doctoral project; after appearing to agree to do so, Sylvie changes her mind and refuses.

We now go back to the dialogue between Sylvie and Luc (A1).

Sylvie with Luc (A1)

Dialogue A1.3

Luc: Do you have the [telephone] numbers of the people we spoke about earlier?
Sylvie: yes, of course, you would like to see them too?
Luc: well, after…

Sylvie: yes, after. Then, I could pass them on when we have spoken again… I think the best is that we get back in touch to carry more searches here. From the moment when you have looked… in relation to these and to a doctoral department…

Luc: and is it possible to see another person, the one you mentioned earlier…
Sylvie: yes of course, but as I was saying to you, the best would be to wait, and in another stage…
Luc: yes but (coughs several times) if… if…they say that my thesis is 'do-able'…
Sylvie: yes…

Luc: to see with them if my training corresponds to the thesis…
Sylvie: this is the point… this is what I am trying to say to you. We' re not right away going to disturb…
Luc: no, no but…

Sylvie: our lecturers at the university…I am suggesting to you…[…] to check the programmes
Luc: if they tell me … then it is feasible…

Sylvie: these programmes might not be the most appropriate to your project. I, personally, would prefer to readjust in a second phase rather than let you…
[…] in relation to the lecturers, and considering the number of requests they have, I would be tempted to say, that we'll solicit the lecturer when we are sure about the programme…
[…] I would be embarrassed to solicit, or for you to solicit a lecturer of the university, because, they say to me « but what happened to the people, why did they come and see me?" I have to be accountable to them…

Commentary 4: dominance – resistance

What is happening here is a choreography of resistance between the two 'protagonists'. When

Luc says "after" I think he means 'after the interview', but Sylvie chooses to interpret it as after

he has done his research. Whatever he really meant, Sylvie acts as the 'gatekeeper' for the

lecturers. More than that, she is "accountable" to them. I observed the enacting of a dialogue

where both resisted the other, although the quality of that resistance differed as one was indeed

in a position of dominance over the other. Taking a discourse analysis view, I would agree with

Gee that "an oral or written utterance has meaning, then, only if and when it communicates a *who* or a *what* […]. A "who" is a *socially situated entity*, the "kind of person" one is seeking to be and enacted here-and-now. […]a "what" is a socially situated *activity* that the utterance helps to constitute" (Gee 2005: 22). It is quite clear, here, who the adviser is – the expert - who the candidate is meant to be, and in which kind of activity.

However, this is not enough. There is this palpable resistance object, and I think of Scheurich's (1997: 72) "dominance-resistance binary", in his discussion on the interviewer-interviewee interaction. More to the point, I like what he calls "an open-ended space" in between. This "chaos/ freedom", as he also calls it, is the space for everything that is beyond the scope of the interview; it helps to view this candidate in less 'dominated' or helpless representation, with the possibilities of pluralities escaping from the confined space of the interaction. After all, we do not know much about this person's life. He could be a first class guitarist, or a well-known motorbike racer (he came in with a motorbike helmet). The adviser will show herself in a different light in a different interview. But in this session, she embodies the right procedures and behaviours that candidates should follow; she performs and embodies the university, its unwritten protocols about not disturbing unnecessarily the academic specialists. Of course I will learn later that it is part of the 'non stabilized' network of the VAE unit within the university, as it is a recently established institution. I will learn of a recent unsuccessful jury which led to some acrimony between the unit and the academic staff, and which will be resolved through meetings and negotiations during my stay.

I asked Sylvie (A3), in our feedback interview, about her refusal to transmit the lecturers' telephone numbers; this is what she said.

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Dialogue A3.3

Sylvie: … So I refused.
I said that I could not give them to him, that's right. I think he had to start from the thesis, that important to him.
If I had given him the person responsible for the Physics degree, what would he have said to him? You see, don't you, I try to put myself in the place of these lecturers…who spend an hour of their time…
There is no one who can help him do his search. It is indispensable that he does it himself.

On the other hand, what is a worry for me, I, who is responsible for an office at the university, his concern was not to know **which** [emphasis] programme of this university *[is available]…* was it a programme at **this** university *[he wanted to do]*? We did not meet on this point.

My objective was to clarify his project. We *[our objectives]* did not meet. We didn't have the moment where in the majority 99% of cases we end up with this 'criss-crossing' *['croisillon' - lattice work]* …
In a certain way we meet and we understand each other … and it triggers something in the person… I think this candidate has a problem…I don't know what kind… I think not all is all tidied up in his head.

Commentary 5: impasse

For the adviser this is an impasse. There was no no weaving of understanding with this

candidate; no mediation possible. There was no alliance created between the candidate's world

and the university. Luc could not get passed that first obstacle problem, the adviser.

My interview with Luc was not very successful. The only time however he talked more loudly and

clearly was when he compared England and France, highlighting a point that other candidates

will make, in different ways.

MP interview with Luc (A2)

Dialogue A2.1

Luc: I would say that if I were in England, it would be my capacities [that would count]. And as I am in France, I would say that it is the level [I have reached in] my studies…
In France, if you don't have the level of study, even if you have the capacities, you have little chance to have your project… [*emphatic, voice much stronger than has been before*]
I noticed it with the English, even if you don't have a diploma, if you have the capacities, they give you a chance – even if it is to sack you after 2 weeks [a shadow of a smile] – *[Did it happened to him in London?]*

In France, if you don't have the diploma, the door, it won't open…or else, you have to have lots and lots of things [?]..It hasn't changed…

Commentary 6: the diploma

This candidate is hard to fathom. He has a sense of resentment. His self-representation includes capacities that have not been given the chance to be developed, or recognised, because of the way the country organises its education system; because diplomas count more than personal or experiential capacities, something I have mentioned previously (Chapter One and Two, see Maurin 2009). But like the other candidates, he is agent and structure; structure, "a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network" (Law 1992: 4). He is part of the "circulating entity" (Latour 1999: 17) that defines the social in France, and educational actor-networks.

So his story ends here, unfinished and uncertain, but a failed OPP.

5.2.2 A successful, but negotiated OPP: **Christian**

MP Interview with Christian (B1)

MP interview with adviser Bernard (B2)

MP interview with head of department (B3)

Christian is 27 and works in a military hospital, which is also part of the local community, so it is also a 'civil' hospital; he is targeting a DUT (Bac+2) in Health, Safety, and Environment, in order to be accepted on a degree (Bac+3) afterwards. He has been in the navy for 6 years, working mainly in health and safety, including on nuclear submarines. He is passionate about his job and the opportunities it offers him to develop his competences in areas of importance for patients and medical staff. He is also aware that one day he will return to civil life, and wants to have the right qualifications to continue working at the right level of interest and stimulation.

I will meet his main adviser, Bernard, a week later. Bernard is based at the IUT, in the Department offering Christian's targeted programme. Bernard is also an active lecturer and researcher. He is a very quiet, understated person. But he is lauded, to me, by his Head of Department, Paul. Paul, on the other hand, is an extrovert sort of person, very upfront about making changes, about being involved in a dynamic field.

First, here is what Christian said about starting on the VAE process.

MP interview with Christian (B1)

Dialogue B1.1

[About the VAE]

Christian: in the army, in the game I knew, in the relations I had, whether private or professional, they had explained a little how it worked…
I had contacted someone in the private sector, I also went on the internet, I like to know the procedure before letting myself into the thing with all my heart, with all my body *[à cœur perdu, à corps perdu: with 'my heart lost' – a metaphor often used in popular love songs - then a play on words by using 'body' instead of heart].*

I had a clear idea. I had already met several persons who had explained to me how it worked. So I knew where I was going. When I start something, I like to know where I am going…

I have kept the metaphor in French as I find it moving. There is an emotional launching of the whole person, heart, mind and body, into his project. There is the question of the distinction made by several candidates between the personal (and emotional) and the professional, a subject well developed in Law and Moser's account of enterprise (1999).

This is what Bernard had to say about Christian's first application to his department.

MP interview with Bernard, adviser (B2)

Dialogue B2.1

Bernard: his dossier is very good. It is someone who could get 50% [of the diploma DUT].
My role is to help him to the maximum. I present his portfolio to the jury. It all depends on the 'sensitivities' of the department.
It was the first time he was meeting someone here … he was told that it would be around 10%. He wrote to me quite shocked that it was so little, with everything he had done [in his work].

We *[at the IUT]* had some difficulties here … a reticence…I think it will evolve.
My role is to convince…
We renegotiated…but it's not official. We arrived at 50% globally, without arriving at a complete analysis because we did not have the dossier *[reads the dossier in front of him as we speak].* We went from 10% to 50%.
It is a department…the persons there are very inclined towards the pure sciences, in relation to chemistry, for example… It is true that they're more 'rigorist' on the aspect of fundamental knowledge…it is not the same discourse *[as in other departments].* It is true that it varies a lot. Anyway, we'll see!

Commentary 7: first obstacle problem: the subject specialist and the ordering logic

There are several things here to say. First, and is it significant? It is the adviser, not Christian, who tells me about the first encounter with the subject specialist, and his poor offer of a 10% equivalence, and of the letter Christian wrote. Christian has obviously drawn a line under the episode. Perhaps he had forgotten it, dismissed it. He is now offered 50% of the DUT, which will enable him in the end to have access to the degree programme.

However, what does it say about the VAE? First, this is happening in a scientific environment, "pure sciences", where facts, rigour, matter. Bernard hints at some difficulty in getting the staff to change their attitude, "a reticence", he says.

Perhaps we can pause here to consider whether it is possible to talk about different modes of ordering, or, as Law and Moser (1999: 5) put it, "ordering logic". There is logic of ordering to do with scientific logic and rigour, but equally to do with bureaucratic exactitude, at least in this case at the IUT. Law and Moser talk about a "logic of science and engineering" which they call "vocation" *(ibid.*: 6) which is appropriate here, in this institution with a scientific mission.

Not all actors have been 'enrolled', through what Lauriol *et al* (2004), Guérin *et al.* (2010) call the 'boundary object' that is the VAE.

Commentary 8: the VAE as the boundary object

The concept of boundary object was developed by Star and Griesemer (1989), as the means by which actors' diverse interests are 'translated' into a common language so that collaborative work can take place; the object must have sufficient plasticity (Gomart and Hennion 1999) in order to adapt to the constraints brought about by the actors' diverse social worlds but "robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites" (*ibid.:* 1999: 237).

Lauriol *et al.* (2004) identify the boundary object as one which allows for "the simplification of the world" while enabling actors "to retain their autonomy" (*ibid.*: 2004: 1788). They had identified the VAE as a boundary object in the way it united diverse actors around the common opinion that the VAE was a 'good thing', in term of the 'second chance'; they were 'interest-ed'.

(These actors included the state, certifying ministries and bodies, social partners). They never questioned its potential and even utopian social benefits (*ibid.*: 2004). However, this formalisation of the boundary object, the VAE, does not prevent actors from positioning themselves in different ways on crucial questions such as the definition and nature of knowledge that can be certificated. In our IUT case, already we see that one subject specialist's first intention is to value Christian's experiential knowledge as worth a paltry 10%.

This is in contrast with one of his colleagues, Bernard's Head of department, Paul, who joins us briefly. I interviewed him too, there and then.

5.2.3 The logic of change: Paul at the IUT

MP interview with Paul (B3)

Dialogue B3.1

Paul: There is the human aspect of the juries; they look at the "whole", it's a different way to evaluate the candidates from the *formation initiale*.

We already have apprenticeships *[students' work-based placements]*, a form of action within private companies…The multiplicity of situations obliges us to adapt our way to consider… we have a common 'appreciation' grid with the key points for the work placement…

If we do not structure this a minimum we might make judgement errors, and I think that for the VAE, we can go further…perhaps, we're going to revise all our *'teaching'* programmes, all the IUTs involved in FC.
We have this approach through an *[evaluation]* grid, with the different sub-headings …It's a judgement for the FC, associated criteria for each heading, more usable for the VAE…To categorise in this way, like all tools, we must learn how to get out of these grids…it's the Cartesian mind!

It's just a tool, we must have a judgement in between the two… they mustn't be too strict, a tool is an aide to the decision, and then it's up to the actors who stay in charge of the decision.
In the past we used to give marks for the VAE…and it was always above average!

The demand for FC is increasing…if we don't do it, others will.

> We started with 'sandwich courses' in collaboration with companies, it's enabled us to question ourselves…The VAE also does that…We're going to change the programmes…they're going to evolve… and the new programmes are going to facilitate the VAE. All the IUT departments [*in France*] in my discipline meet once a year for a 3 days training course. This year it is on the VAE.

Commentary 9: a problem of interessment and enrolment

So there are tensions, between those "Cartesian" minds who need grids, those who still firmly believe in the virtue of a French evaluation system based on marks - in spite of repeated, long-term research based critiques (Gumbel 2010; Bonniol *et al.*: 1972) - and those, like Paul, who believe that the VAE, like the practice of work placements, has created a need for different evaluation methodologies. The social world of the scientific IUT is performed through the materiality of traditional evaluation tools, some, or many, still use. The agents in the IUT are "effects generated by in a network of heterogeneous materials" (Law 1994: 24). Paul on the other hand wished to construct different tools. Paul is an ally for Christian and Bernard, but as Callon (1986: 208) says, he is also "implicated in the problematisation of other actors", those in the IUT who do not share his interest for change, for example.

Thus, this is one of the 'controversies' running through the IUT. Paul is in another ordering logic, that of change; a logic of innovation for the evaluation of experiential learning.

True to what Callon explains (1986), the moments of problematisation, interessment and enrolment do not happen in a linear way. I have already mentioned the way Lauriol *et al.* (2004) identify the moments of interessment and enrolment at national and local sites fro the VAE. At this local site, Bernard has succeeded in the interessment of the subject specialist, through the various devices presented by Christian, the CV, the documents charting his achievements, and probably through the fact that the VAE is a legal requirement; the VAE is an inescapable entity.

This does not mean that it will be the same each time a candidate presents him/herself. This example shows that in the words of Fenwick and Edwards (2010: 20) "the relative stability of certain networks occur not through their coherence but through their incoherence and ambivalence". In this example too, and to a certain extent in Luc's example, we have a glimpse of the VAE as an immutable mobile, and how, in the words of those writers, such entities

"work to disguise their precarious mutability, offer an approach to understand and challenge the strategies of powerful networks in education that work to authorize, control, compel and measure practices of knowledge" (*ibid.*: 23).

5.2.4 Claude's story: problematisation, point of passage; success and failure

Now I want to bring in Claude, the President of the jury I observed (for candidates jean-Marie and Raoul). His inclusion here is immediately affecting the ordering of my accounts; however, perhaps they should not be told in a linear way. The accounts intersect as the worlds of the actors do. I have to take the risk.

Claude is the Director of the Computing Science department at the IUP (more research-based than the IUT). He wants to say something too that complements Paul's and Bernard's vision of the VAE.

This is his approach to new VAE candidates. We are here at the moment of problematisation, and interessment. Moments of translation are not linear; they overlap.

First, he says that the portfolio is not enough to make a judgement, which is why he always

arrange for pre-interviews with the candidates.

MP interview with Claude (C1)

Dialogue C1.1

Claude: There are lots of things which cannot appear in the portfolio and which are more useful than "I did that" in two lines…

MP: but the portfolio, it's not just 2 lines surely!

Claude: no of course not! But often…the candidate puts so many things in the portfolio, that the pertinent points …there are several of them, in the portfolio, but it's several times 2 lines; in the total of 30 pages, it's not enough.

MP what would you call these pertinent points?

Claude: it depends on the candidate. Anyway, I don't think there are algorithms *[you can't apply the same formula to everyone]*…it's not the problem…
That's why I prefer to see the candidates. I see them 3 times…

The first time I see them maximum half an hour, roughly…I don't even ask them what they've done, I ask them what their objectives are, that's the 1st thing.
I say to them: "so now we're going to try and see, in relation to your real life experience *[vécu]*, what you have done, in relation to what we teach here, and then you can come back and see me when you've made the 'match' between the two.

Then, we have a second interview, of about 1h and a half generally, when s/he tells me …"so you have such and such unit. In this domain of application, I have done that and that […]". So basically they either have 0%, or 20 or 30% of the knowledge, or more. And the 3rd time is the jury.

Commentary 10: the first OPP

The subject specialist does spend time with the new candidates, defining the terms of

engagement. He probes the "objectives" first. He does take time. It is not, however, always a

positive outcome; in reality the majority of candidates fail the problematisation moment when

they encounter their first point of passage, here Claude. Like Luc, they have not succeeded in

gathering enough devices to proceed to the interessment of the subject specialist, who is the gatekeeper of his programmes' standards. As Claude further explains, out of 8 persons he had seen, only 2 went through the VAE.

Dialogue C 1.2

> Claude: […] there were 6 others to whom I said that I was not advising them to prepare a portfolio, they were wasting their time.
> That means that, whatever they were expecting from us was overestimated, or they were not matching adequately at all, they were making a mistake… there was one person, I said to her that she was targeting the wrong speciality.

Those persons failed the first OPP. Their 'experience-world' did not ally itself to the programme's units and *référentiel*; or as Nespor (1994: 13) might say, the actor-network of the discipline of computing science did not identify those people as "would-be participants" in the network. The problematisation failed to gather the necessary alliances. I will return to the jury later in this chapter.

In the next session we have an example of a successful, but apparently reluctant OPP, seen from the candidate's point of view.

5.2.5 A successful but reluctant OPP: Benoît

Benoît is a 39 year-old Production Manager in a paper manufacturing company. He has a BTS, or Bac+2. He is targeting a professional Master in Production Management. He uses emotional language, such as "exposing his desire" for further qualifications.

I can see that Benoît is a very able communicator, with that voluble French South-Western

personality, with its singsong regional accent rounding off rich imageries through his 'story-telling'.

He went into it not knowing very much about the validation. He said he was "lucky" that his company had a knowledgeable training officer. This was the first step in the problematisation moment; gathering the elements and entities that would make the VAE possible; his training officer, the right programme, the local institution. The search uncovered other programmes in Marseille, Paris or Toulouse (all very far away). He was prepared, he said, to go that far as it would "open horizons, elsewhere than in the paper industry", and because they were not just "technical", but about people management. They eventually found a local Master 2 at the university B.

He often falls back on 'reported speech'. Below is his account of his encounter with the subject specialist, Mr René, illustrating some of the tensions around academic knowledge. This is about the level of mathematics he should have, and therefore about his acceptability; or about the ambiguity of the academic discipline's actor-network towards knowledge acquired through experience.

MP interview with Benoît (D1)

Dialogue D1.1

Benoît: I chose this programme, then I got in touch with the VAE unit, and Sylvie. We discussed to see if I had the right profile, if I had understood the funding, and everything, then she sent me to Mr René, the programme director.
With him, it was more about..my school – education profile, to see if I corresponded well to what was expected […] so he gave his opinion, saying *[reverting to direct speech]* "there will still be a minimum at least, I advise you to get back to speed in maths at the Bac level".

MP: these notions in mathematics, were they necessary for the Master 2?

Benoît: apparently … but the programme on 'real numbers', I hadn't done that… there were terms which didn't mean anything to me.
Maybe I will realise that I do it *[in my work]* but … So, Mr René made me understand that … it is not necessary to know the Bac programme, but *[the Master]* is going into precise areas of Mathematics *[…]* used for personnel management, which require a good foundation in Maths … But sometimes, you can have these bases in Maths, without being aware of it, because you practise them everyday…

So, I won't know until I am right into the programme, and see if I have to be a genius in Mathematics or not; well, anyway, I will never be a genius in Mathematics!

But I want to continue in what I believe I know I can do, where I feel good, and that is in managing new production projects…research and everything else you want, it's not for me…

I don't think I have an atypical career, I think that people who do this Master, many will be looking like me, or rather…I look like those people, I mean, people who have left school for more than 15 years, who have a BTS, and, I may be wrong, but ... if they're like me in their everyday work, then they sure don't use mathematical formulas!

Commentary 11: not a maths genius!

Here we can see how he had to negotiate this first OPP; the subject specialist, like his IUT

colleagues, is also an effect of the material heterogeneous networks where the VAE has

succeeded, as a boundary object, to be translated in many diverse social worlds, including that of

the university, but this lecturer shows resistance as he clings to the Bac level in mathematics as a

necessary OPP for entering the Master.

We can also sense Benoît's own resistance, who has no intention to modify his mode of

experiencing; or, to follow in Law and Moser's (1999) footsteps, he shows a particular kind of

subjectivity to do with a specific mode of being an experienced man, who will later say to me:

Dialogue D1.2

Benoît: "I am not ashamed of what I am, what I do, I have nothing to hide... I am happy to be a Production Manager...I am happy in my shoes [in his personal life]. "

The actors' interests (Benoît and the subject specialist) have found a way to be translated into a common language, which will be that of the portfolio, eventually. The moment of problematisation has passed, Benoît has joined forces with the subject specialist, in spite of the latter's apparent reluctance.

5.3 Interessment

In Christian's case, we saw how he had managed the process of interessment with his adviser. In this section, we will focus on the relational networks created with the adviser and what those successful alliances mean to candidates and advisers. We will look at Alice, the adviser with a high degree of self reflexion; and the comments of a few candidates; Colette, who introduced the idea of 'centring', and gave me the travelling metaphor; Thérèse, the diffident woman who had to change adviser; Jean-Marie, the unemployed and unhappy 52 year who succeeded in the VAE, and Denis, another VAE success.

5.3.1 Successful alliances: the *accompagnement*

We have seen in Chapter Four how the interessment moment of translation involves the candidates' strategies of resistance, or of seduction towards the adviser. The adviser is key. Only by engaging her or his support, can the candidates complete the portfolio successfully. They have to have him/her on their side, and usually, that is what happens. The advisers represent the candidates' interests, particularly during the jury, while they also represent, as has been seen with Sylvie, the interest of the academic staff and their programmes. I have also said the

candidates put the advisers in an 'ontological' paradox, cutting them off, temporarily, from the other entities (subject specialists, jury, funding bodies).

In this respect Christian has won over his adviser, Bernard. Bernard likes Christian, it is evident: "At the level of rigour, he is special, he is very good; he is very methodical". (B2)

Bernard is equally won over by candidates who "[…] are very willing, very motivated, very upfront in relation to their approach, capable of expressing themselves". (B2)

Bernard's story is a story of alliances too. His account of the subject specialists' resistance or willingness to change reflects a story of alliances and struggles. Bernard's own efforts are part of the process of interessment.

As Bernard said: (B2) **MP with Bernard**

Dialogue B2.2

"I helped him [Christian] meet other people [within the IUT]; yes, my role is that of an advocate. We try to do our best…to convince".

In Bernard's story, the subject specialist who only gave 10% was persuaded to change his judgement; the entities in the IUT are being modified (Callon 1996) with the wind of change, which Paul suggested as inevitable. In the IUT, The fact that departments are involved in evaluating work placements, and the fact that they have a tradition of FC make them open to different ways of evaluating knowledge and competences; but resistance to change is strong too.

We will see how the conflicting interests express themselves through other interviews.

For now we shall turn to the adviser Alice, and 'her' candidates. Alice comes from a varied professional background, "fell" into the job by chance. Serendipity seems to play some part in advisers' accession to their posts (Mayeu 2010).

The adviser, Alice

MP interview with Alice (E 1)

Dialogue E1.1

MP: You said, to the candidate, "I am not an expert"; then, "I am another eye *[to look at the portfolio]*; I will need proofs". But you are the expert, surely?

Alice: The adviser's role is one of evaluation and search for proof… We are there to **warrant** *[my emphasis]* all that is written and the formalisation of the candidate's discourse.
I do tell them that I am not expert in terms of the technical elements; I have a blurred view of what they do… but I let them take care of formalising the competences as close to what they do as possible… So simply, *[it's]* a methodological help…what is expected of them… sometimes I allow myself to be more directive…

To be in this post, it is important to have had jobs which enabled you to have that distance… and then I believe that … you have to like people…if you don't like the relation to the other, if you do not have the taste *[for it],* to listen to the stories, it is not a post you should occupy… I like people, I am interested.
I am interested by their *[career]* life paths. I am interested to help them develop.

[…] So, I am not someone…it's true that personality really comes into the interview… I am not…strict. I am really here as a guide…I feel better about guide than 'trainer' *[formatrice].* But I sense that there is learning *[apprentissages]* taking place…I offer them tools, show them methodologies, ways of doing things…

Commentary 12: the practice of *accompagnement:* controversies: gate-keeping versus empathy

So like Sylvie, Alice sees herself as the guarantor of the process for the jury - institution. There is a tension, however, in Alice's words, between her role and how she sees herself, and how she indentifies her subjectivity towards the candidate. She "allows herself to be directive" but on the

other hand she is not "strict". She is a "guide", not a trainer, with all it implies for her, one imagines, about being a 'teacher'. She is also "interested" to hear their story, to help them develop.

Here, along with Law and Moser (1999: 5) we could talk about an "intersecting of ordering modes". We have the gatekeeper mode, perhaps best exemplified by Sylvie's interview with Luc, and the mode of enabling and care in Alice's case, and in Bernard's case. These modes imply "a certain kind of subjectivity" (*ibid.*: 5) and a particular form of being with the candidates. Alice's mode of enabling and care enacts a 'subjectivity of empathy' which is not at ease with the gatekeeper mode. Furthermore, she pitches herself against "some juries", who do not 'valorise' the candidates.

MP interview with Alice (E1)

Dialogue E1.2

Alice: I find that we impose so many things on the candidates already...that I can't allow myself to give negative feedbacks...*[I have to]* find the positive of the negative...I am part of – the valorisation of their *[career]* path. They come looking for some valorisation, some recognition, so it's up to us...as advisers, to get into **this game**...*[my emphasis]*
[a valorisation] which they might not necessarily find from the jury. Some of them are positive...*[but not others].* Honestly! *[Indignant]*. Because that's what the candidates are looking for...

They come to look for a bit of paper, but mainly they come to look for recognition...so mainly it falls on the jury to give that *[positive]* feedback...

She is on the one hand part of the valorisation process the candidates come to her to find, but she is also part of the wider actor-network of academic staff and standards reluctant to be enrolled, escaping the advisers' best effort to mobilise them through the portfolio's representations and their advocacy for the candidates.

Here are some candidates' views about the adviser's role.

Colette's view on the adviser's role

Colette is an administrator, a "socio educative adviser", in computerised systems, working for

the local authority in social affairs. She was trained as a Special Needs educator, passed the

'concours' (competitive exam) for the post of Head of service. She has a Bac+2 and a University

Diploma in Business Management, has done many training courses. She has also been involved

in several voluntary groups, as shown in the portfolio's sub division *'parcours extra-*

professionnel' (non-professional activities) of the biographical sheet.

Colette appeared self-assured, in comparison to others. She had tried to turn the portfolio's

conceptual categories round to suit her own conceptualisation. This is what she said to me about

the adviser's role.

MP interview with Colette (F1)

Dialogue F1.1

Colette: So this *'accompagnement'* makes is possible to **re-centre** *[my emphasis]* things. And the things that are not useful, we can leave them aside. …
It's true that she *'accompanies'* me in this sense… without saying what I have to do (she laughs) … she stays neutral, she doesn't influence me, she simply says: "it's possible" or "we don't need this"; so, she doesn't impose it… that's interesting… we are really in an *'accompagnement'* and not in a directive relation.
MP: so you are saying that it is not directive… Do you really think then that it is an open process for you, that you are taking control of it?
Colette: I was going to say…it's more subtle than that! (Laughs).
There is a weft [*'une trame'*, *of a cloth*] a procedure… Alice is more in the detail, more in the finalisation of the project, and portfolio…
But to move forward one has to understand the expectations, so that is what I mean…

However, it is an *accompagnement* where we are still given the **rules** to get there, if you want to be productive …you have to know where you are going…
You are on a road, the two of you… she is there to show me the road without telling me "you walk in the middle, or you walk too fast, or you don't walk fast enough"…without giving the cadence. We walk a bit of the way together…
It's me who give it *[the cadence]* in fact.
I tell her, I need 3 weeks to prepare all we did to-day…sometime I may need one week. So that's why it's me rather who gives the rhythm …

Commentary 13: centring and decentring

Colette says that the process of advising helps her to "re-centre things". I would like to stay on

that thought. ANT says Law, is interested in "fragmentation and the decentring of subject" (Law

1994: 101). He adds that "if an agent or a subject is an effect, then how that effect is generated

becomes an important topic in its own right. But in a relationally materialist sociology, an agent

is an effect generated in a network of heterogeneous materials" (*ibid.:* 24).

Therefore, in this accompaniment relationship, Colette's experience, and herself as an agent, are

bounded through the materials of the VAE. She, as an agent, is an effect of "more or less

unsuccessful struggles" *(ibid.*: 100).

Her capacity to act seems to be dependant on "her relations to other actants" (Lee and Stenner:

1999: 93); these writers develop the idea that "centredness of agentic responsibility is

distributed into a dispersed network of interdependencies and co-responsibilities". In this way,

Colette re-centres what is essentially dispersed in interdependent relations at work and

elsewhere. The materials of her VAE experience are also effects or products, which are

meaningful in the ordering process in which Colette is embodied. Many ANT stories, (*op.cit.*:

101) "tell how it is that agents more or less, and for a period only, manage to constitute

themselves". Indeed this is a moment in time, when the portfolio - the interessment device - will

hold things together, for the time of the final judgement, only. What it holds together is also enmeshed in temporality, past and present, as we will see in Thérèse's accounts later on.

Commentary 14: travelling metaphors; a logic of the future. Emancipatory progress

Metaphors populate the VAE candidates' narratives, such as those in Colette's account. We shall therefore begin to explore them a little here.

The cloth: the first metaphor Colette uses is that of a *'trame'*, the weft - the yarn woven across the width of a cloth. The word *trame* in French is so common in that sense that its origin is probably forgotten; it occurs frequently in the candidates' accounts to talk about the portfolio's preformatted framework.

The journey: according to Colette, Alice is not directive, she stays "neutral" and does not "impose". They are journeying together, for part of the way. Colette even gives the rhythm, the cadence (is it a dance, like Cussin's 'ontological dance'? (Law 1999b: 6)).
But it is all a bit "more subtle", there is a canvas on which certain things are set. There are procedures, and there are rules. Colette has to know her final destination. This is not left to chance.

The travelling: this 'final destination' brings us to the travelling metaphor which recurs so often that it could in itself be a metaphor for the VAE. It is not by chance that the adviser is an *"accompagnateur-ice".* To accompany is to walk with; as was already mentioned in Chapter One, it conjures up the image of companionship (Lerbert-Sereni 2003). Moreover, the official word in the portfolio *'parcours', de formation, professionnel;* it is also a metaphor for a journey, as it is in

English – 'career path'. It is a metaphor about moving forward, from one place to another, of making choices as to which road to take, and of time: a journey takes time, specially on a 'path'. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 14) would call it an "orientational metaphor", based on physical and cultural experience, at least as we understand them in the West, where "the future is in front of us, in others [cultures] it is in back" (*ibid.*: 14). Candidates use these metaphors often; up and forward, good, down and backward, bad.

This travelling metaphor is linked to what Cussin's story in (Law 1999b: 6) refers to as "prospective/retrospective interpretation" where past and present are performed into a vision for a possible future; the candidates are travelling, holding together their "bits and pieces" before those try to make off in other directions. This logic of the future implies subjectivities of hope and progress. Candidates would not start on the difficult VAE road if they were not hopeful. Thus the VAE is part of an ordering of 'emancipatory progress', the boundary object which ties together various actors as a tool of social equality in France (Mayeux and Mayen 2009; Guérin *et al.* 2010).

I now will turn to a failed interessment; this moment of translation is not always trouble free. Here are two accounts.

5.3.2 Thérèse: a failed interessment

Thérèse is 38 year old; her working experience has been interrupted by relocations, and the birth of her second child. She has had mainly secretarial and administrative posts, but found a good

job, 4 years previously, in the adult guidance agency GRETA[4] while having an interview herself as a client. She has a DUT in Business Management and Administration. She is diffident about her experience, although she obviously has kept doing training and evening courses.

She started the VAE with an adviser, Véronique, but she did not get on well with her. It turns out that there was a specific reason why it was so. That is how she explains it.

MP interview with Thérèse (G1)

Dialogue G1.1

> Thérèse: I would come out of our meeting, and feel, she had given me elements, but they didn't allow me to reconstruct, afterwards…to know how to work on them…I had a little… the feeling…to be lost, not being guided.
>
> So, well, it's a bit anecdotic, but I think it played a part…what happened between us…
> There I am at my agency; we offer the VAE from the CAP *[craft qualification]* to the BTS… And I learned that Véronique was doing a VAE herself, for a BTS… I have to admit that I found it perturbing… I was thinking… I was going to be advised by someone who… – and we're in an environment where all that matters is "diplomas, diplomas" – in the end I have a Bac+2 and the person in front of me doesn't even have that…So I was questioning her competences.
> […]Then, the worry also is that her adviser is the person I work with …
>
> MP: for you that was a problem?
>
> Thérèse: for me it was a real problem. I could not, I know it's stupid, but I couldn't get over it.
>
> MP Why is it stupid?
>
> Thérèse: Well…because… if she managed to get that job, she surely had competences, but as I was already struggling… I think that what she was giving me wasn't concrete enough…to make progress…
> So as I already felt that I was not understanding, I would tell myself, it's me who don't understand what I am being told… then I thought, no, it's not a problem of trust, but well…
> So I asked to be moved *[to another adviser]* but I never said why…

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[4] A GRETA is a grouping of public Educational institutions (colleges, senior secondary schools)which organise adult training. It uses the facilities and staff from those institutions to offer training programmes adapted to the local economy's needs. http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid50753/la-formation-continue-des-adultes-a-l-education-nationale.html Accessed 19.04.11

> With Alice it was the opposite…as soon as I was coming out of our interview, my husband would say "but what are you doing? Are you not coming to bed?" I would really work on it then… Perhaps I attach too much importance to this "feeling" thing…but now it's true that it is going very, very well.

Commentary 15: lost boundaries

The process of interessment here did not work. Thérèse feels that Véronique is not helping her.

More than that, Véronique fails to enact the logic of professionality that Thérèse expects.

Véronique's roles are muddied. Is she an adviser, or is she a VAE candidate? Thérèse's workmate

is also Véronique's adviser. Categories are blurred, unsettling Thérèse. Trust is lost. Furthermore,

there is also the 'ordering of the diploma' lurking in the story. There are hierarchies where

people with a Bac+2 should not be advised by people without. The VAE can be that too: the

stabilized networks it tries to hold together escapes at the edges, it merges into other networks.

It circulates and messes up the barriers. Nothing is what it seems.

Below is another short account of that first encounter with an adviser.

5.3.3 Different accounts of the adviser's relationship

Denis' account

Denis, a 49 year old engineer; he has already completed the VAE successfully when I see him, for

a degree in Production Engineering, in order to access a Master. His background is Electronics,

and after training in the Navy and working on submarines, he now works with the national

electricity company EDF. He has always been learning new things.

MP interview with Denis (H1)

Dialogue H1.1

Denis: "I have just about as many training courses as professional activities".

He travels, he has a pilot licence, went on a Sahara rally, and wants to set up his own business in South America (his wife is Mexican). He sounds and appears self-assured; he embodies an enterprise spirit or, as Law and Moser (1999: 5) would call it "the entrepreneurial subjectivity".

Dialogue H1.2 (H1)

Denis: At the beginning, it was… Sylvie appeared like the teacher transmitting knowledge, a way of doing, a process…So it was a bit… there was a bit of that kind of relation, the student and she…but then she managed well, because she has the experience, you feel she could do it better than you; well, ok, she hasn't got the 'different knowledge-s of life' …but she saw immediately how it could be done, to translate the experience…

At the first meeting, she knew the portfolio better than I did, almost… She knew how to transmit all that… During 2 or 3 months she directed me [*aiguillé, idea of directing with a needle*], then she said, now you manage, *[débrouillez-vous!]* up to you…well, that's what I understood….

On my own, I wouldn't be able to do it, I wouldn't…

Commentary 16: teacher-pupil

Here the account is different from the ones above. Denis feels that he is back into school student mode, Sylvie knows best, like a teacher. However, he also quickly realises that she knows what she is doing; she knows how to "translate", even 'though of course she does not have his specialist "life" knowledge. Then she lets him go. Does he feel…abandoned? I will not know; it is difficult to get more from Denis as he did not dwell on his relationship with the adviser. It was over. He was ready to move on, to the Master, to his future. Is it an aspect of the temporality of the stabilized network, whereby, once centring is accomplished, decentring starts again, the heterogeneous elements will be drawn apart, and will go their own way (Law 1999b)?

Jean-Marie's account

Jean-Marie is 52 and has been unemployed for 2 years. He left the navy at 35 and worked in the private sector as a maintenance electronic technician, then as a system administrator in a factory. He was made redundant at 50, which has left him depressed, bitter about the way he feels he has been treated, anxious to find work, but at the appropriate level for his experience.

He is one of the two candidates to appear in front of the jury I observed. He sees the degree he obtained through the VAE as a way to acquire credibility from prospective employers. He is acutely aware that unemployment for the over 50s in France is very high (Maurin 2009).

MP interview with Jean-Marie (I1)

Dialogue I.1

Jean-Marie: I was very well received by Sylvie and Alice… It was a bit like psychoanalysis for me!…but well, I live in the country… I have become introverted, for sure.
They were excellent! I would even say (laughs) that I regret it's finished; I took pleasure in talking with Alice…

When you are unemployed, of course at the beginning you have hope…but when it drags on *[s'éterniser]* for 2 years…
Well, it is reassuring that there are now 10 millions people unemployed…I feel like saying "welcome to the club!" (Laughs)…
Yes you have to keep hope… But the deadline is approaching *[for his mortgage]*… I try not to show it *[at home]*; here I show it a bit, because I can speak to someone, here, I can say it to *you*, I can't talk about it at home... I don't want to depress everybody…My wife knows, but we don't talk about it…

Commentary 17: the portfolio as an interessment device

Jean-Marie seeks the comfort of empathy, and gets it from Alice. He says it to me too, and this interview is difficult for me. It takes me back to the time when I worked with unemployed people. I have some difficulty of being that neutral researcher suddenly.

However, Jean-Marie's story is not all desperation. It turns out that he has joined an association

for managers, has an active role in it; a new "network", new friends; hopes "to get good "tips",

through it, to find a "new job". The VAE for Jean-Marie, in the material form of his new

qualification and his portfolio (which he carries with him in his attaché-case like a trophy, or an

alter-ego?) is his interessment device for employers.

5.4 Enrolment (and mobilisation): the portfolio gets down to work; material relations

This section focuses on the portfolio. I want to introduce here a series of short candidates' and

advisers' accounts and interactions, to do with the portfolio and ordering.

Like Callon's scallops, it cannot speak. So we hear its voice through the candidates' and advisers'

accounts. The portfolio is also about how materiality shapes the way candidates represents

themselves to themselves and to others, recreate their past, project themselves in the future.

The portfolio can been explained through the ANT's principle of symmetry, a "social product"

(Law 1994: 9) in the same way as the adviser, the candidates or academic staff are also social

products. Human and non-humans are potential social agents and should be treated and

explained in equivalent ways (Hamilton 2010).

This object-agent indeed takes many different guises, which all determine the kind of agency

they acquire. As far as Colette is concerned, it makes a difference if it is …

MP with Colette (F1)

Dialogue F1.2

“… in a ring binder. it's a lot simpler, it's a lot more flexible, it allows me to work according to themes, to attach annexes…one doesn't present things in the same way”.

Like Denis, whose portfolio…

MP with Denis (H1)

Dialogue H1.3

“… starts with a big binder, with plastic envelopes, with sheets…after, to finish, I told myself, about a presentation…I am going to put photocopies double sided…”

Raoul, the jury's candidate, brought not only a “ big ring binder, but also a lectern *[to the jury]*”.

The VAE candidates are indeed performed through their objects. The VAE is enacted through the portfolio. In the VAE network, the portfolio is an agent; in fact, as we will see, it is even an “uncertain effect[s] generated by a network and its mode of interaction. […]”(Law 1994: 103).

 It physically dictates candidates' narratives. Law (1994: 25) discusses the “material character of representations”, and “self-reflexive ordering”, which seems the right way to portray the portfolio. Laws adds:

> “self reflexive ordering, *depends* on representations. It depends, that is, on how it is
>
> that the agents represent both themselves, and their context, *to* themselves. The

argument then, is that representations shape, influence and participate in ordering practices: that ordering is not possible without representation" (*ibid.*: 25)

This passage deals with the moment of translation Callon identifies as enrolment. I have, however, added the moment of mobilisation in bracket, to show that enrolment is intertwined in the last moment of translation. The portfolio does plays a central part in both moments, as it uses all kinds of tricks to enrol the life worlds of the candidates, and to mobilize those into formatted pages, twisting and using the candidates' subjectivities and representations in the process. The enrolment of course is resisted by those heterogeneous elements which all want to be represented. Mayen (2009a) is explicit about the fact that not all experience is worthwhile; a selection and hierarchies are effected; therefore, aided by the adviser, the portfolio carries its ordering and its erasures.

In its final version, the portfolio become the spokesperson for the candidates and all these elements which constitute the candidates' social worlds, ready for the jury's consumption. The *'tour est joué'* (the trick is done).

In the following section I shall let the candidates tell the stories of dismembering, sometimes through 'explosion' of their life worlds, through narrative manipulation, through repackaging together the bits and pieces, even those trying to escape through selective memory; stories of modes of ordering, and of resistance too.

5.4.1 Accounts of deconstructing and regrouping; Julien, Thérèse and Fabien

Julien is a 39 year old Project Manager (Level BTS, bac+2) working in a civil engineering company. It is his second attempt at the VAE, but he feels he is getting much better support this time. He has nearly finished the portfolio. He is a laconic man, has to be prodded a little, but opens up towards the end of the interview. He is one the few male interviewees who mentions his children unprompted.

MP interview with Julien (J1)

Dialogue J1.1

Julien: You put all the experience(s) you have had on paper, and you try to coordinate them and to organise them…. It is a lot of organisation because, at the start, you have … lots of ideas about tasks which you can do, but each task can be deconstructed into several tasks…so a task you can do in one area might be the same in another area, so in fact it's a lot of regrouping together.

That it should be done in relation to a *référentiel* … let's say that for a Degree there are several subjects *[units]* to do, and according to the subjects you try to fit the experiences into each subject.[…]. A lot of reflection time, a lot of *formatting*."

MP interview with Thérèse (G1)

Dialogue G1.2

Thérèse: You have to restructure a little…I had a real problem between '*savoir faire' [know how]* and '*savoir-être' [know how to be – qualities, soft skills]*

So there *[pointing]* we put *savoir-faire* then *savoir-être*… and the *savoir-faire*, we split it again according to the personnel management…
[…] So *connaissances mobilisées* (mobilised knowledge) and professional *compétences*…

MP: So it's not the same thing?

Thérèse: no it's not the same thing…

MP: So the two are joined together…

Thérèse: Yes, it is tallying them together really, because to have competences you have to have knowledge…

MP but the *connaissances*…did the knowledge also generate competences?

Thérèse: Yes there too…but it's true that it is a great debate!...but me it's a bit above my head, I'll tell you frankly…

Commentary 18: "disciplinary writing"

In these two short accounts we can see the work of ordering, categorising, deconstructing, tallying. I think about Foucault's "field of documentation", of the power of the norm and the power of objectification of the experience, which becomes bits to be fitted wherever is the 'right' place. Tasks are deconstructed into smaller tasks, life becomes part of the "procedures of examination […] accompanied at the same time by a system of intense registration and document accumulation" (Foucault 1977b: 189). This is a form of disciplinary writing, which concerns "the accumulation of documents, their serialisation, the organization of comparative fields making it possible to classify, to form categories, to determine averages, to fix norms" (*ibid.*: 190). As Sylvie and Alice repeat, this is a "normative" document.

MP with Julien (J1)

Dialogue J1.2

Julien: these are abstract words, abstract conceptions in which I had to tidy up my competences, what I do…what I know how to do, what I do regularly…
Julien: I had to **explose** *[my emphasis]* everything in order to put them in a box (laughs)… It was very difficult.. .

I spent a huge amount of work, but I am not sure that it corresponds exactly to what I ought to have done..(laughs).

I think it's about 2/3 reflection, 1/3 writing…In fact, one doesn't stop thinking about it…you say to yourself, I have to think of that, and I have to put it in…it's true that it was like that for 2 or 3 months…well…(laughs) you note, you take notes and then… after the writing and the formatting…it's not too long.

MP with Thérèse (G1)

Dialogue G1.3

> Thérèse: […] it was an editorial advice about the terminology, she asked me to emphasise more on the professional terms, or maybe it was simply because…
>
> Do I write in the present, or past tense? These are stupid questions, aren't they…and as I had left that job, I wrote everything in the past, so she said "no, the present, not just the past"… We concentrated more on the style… to put verbs in the infinitive, for example…or nouns… so instead of saying I achieved…we put: achievements.
>
> Thérèse: You say "well, I hadn't thought to get back out certain elements of my experience"…It is during a discussion that it sprang up. Things you have **occulted** [my emphasis] a little…
>
> It's true that in 10 years I did 3, 4 [jobs]…These meetings enable me to get things out which were camouflaged by my memory…things you had forgotten.

Thérèse again, or the pain of not using her own words: she had to ask her husband for help to

write the covering letter:

MP with Thérèse

Dialogue G1.4

> Thérèse: finding the right words…I could find words you say orally, but that you can' t write…I did it with my husband in the end…so it was …smoother…well, it was good, it expressed the same things, but not with **my** words…! I couldn't find myself in it…even 'though he used words and I would say "it is **not** me!" Anyway, it cost me a meal at a restaurant!

Commentary 19: Explosions, reflections, past and present

It is difficult not to notice the strength of the metaphors used by candidates. There is a sense of

pulling apart, 'even exploding', before it is all put back together, differently and in 'order'. There

is also the jostling of the past and the present, with this existential search into several past

activities whose cumulative effects will result in "proof of the learning" (Mayen 2009b: 104).

Is there a little pain in Thérèse's *cri du coeur* "not my words! It's not me"? There is a sense of dispossession… of usurpation of her words. Of course it reminds us of Presse's study (2008) and of the use of second level language. Mayen (2009a) also refers to this language shift.

There are many examples of this process in the interviews, and space does not allow to reproduce them all. However, the next dialogue is intended to show the work taking place within the VAE triangle: the candidate, the adviser, and in the middle the portfolio.

Fabien is a 34 year old Civil Engineer, an Assistant Director in a medium sized building company, who is keen to 'progress' in his career. He is very articulate and the session between him and Alice shows a strong dynamic of mutual empathy. He strikes me as eager to do the right thing.

Dialogue: Fabien session with Alice (K1)

Dialogue K1.1

Alice: To go back to these descriptions and activities… so you have started by dividing into 3 your current post: Works Manager, Commercial, Quality.
It's a possible classification, which I find reductionist; it locks us up a little too quickly in your transversal competences…
(Laughs)… So we're going to 'decline' *[gr. declension]* 'Works Manager'… We're going to refine, in the form of competence, and this competence, we're going to decline it into an action verb.

Fabien: An action verb carries an action… like…to analyse, manage, negotiate, coordinate, plan…

Alice: So we always start with an action verb and with a precision of the action, like organising planning, or developing quality assurance…
[…]
…so we're going to refine the action verb to be the most concise possible and the most precise in your tasks *[tâches réalisées]…*

5.4.2 The portfolio has to bend

In this section we will observe in greater detail the struggle taking place between the portfolio and Colette, first through her interaction with Alice, then as reported in our interview, and as seen by Alice. The main part of their session focused on the way Colette wanted to write her own categories, to make the portfolio her own, bend its rules.

Alice with Colette (F2)

Dialogue F2.1

<div style="border:1px solid">

Alice: you have insisted more on the '*connaissances*' *[knowledge]…*

Colette: it was on the description of the post I have just now… I took several approaches according to the themes I have chosen …

Colette: [I have] 5 great themes: social sciences and education, social protection in France and in the EU and health policies – knowledge I acquired when I did my exam for my post …
Employment legislation, budget management, groups and project management
[…]
Alice: it's really complete… your 'entrance door' is the knowledge aspect. It's rare that candidates start with that …they usually extract knowledge from the competences first…
[…] You talked about unblocking the experience in relation to your knowledge in human sciences *[as a category of the 'connaissances']* …this part will perhaps have to be inserted in the descriptive part of the activities, right within the post you occupy right now?
Is it going to be possible to put that back in a post you've had?

</div>

Commentary 20: the choreography

The dialogue continues for two hours, and Alice tries to fit Colette's 'themes' – her knowledge categories, instead of a list of competences - into a manageable format for the portfolio.

Like most of the adviser-candidate dialogues I observed, it was often a choreography, with one finishing the sentences of the other, with pauses filled with pages turning, the portfolio in the prominent space on the desk between them. The discussion is technical, (the above passage barely renders the almost bureaucratic process of what to put where etc.) very precise about

how to fill each section of the portfolio, with much input from the candidate as she explicates

aspects of her various responsibilities.

Alice is displaying what Mayen (2009b: 104) calls "plasticity" on the part of the adviser, who

nevertheless, maintains her "principle", as Sylvie has done, that the candidates are the "experts

of their experience and it is up to them to express it, analyse it and provide proof of their *acquis"*

*(Ibid.:*104). She also mediates, in the face of Colette's independence of spirit. I shall call it

resistance, even a small part of the controversies running through these encounters.

Finally, this is what Alice had to say on this subject.

MP with Alice (about Colette) (E1)

Dialogue EI.3

> Alice: " I had some trouble with Colette, to channel her…but it's true that I am not in the attitude of….I don't like upsetting people…I tried to impose, really tried…
> These 5 themes, I could feel that they were really vital for her, so it's true that I didn't want to upset her…to say, be careful, you have to get into this normative portfolio.
>
> But I am always torn, thinking…one must leave some freedom to people to express themselves through this normative dossier, in their own way too…So it's true, I am divided as to that aspect, let people write as they wish….or….impose this dossier with 6 categories, which is after all rigid….
>
> So, I felt that with Colette…She had done really good work around these 5 themes, ….She took **ownership** of the *référentiel*…so, **we found an alternative** *[my emphasis],* to say, we can integrate them, even as sub-themes….

Commentary 21: the portfolio, a loose ordering

This next passage is about resistance. There is tension; perhaps more than resistance, it is about

Colette deciding unilaterally how she will order her representations on the page. She enacts

independence of mind; she tries to bend the portfolio to suit her needs.

The adviser wants to give some freedom of expression for the candidate, but the portfolio draws in a different direction, that of ordering. Mayen (2009a: 102) talks of "selections and hierarchies according to the criteria predetermined by the tools which are the *référentiels*". Equally, Mayen and Savoyant (2009: 10) evoke a process of 'reduction' applied to the experience; they use a cooking metaphor of "reduction" in much the same way a sauce is 'reduced' to make it stronger and thicker. The experience is fitted into the portfolio categories, dismembered and 're-membered'.

Colette had organised her experience into conceptual broad themes to do with her knowledge acquired in formal settings, not respecting the portfolio's own categories.

I must say something here about these famous portfolio categories. They may not be as bad as they sound. There are 'grids' and columns for the listings of formal and professional education, for the biographical sheets (like a succinct CV), the tasks descriptions (of which there can be many). The rest of the 'categories' are just sheets with a title, and sometimes a sub-title, such as 'environment' in which the professional, or non-professional, activities are performed; the sheet for 'mobilised knowledge'; or for professional competences. In some instances, as with Raoul, the competences appear as a sub-heading under the mobilised knowledge.

What I am saying? The ordering is looking like a …loose ordering. Individual portfolios behave differently, with candidates presenting these sheets in different order, with different content, some short bullet-points, some in narratives, like Colette. Perhaps talking about categories is a

misnomer; these sheets have a title, and it is up to the candidates to write their text. So, does the portfolio participate in disorder as well as order? Is the portfolio an ambiguous entity, with ill-defined boundaries?

The moment of translation defined as enrolment involves what Callon (1986: 211) describes as "the group of multilateral negotiations trials of strength and tricks that accompany the interessments and enable them to succeed". We have seen how successful the portfolio has been in enrolling all the bits and pieces trying to escape, in 'thickening the sauce'.

5.5 Mobilisation: playing the game

The metaphor of 'playing the game' is a strong one in the VAE and accompanies the other mode of ordering; that of conforming and accepting the rules. Mayen (2008a) is explicit in identifying the "understanding of the 'game' *[le jeu]* which the situation is asking [candidates] to play, particularly the understanding of [who] the recipients [are], their expectations, and their benchmarks" (*ibid.*: 62). We shall return to this subject later.

The portfolio has become the spokesperson for the candidates. As Hamilton (2010: 7) argues, the moment of mobilisation is where […]"[T]here is one united voice and a new settlement which is no longer questioned. This is the stage at which 'black boxing' of previous unstable truths and meanings occurs".

That united voice is that of the portfolio, although of course it will be challenged by the jury's own united voice. Unity has been found in the acceptance of "the rules of the game". The VAE

actors are enrolled in order to obtain a successful conclusion. As has already been discussed, 'playing the game' occurs often during the interviews. Candidates have accepted the rules of engagement, having accomplished the laborious process of ordering each and every bit of 'useful' experience.

This is how the candidates and the adviser see it.

MP interview with Julien (J1)

Dialogue J1.3

> Julien: The candidate has to put his/her life on paper…
>
> […] it's not obvious at all…but on the other hand, **you** *[emphatic]* have to do it, so that the jury can have a real idea of what the person in front of them is…
>
> Since you have committed yourself to the VAE, you accept the **rule of the game***…[my emphasis]* The system is like that, you have to do it; you have to go through it…
>
> It's true that from the moment you know that you're going to go in front of a jury, you don't go there…very reassured…there is always a certain apprehension, saying, well, it is the rule of the game; you tell yourself you deserve it, but, can you get it? And you try to get it….
>
> […] if they were useless rules, I would say, yeah, they should not exaggerate … there are rules, the structure of the portfolio has been studied *[elaborated]* in such a way that …the persons who have to judge you can look at you in quite a rapid and synthetic way, what you have done…

Fabien with Alice (K1)

Dialogue K1.2

> Alice, to Fabien: He *[subject specialist]* did underline to you, the jury is **sovereign** *…[my emphasis]* …You've been told that it was OK for a total VAE…However, there may be recommendations…We're agreed on that…We're not certain that there will be a total VAE…
>
> Fabien: otherwise it would be given to everybody…(laughs)

Alice: there is no ambiguity in the approach…

Fabien: it's up to me to do what needs to be done… to succeed in getting the totality…to demonstrate…

Commentary 22: rules, standards and the French diploma

In these short extracts there is an acceptance about this game with rules; there is also apprehension about being up to the challenge (others too reported those feelings). There is some defiance too; the rules should not "exaggerate". In the second dialogue, one senses a degree of conformity. Fabien, the eager to please candidate, does not challenge the strong word "sovereignty". He has understood the principle of inclusion – exclusion, or in ANT terms the failure to enrol and "destruction of the world of the non-enrolled" (Star 1991: 49). So he may not obtain a full validation; but that is part of the game; not everyone can be successful, can they?

In France there is the notation (marking) phenomenon within the school system. Gumbel (2010) argues that the marking system (0-20) always results in the spontaneous distribution of pupils along a statistical curve, whereby one third are 'good', a third 'average' and the rest 'weak', whatever the general level of the class; a system where, according to him, all that matters is to maintain the average (10). One of the perverse effects of the system is that not everyone can be good or above the average, or inversely, "the system needs weak marks to function" (*ibid.*: 61).

Why does this matter? I think it explains Fabien's complete understanding (and other candidates' too) that there has to be weak or unsuccessful candidates, or, what would be the point of evaluation at all? The historian Suzanne Citron (2008) calls it *"l'élitisme républicain"*, or the "collective unconscious which considers French society as a ladder to climb" (*Ibid.*: 307), joining of course Bourdieu's (1989) analysis of the weight of social capital in the reproduction of

a (republican) elite through the school system, notably through the elite schools (*grandes écoles*) from where most politicians or high ranking civil servants emanate.

Candidates (and advisers) accept the rules, which are inscribed through the work of the standards, those *référentiels* so often mentioned but rarely seen – which only rarely have precise indicators and criteria (Mayen and Tourmen 2009).

The rules of the VAE practice are framed by those *référentiels*, and by the other boundaries of the VAE world. The exercise of power is not enacted from the powerful (state, institution) to the least powerful; rather, as Fenwick and Edwards (2010: 86) argue, "standards, as well as these powers, are understood to be effects that emerge through a series of complex actions", and are enacted through "many negotiations that lead to translations of entity at each knot of the political decision enactment". All the actors therefore are part of what Latour (1999: 17) calls the "circulating entity"; instead of a social world defined by agency and structure, the candidates' heterogeneous elements are each at once part of the micro and macro social (*ibid.)* Power is distributed through the actors and as Foucault (1997a: 192) explains "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth". Those actors are this reality and have been enrolled. Now the portfolio and the standards are their spokespersons.

Diplomas are also actors in this reality. They are the traceable elements of the circulation that is French educational and labour market hierarchies (Algun and Cahuc 2007; Maurin 2009).

The Jury President, Claude, and the other member of the jury, the 'professional-researcher, Gérard, have this to say about the hierarchies of the workplace and of the educational system:

MP with Claude (C1)

Dialogue C1.3

Claude: There is also the problem of what happens after *[the VAE]…* on the salary scales…as a company, if I want to recruit someone, the only way to justify the new person's salary in relation to my other employees, it's her/his diploma. That's why you have salary scales.
It's nothing to do with age; it's the diploma plus the experience.

MP Interview with Gérard (L1)

Dialogue L1.1

[talking about how important it was for Jean-Marie to get the diploma because of his jobseeker status:]
Gérard: Diplomas…It's so important in France! You can have all the competences, if you haven't got a diploma…
Those coming from the elite schools *[grandes écoles],* they have no experience, like those trained on the ground. So it can be a problem when they have to manage people.

There is a different weight given in the professional hierarchy… according to which school *[they come from]*, they get more responsibility…In France, much is made *[played]* of your title…

Christian, the candidate, is also acutely aware of the need for a diploma:

MP with Christian (B1)

Dialogue B1.2 Christian

Christian: Now, they ask for the Bac+2, Bac+3, *[in civil life]* to get into the public sector… They function a lot with the diploma…
In the private sector it's not quite true, they function more on experience, but well, now…
Anyway, you have to hang in there…*['s'accrocher']*, it's finished, one might say, the time where you stay with your diploma until 60, in the same job… I know that I will move around, in several companies…

In spite of my experience, if they say "so yes, you also have a **weakness** *[lack of diploma]"* so, you can say "well, I have my experience and I have my diploma…"

It's a way to be taken into consideration…in relation to young technicians who come out of school… they haven't got the competences in all the areas… But they have a knowledge which I don't have, in others…

MP interview with Colette

Dialogue F1.3 Colette

Colette: When you apply for a post, more and more, even in the public sector, you are asked to have a certain university level…I already have 2 diplomas and the exam for the assistant post, but they ask for the level of a Master or a Degree…so…
"I want to be at the same level too as those young people arriving..…I could say, there, I have a Master too"…

MP interview with Benoît (D1)

Dialogue D1.3

Benoît: "if I wanted to apply for promotion, I would be in competition with people with Bac+4 and 5, even if they were beginners".

MP interview with Julien (J1)

Dialogue J1.4

Julien: I don't think it *[VAE]* changed much that vision I have of myself… if fact, for 15 years I have climbed the rungs in my company, so each time you have to question yourself a little…From the moment you work, you are in constant evolution…I don't see the *Licence* as a goal to achieve, and even like something which is behind me …Not that I imagine it's going to be easy, but let's say the work is already done…so I always try to go forward…"

Julien: I would say it's like a stone you put on a wall and you continue to construct…then it is a big stone so it's the lintel of the window and you continue building on top of it"

Commentary 23: the imaginary competitor

So weakness is to be without a diploma, even if you have experience. The public service is

particularly singled out here, with its reliance on competitive exams, and increasing demand for

academic qualifications.

Moreover, an 'imaginary' entity has entered the scene in candidates' narratives; the young jobseekers straight out of school-university, with their brand new diploma (but no 'practical' competences). Every one of the candidates mentions that fear of the younger, better qualified competitor on the job market, as one of the main reasons for their application.

The VAE is inscribed in the French landscape where diplomas dominate.

I wanted to talk about subjectivities. It seems that to start a VAE process, people already need a special kind of subjectivity which is about "something not being enough", about insecurity, fear of a younger, better qualified generation pushing you off on at the sidelines, or worse, in a backward space; consequently it is about hope and future, and being recognised for what you really are… but that is problematic, and requires many alliances, negotiations, which may or may not be successful. It requires redefining your own representations about yourself. The portfolio is a mirror, but who is that person looking back?

5.5.1 The mobilisation and the jury

We come to the part where the portfolio has finished its work, and, however much all the actors have resisted, it is complete. The jury has read it, the candidate is ready to meet them. In the words of Star (Star 1991: 29) the candidates, aided by the advisers, are "the ones who have done the invisible work of creating a unity of action in the face of a multiplicity of selves, *as well as*, and at the same time, the *invisible work* of lending unity to the face of the torturer or of the executive"; or in our less dramatic context, in the face of the employers, the labour market, the university.

This is about lending unity to the multivoices within the candidates' experience. The jury will also give it unity, thus erasing the multiplicity of the candidates' materials and subjective worlds.

What the advisers say: portfolio mobilises entities

MP with Sylvie (A3)

Sylvie about Christian's portfolio

Dialogue A3.4

Sylvie: His*[Christian's]* portfolio is well presented, coherent...there are different sections, you can see clearly that it is a standardised portfolio *[normé]*

You can find the different parts, that is essential …you see that I put myself in the jury's place, who is going to receive this portfolio…Could you go in and find the information, follow it step by step or not? That's crucial, to present to a jury, to academics, to check that the information is accessible, the portfolio' structure is respected…

Bernard on the IUT jury's gathering: mobilisation (B2)

MP with Bernard

Dialogue B2.3

Bernard: The first thing, we meet the Head of the department, there is a discussion, and […] the propositions are taken to the department *[for]* the modules. It is already a collective reflexion, a pre-analysis of the portfolio.

The department can then speak with **one voice**…it's a lot of work…When the portfolio is completed, it is transmitted… for a month… a dozen people from different departments look at it, they are the jury members. They *[the jury]* are nominated. The Director of the IUT, the President of the commission, the Head of the department, the Head of the particular programme, the Senior adviser of the VAE unit, me as a consultant, 12 in total.

Commentary 24: the unitary voice

To make a unitary voice is a lot of hard work. The portfolio is standardized. The adviser also speaks for the candidates, for the standardization process she has contributed to, for the legislator, for the texts delineating the VAE. The jury speak for the *référentiels,* the professional bodies, the university. This is the final OPP for the candidates.

It is also the mobilisation moment when the necessary "displacements" (Callon 1986: 216) have been made, when someone speak in the name of others. "To mobilize, as the word indicates, is to render entities mobile which were not so beforehand" (*ibid.*: 216).

The jury sessions covered much technical questioning, technical in the sense that would not be relevant to this enquiry. So I am exercising the researcher's process of selection and culling.

Senior adviser's introduction to the jury (X1)

Sylvie, to the panel: so, here the question which is asked of the jury: … whether these persons have acquired within their whole experience, the competences and knowledge corresponding to the programme's objectives….
… if they have, we can deliver the diplomas, if not, how can they acquire those conditions…
Then, we can see, in a second phase, the collection of things we can recommend for what we call a recommendation *[prescription]*
[…]
Sylvie : so… the way juries usually happen…In a first phase, we exchange on the programme contents, then eventually on the questions you asked yourselves when you read the portfolio…
First of all, Alice has prepared a summary…of these life paths *[parcours de vie].* Then in some way we try to delineate the questions, to be asked to the candidates…
Then we will ask him to come into the room…

The questions can only be about the experience. They cannot be on what you could tell us on applied mathematics, for example, or on electronics…you cannot ask questions on theoretical knowledge.

Alice introduces Jean-Marie: she speaks for the candidate, presents him and some characteristic she wants the jury to understand, for example, the effect of his unemployment, his motivation...

Alice to jury X2

Alice to the panel: his VAE project is to facilitate his return to employment.
He has a good capacity to write a narrative. He is very anxious, very motivated.
Since he was made redundant, he passed from being a competent person to an incompetent one.

Claude: the VAE is not a production line

I interviewed the President shortly after the jury. I am struck by his open-mindedness, and his explanations. (I actually wished that academics back home had the same vision). The President's role is to encourage the discussion, to explain the criteria and indicators taken into account by the jury members, facilitating the global 'impression' juries develop about a person (Mayen and Tourmen 2009).

MP interview with Claude C1

Dialogue C1.4

MP: you said during the jury, that "you do not evaluate the same thing and in the same way; it is not like traditional students" *[formation initiale]*

Claude: and I maintain that... typically, if you were doing the same things you do for your *[traditional]* students, I think there would be no validation.

Sincerely, in a HE institution, students get information in all kinds of areas; it's different for someone who works in a company, who will have his/ her speciality, but not in a vast domain. Students have 35 hours of classes, they receive lots of new stuff, but they are not operational... The person at work, s/he knows stuff for her/his small domain of application... but not as much as the students.
So you can't make the same rule. Otherwise, you're wasting your time.

So I persist in saying that you mustn't try to compare with what the students can do, because often there are a few years gap. And you can't ask someone who has worked for 10 years in industry to be as competent…up to date in all domains as the students are.

About Raoul: he was a bit atypical…I knew him professionally, because his company had taken some of our students. So I knew his domain of activity, his role, very well.
Anyway, my colleagues identified very quickly that in certain areas of *[technical]* applications, he did not have competences, but I think they also felt that he could have found them without any problem.

When I interviewed him, it was clear that he would find the solution to a problem, if he had to… That's why I can't apply an algorithm, independently of who the candidate is… That's why you can't do this kind of validation like a production line…I am convinced of it.

MP interview with Christophe, second academic (Lecturer-researcher) (O1)

Dialogue O1.1

Christophe: That's what I look for…the career path, the match between their technical progression, their capacity to manage people, to abstract from a problem… otherwise it's useless.

…We put them ill at ease when they're already uncomfortable because they're stressed, so you have to take that into account of course.

People have learned on the ground the technical aspects, and then there is this human element… they have it of course, they are much more mature, at 40 plus. Someone who has 10 years experience, with a Bac+2, like the first person we saw *[jean-Marie]* who's obviously **worth** *[my emphasis]* someone who's got a Degree.

What I judge in the VAE, it's the intellectual capacities. The technical capacity is already in the portfolio; you don't ask technical questions in the VAE.
That's what happens anyway *[during the jury].* The intellectual capacities don't have anything to do with the technical capacities.

About Jean-Marie : We saw it, he could not abstract himself *[from the technical side]* …but it was also probably the emotion… People are 'in emotion'… he is unemployed, he wants to prove that he is not out of date…he only shows this aspect…

Finally, Gérard, the professional-researcher, agrees with his colleagues (L1)

MP with Gérard

Dialogue L1.2

About Jean-Marie:
Gérard: It's difficult to evaluate someone with experience as you would evaluate a student, because there are levels, very precise criteria; here 'though we evaluate an **envelope** *[my emphasis]*, he has **baggage**, we look to see how heavy it is... so according to the weight of the baggage we try to see if the diploma he was applying for wasn't too low a level...

[...]at one point I asked, "why is this person with such a baggage not aiming for higher"?

MP: but I thought he was being very 'technical'?

Gérard: yes, absolutely, but on the other hand he was a technician who had **climbed the rungs of the ladder** *[my emphasis]* starting from scratch, he had managed people...and that's what we ask students I 'd say at level Bac+5, Master 2 in fact...

We had time to discuss this with the other two before... Claude too was not sure about a Degree or a Master 1...

The adviser suggested to aim for a lower level, to make sure he got it, rather than aiming too high and risking not getting it. ...Because he is unemployed, so that was important.

About Raoul: a bit like my colleagues, I was reticent... he had a superficial technical baggage... he had set up his business, so hadn't had the time to deepen his technical baggage...

Compared to Jean-Marie, I was a bit embarrassed. It was a bit light...even obsolete ...You could see it the way he was talking; it was more commercial...
He has a small SME...there is accounting to do...it is at the level of a Master 2...but he has practically lost touch with innovative technology...

The other person *[Jean-Marie],* you could see his passion was his job...his warhorse...Raoul...there was quite a pronounced ego, he put himself forward a lot, he was selling himself...

It's not to criticise the person, but as an engineer, you meet a lot of 'commercials'...that's our experience...that's why it is subjective...each of us brings our own experience *[to the jury]*

MP: It was not like an exam, was it?

Gérard: We do not sanction *[punish];* with an exam, you can make the person repeat *[a year].* With a professional, you can't. So it's difficult to sanction, we do not validate, one can say that the baggage is not heavy enough, you're not going to say, come back again...

Commentary 25: impressions, thoughtful process, and successful mobilisation

Tourmen [2008] who has carried out studies of the juries' decision-making process states that the judgement is progressive rather than sequential, expressing 'impressions' and discussing them, in an process of '*pondération' (*thoughtful weighting). Here the sense is that this jury understood the issues at stake from the candidates' point of view, especially in Jean-Marie's case; that each candidate was considered separately, according to the level they had reached, and not in comparison with the student population. The jury members were all agreed, even adamant on those points. It was acknowledged that Jean-Marie needed a total validation, as a partial one would be useless, even meaningless.

The metaphor of the ladder reappears. The mode of ordering of moving forward, with struggle and effort; climbing is not easy. The candidates, as lifelong learners are participating in what Edwards (2003: 59) calls the "attempt to re-order subjectivities in representing and mobilising a particular image of human beings through which people can work on themselves in conducting their conduct". That image goes through the ethos of enterprise, of "calculating one's worth within the economy" (*ibid.:* 59). The jury, advisers, référentiels, programmes, policy-makers and legislators are all brought together in that "actor-network of interests" (*ibid.)*. I will come back to this point in the next chapter.

To finish on this particular commentary, it must be said that this is one jury, and that there are countless others; practices differ, if we believe the testimonies gathered by Mayen and Savoyant (2009). Candidates do fail. Or, academic members of staff express ambiguities, like Michelle, below.

We have reached with this jury the state of successful mobilisation, but in other cases controversies arise. As Callon says, controversies are the manifestations by which the representativity of the spokesperson is questioned, discussed, negotiated, rejected. I will leave the last word to Michelle, I think a dissident par excellence.

5.5.2 Michelle: an alternative, dissident view

Michelle is in charge of a Masters in Social Work. She was a mature student for a long time, and worked as a professional social worker while raising her children on her own and working on a PhD. She is an "atypical" academic, she says. She started with setting up a 'collective VAE' (in the form of group work) for professionals, not uncommon but an unusual practice.

I recognise in her a specific subjectivity of the one 'who takes risk', the creative thinker, the non-conformist even (her personal story confirms this, and I sense that she is proud of it).

She is adamant that professionals need to learn in a peer group. However, the President of the jury, also the Director of the department, is not in favour.

She has mixed views on the VAE. She can see the "VAE's perverse effects", as fewer people return to study, so that her FC courses *[separate from the full-time programmes]* do not attract enough people. So she mourns that. The social work professionals are instead fitted in the *formation initiale*, with the young students, something with which she disagrees strongly.

MP interview with Michelle (P1)

Dialogue P1.1

Michelle: The president didn't want it to be another group. I had to fight …and we only got 6 persons.
So only 2 people now who took up studying again, we put them in the main course… I think they have a very bad memory of our programme… We don't organise a coherent programme for *[mature student]* groups anymore…

The problem is that we 'format' *[standardise]* so much the university programmes… so you get groups that are terribly homogeneous…It's a disaster! To look predominantly for people who have school –academic pre-requisites..! Even for the *formation continue*!

There is hardly any VAE now…
I'd say that the university uses the validation so that…it doesn't have to involve itself with FC classes… There are university people who only want a mix *[of FC and FI students],* who do not want to have FC classes…of course it's complicated, it requires energy…

In fact, for me, the VAE works too well!
For me, who was responsible for the FC, it prevents me to set up classes….I am an **orphan** *[my emphasis]* of the FC…!

… I am not in this culture where you give the diploma only because you've got experience…
Me, I have slogged…to have all my diplomas…(laughs)

I think we must be careful regarding the delivery of diplomas like that…experience sometimes is largely worth the diploma, but even 'though…
Beware of excess! It could devaluate entire sections of qualifying programmes…

I think that among your traditional university folks, not many would be prepared to give a total VAE…

However, god knows that I recognise the value of experience! But at the same time, I know how important …in relation to the academic world, to be judged on one's academic competence…

Commentary 26: the orphan of the *formation continue*

Michelle's story is interesting in that she is represents an actor-network who is at once in favour

of, and ambiguous about the VAE. She understands the value of experience, she herself wears

her "practitioner's hat" when she has a group of social workers, but she has worked hard,

struggled through a typical adult (woman's?) life to get her PhD, to be where she is. So she is

ambiguous about the value of the VAE. She knows what knowledge is valued in academia, she

believes there are hierarchies of 'worth' applied by the university which downgrade

qualifications obtained through the VAE, and knowledge obtained through work.

The controversy here is about the failure of the portfolio to stand for academic knowledge. Most of all, for Michelle, is the issue of the loss of her peer learning groups, replaced by the VAE process.

The unitary voice of the university may not exist after all if we consider this account, and those about the IUT academic staff. It is a contested terrain. Stabilized networks are precarious. The VAE actor-network is not as solid as it looked.

5.6   More questions than answers; some conclusions…

In this chapter I followed Callon's four moments of translation to explore whether the VAE process could be analysed through them. I wanted to agree with Hamilton that

> "using ANT, we can develop analytical strategies for dealing with competing policy innovations, unstable or ambiguous social projects and the multiple and shifting perspectives of participants within a given policy initiative" (2010: 4).

It seems that the VAE could well be this 'unstable' and 'ambiguous project' if one considers the results of Guérin's *et al*. (2010) recent research, to which I shall return in the following and final chapter.

In this study, I have been looking at the participants of this government driven initiative. I am not certain that I have used ANT to its full effect; furthermore, ANT is often used to discuss policies

and organisations. The VAE, however, is a form of organisational management of the self and its projection into a future of 'progress and betterment'; as Du Gay (cited in Edwards 2003: 60) says,

> "Biographical formation is worked upon in a way in which 'certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such' ".

I wanted to talk about material relations between agents – they were my key informants after all - within what I consider to be an ordering project. However, policy initiatives are not distinct from their applications and effects on those participating in their circulating spheres of influence.

In this chapter I have tried to give actors their voices, carrying out a running commentary at the points were possible themes were discernible in an ANT frame of reference. Of course, I carried out my own ordering and culling of material in a way which I did not wish to do. I am aware that it is an act of interpretation, and that it participates in the obscuring voices I wanted to avoid. Finally, I must reiterate that these interviewees' narratives are only a localised story in the vast VAE actor-network.

What transpires from the sums of interviews quoted here – and to my chagrin it just was not possible to render the richness, the sheer volume of people's multiple voices – is the strength of the ordering process and how it struggles to hold all the bits together; to centre. How candidates struggle and accept the game, but at a cost, as yet unquantified.

In the next chapter I intend to do a summing up of some of the commentaries which represent the main ANT points to be made. So the next chapter will summarise and discuss the points I feel are the main results of this work, and will set them against the original aims stated in Chapter Three.

6. 1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter I sought to trace a story of the French VAE out of the narratives told by the actors. I used a series of commentaries intersecting with their accounts, designed to signpost elements of ANT analysis, rather than to interpret my interviewees' words and own meanings; I thus attempted to avoid falling into a hermeneutical investigation of life narratives (Erbern 1986), as was pointed out in Chapter Three.

I was always aware, during my encounters with the candidates especially, of the asymmetrical relationship between researchers and interviewees (Scott 1996) and of the ambiguities and even impossibilities to capture and categorise (Scheurich 1997) what was said, and not said, the spaces in between (*ibid.*: 1997). I have equally mentioned in Chapter Three my awareness of the way my own research activity may produce its own world through my own representations (Usher 1996), and these commentaries are indeed such effects. Like Law (1994), I attempted not to make myself invisible, accepting that this story is also my story about how I see the VAE and the actors within it, and how I wished to conduct my research. I am also taken by the idea that the actors in my story are capable of being "social philosophers" (Law 1994: 4); I wanted to hear: their own philosophies, however they were expressed.

This chapter is intended to be both a discussion of the results and the concluding chapter for the research. I wish to bind together a discussion on the research with final conclusive reflexions, as the latter follow from the former.

Therefore, the discussion here will draw from initial elements of analysis drawn from the commentaries of Chapter Five. The aim is to 'round up' some of the ANT themes identified to construct my narrative about the VAE as I witnessed it. This chapter will also return to the initial questions and stated intentions, while considering the extent to which this 'modest sociology' (Law 1994) may have contributed to a new way of considering a social object such as the VAE. It will conclude by exploring new perspectives which began to emerge through the act of writing.

6.2 What about the results?

I said in the preceding chapter that the VAE might be considered to be a form of organisational management of the self. In this section I will argue that the relation candidates to adviser is an actor-network where governmentality takes the form of "technologies of the self" (Edwards 2003: 55), whereby learners work upon themselves in a constant search for self-development.

So my first point is to discuss the effect of and the ordering of the heterogeneous elements of the candidates' lives through the act of the disciplinary writing (Commentary or C 18). This will be linked to the ways subjectivities are enrolled into 'playing the game', (C 22) as part of the 'circulating entity' (Latour 2005).

I will finally turn to the adviser's role as the mediator-gatekeeper of the VAE actor-network and I will discuss the resistance and controversies encountered through the VAE process.

6.2.1 Disciplinary writing; the 'technologies of the self' or the ordering of subjectivities

Disciplinary writing (C 18), is an essential analytical element in the story; it is part of the disciplining of the self whereby, as Edwards (2003: 56) argues "certain notions of the subject/subjectivity become mobilised as actants that both do work and are worked upon and are brought into relationship with one another to form an actor-network".

This actor-network is the one which is part of what I called the "ordering of the future", progress and betterment (C 14) to which candidates' subjectivities contribute, and derive from. It manifests itself, in the candidates' narratives, as a travelling metaphor, a metaphor of hope, with its negative opposite, the fear of the imaginary competitor (C23). They hold their baggage, and hope for a better future. In C 22 I mentioned how this was part of the candidates' enrolment into the ordering of the 'diploma'. This 'ordering progress and betterment' is part of what those educational practices "primarily formulated within the universal legitimising discourses or grand narratives of modernity […] – narratives of individual and social betterment and emancipation […]" (Usher and Edwards 1998: 163).

The candidates' subjectivities are framed into what Edwards (*op.cit*.: 59) calls "an ethos of enterprise" where they have to invest in, or 'calculate', their human and economic capital. This is also the entrepreneurial subjectivity described by Law and Moser (1999) of some of the Laboratory managers. Most of the candidates I interviewed were, to a greater or lesser extent,

displaying a conduct of "energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility" (Edwards 2003: 59). Without those they would not have been candidates for the VAE.

We will see in the next section how the process of advising-guidance is also part of that actor-network. For now, it seems to me that all the hard work of centring and regrouping (C 13, C 18); of resisting the portfolio's demand; of exploding (C 19) their lives apart to tame them into docile representations on a flat piece of paper; even the struggle to forge alliances (C 5, C 7, C10) are what Edwards calls "technologies of the self" (*ibid.*: 55), referring to Foucault's notion of governmentality. These, he argues, characterise the age of the lifelong learning discourse. Edwards and Boreham (2003) also talked about learning technologies in the lifelong learning discourse where the learner, as an individual, is constantly recreating her/himself according to the need of the labour market, becoming in the process a consumer of learning in order to survive in a competitive and flexible labour market (the imaginary competitors in C23). It would seem that the VAE is as much a learning technology as it is an object of *formation* (Chakroun 2009).

The intrusion of the imaginary young competitor (C 23) creates what I would call a VAE 'mythology', as most candidates expressed their deeply felt need to move forward, to gain qualifications so as not to be overtaken by more 'marketable', better qualified and younger people. This need is associated with anxiety too when faced with unemployment and in some cases with a sense of redress of an earlier injustice, of an early life exclusion from formal education.

It would therefore seem appropriate to equate the VAE with those 'technologies of the self' as an 'aspect of self-work'. I have already shown in Chapter Two (HCEEE 2004) how the VAE was inscribed into a discourse of lifelong learning. Therefore this section is following Edwards' (2003) argument that the shift from lifelong learning discourse into a

> "strategy of governmentality and a technology of the self [...] signifies a move that deepens the processes of socialisation that takes place in formal education, training and employment into a therapeutic relationship of the self to the self that takes place throughout life. In other words, one's self becomes something that we are required to work on rather than simply being worked on by others" (*ibid.*: 55).

It is not difficult to see how this shift is happening in the VAE process. The commentaries from C 13, 14, 18, 19, to 23, suggest that the VAE is hard work on the self, even war: "it was hard to know where to start, where to 'attack'" said Christian, in order to conjure up those disparate elements, and pin down what has been essentially decentred and an essential part of specific subjectivities. We are seeing in practice these technologies of the self whereby, as Edwards argues,

> "[...] the representation and ordering of subjectivity is fundamental to social practices. Governing does not determine people's subjectivities, but elicits, fosters, promotes and attributes; it is not simply oppressive, but works on through and with active subjects through the promotion of reflection and reflexivity" (*ibid.*: 58).

Those active subjects, candidates but also advisers and academic staff, all play the game that is demanded of them, all know and accept the rules. The rules in the French context are performed through the tyranny of the diploma (C 6, C 22), It may be possible to say that the social practice of diplomas in France requires this ordering of subjectivities to the point where the candidates' sense of self is dependant on obtaining it, which is *'valorisant'* professionally and personally.

6.2.2 The adviser's role: confessional practices and the shaping of self-identity

The reflection and reflexivity Edwards mentions are facilitated by the advisers' mediation and negotiation ability. Their role may be described as one of guidance, a concept Usher and Edwards (2005) have analysed through ANT. Following their argument, it may be possible to say that the advisers' role is not to consider the candidates as isolated individuals with a unique psychological framework, but, as they argue, "in ANT […] guidance can be seen as a knowledge-producing process where the knowledge produced is talk, or to put it in another way, knowledge is discoursed into being through the dialogic transactions of the guidance encounter" *(ibid*.: 406).

Usher and Edwards use ANT to show how it is possible to understand the role guidance practices play in the formation of subjects, drawing on the ANT notion of a subject as a "knowing location" (*ibid.*: 398). They use Foucault's argument about the way "externally imposed discipline has given way to the self-discipline of an autonomous subjectivity" (*ibid.*: 400), in a modern society, with the development of what Foucault called 'confessional practice' which shifted from a religious context to one of "self regulation, self-improvement and self-development" (*ibid.:* 400*).* The 'confessor' is also the expert, a fact recognised by all the candidates when talking about their advisers (C 12, 16). Indeed the relationship is not equal, because

"[I]n order to participate fully in confession, persons need to be subjects […]. Thus, in guiding learners, there needs to be an acceptance on the part of the learners that they are indeed *learners*, that they are positioned as a particular kind of learner, and as such are in *need of learning* for their future development" (*ibid.*: 401).

The shift from disciplinary power to 'pastoral' power, as those authors further argue, goes through practices which include accreditation of prior learning and portfolio-based assessment; where the power of self assessment and self improvement adds greater, not lesser, sense of dislocation and anxiety for those 'learners' or workers, in the way it emphasises personal responsibility and the importance of ever greater "development of an autonomous and individualistic subjectivity" (*ibid.*: 403).

Guidance, they argue, has become a "*technology* of governing […]It involves the four moments of translation since values, subjectivities and interests of all the actors must be translated, including the material objects which make the guidance practice possible" (*ibid.*: 404).

It is through the adviser that the candidates are enrolled, and mobilized, into the temporary stabilized actor-network, just for the time of the validation. However, the adviser, as I said previously, is in an 'ontological' paradox', as I shall discuss now in the next section.

6.2.3 Resistance –dissidence and controversies

There are stories of resistance and dissidence in those accounts. Staying with the advisers for a moment, we can see how Alice was torn between her desire to let the candidates express themselves, and her role as gatekeeper of the "sovereign jury". I have talked about the

intersecting of ordering modes (C 12) (Law and Moser 1999); mode of enabling and care, as opposed to the gatekeeper mode. Alice shows a subjectivity of empathy, as does Bernard, who enjoys his advocacy role for his candidates towards the reluctant scientists at the IUT. However, in Bernard's case, he has to work hard too, to interest, and enrol, those subject specialists, who want to hang on to their actor-network of Cartesian tools and evaluation methodologies, enacting what I called the 'ordering logic'. It is thanks to Bernard's negotiation skills that the controversy is held at bay, and that Christian passed through his first OPP (C 7).

There are dissidences between Christian's subject specialist and Paul (C 9), Bernard's Head of department, whose specific subjectivity is that of change. The VAE as a boundary object just manages to hold those actors together; they are united through the institution actor-network, through their obligation towards the law, but they are apart in their modes of ordering. In a sense Bernard holds them together, for a while.

It is thanks to Alice's skills that Colette manages to compromise on her 'themes' (C 13). In spite of her own 'dissidence', Alice enrols Colette to conform to the portfolio's demands. The portfolio has also resisted, although it has bent too.

There is dissidence, even controversy among other members of staff. Michelle alludes to controversies about the VAE with her own Head of department, and about the *Formation Continue* (C26). She herself is ambiguous about the VAE. Not everything is united, there are multiple voices trying to get out.

The VAE is a story of tensions and a story of inconsistencies which, in Callon's fashion, are drawn to the centre. The jury I observed did draw things to the centre, through a successful mobilisation of all actors. It may be temporary, only for that jury, perhaps. "[A]t the end of the process, if it is successful, only voices speaking in unison will be heard" (Callon 1986: 223).

6.2.4 The VAE as a boundary object, and the mobilisation of actors

The idea of the VAE as a boundary object was developed by Lauriol *et al.* (2004) then through their follow up study (Guérin *et al.* 2010), and mentioned in (C 8). Fenwick and Edwards (2010: 51) explain that " [B]oundary objects do not sit between the borders of different contexts, at the edge, but express a relationship between, brought together through the enactment of purification *and* translation". Purification "refers to the way in which the educated subject is assembled upon the basis of the denial of the play of multiplicity and difference and the mobilizing of specific practices as more valuable than others" (*ibid.*: 49).

It is possible to say that the centring and regrouping process (C 13) and the uniting choreography (C 20) between candidates – advisers during their interaction are effects of a unitary movement which are smoothing out differences, and multiplicity. Law (1994: 33) talks about "arrangements", that each person is a set of arrangements, holding together those bits and pieces over which there is not much control. I like to think of the VAE as a set of arrangements temporarily holding actors together in a moment in time, before dissidence, rather than controversy, take them apart; this is how I understand Star and Griesmer's (1989) concept of the boundary object. I will return to unitary voices and multiplicity in the conclusion.

6.3   The research questions

I have already explained (in Chapter Two and Chapter Three) how the life history perspective

(Dominicé 2000; Josso 2001; Bertaux 1997) influenced the way I crafted my original questions,

which in turn shaped the interview questions and methods. My first question was concerned

with the processes involved in transforming and formalising experiential learning into a

qualification. This question led to a second question, about how representations and translation

processes were being mediated through the interactions with the advisers and the juries. The

fact that I relied on questions within this perspective meant that I did obtain rich narratives from

which to draw my own ANT accounts.

By using ANT to analyse the results of the interviews I have widened the scope of those initial

questions and showed how translations are effected by and through the portfolio. Translations,

note Fenwick and Edwards (2010: 9) is "what happened when entities, human and non-human,

come together and connect, changing one another to form links. [...] Entities that connect

eventually form a chain of network of action and things, and those network tend to become

stable and durable".

I have also attempted to 'order' the moments in the VAE process as moments of translation; that

is, the creation of alliances and actor-networks, and exclusion of others, until mobilisation

creates stabilised networks, up to a point and possibly temporarily. The actor-networks thus

created were the ones connecting for example candidates and their advisers, or candidates and

the juries, through the portfolio representations. In this case we might be able to say with

Fenwick and Edwards that the portfolio is an "actant" in the way it enables the activity of the

actor-network. However, "when it is translated to become a performing part of the network, [it] can behave with what appears to be particular intentions, morals, even consciousness and subjectivity, that is, as an actor with agency"(*ibid.:* 10).

I have shown through my commentaries how the portfolio was translated as part of the network as it resisted the experience's disparate entities and the candidates' efforts to create their own representations, in spite of the formatting imposed by the portfolio. The descriptions given by the actors themselves of their struggle, failures or successes in stabilizing their heterogeneous entities into the portfolio answer, in some way at least, these original questions.

In summary, the responses to these two questions evolved into an analysis on how candidates turn their experience, and therefore their lives, into narratives which have to fit with the targeted programmes' final objectives, through staged and iterative processes involving representations and translations of that experience; their lives becoming the laboratory Alheit (2004) mentions. The responses to the second question highlight those mediations and interactions between all actors, with the added analysis provided by Callon's (1986) four moments of translation, as shown in Figure 1, Chapter Four (Problematisation), and by ANT analysis of the role of non human actors such as the portfolio. The results indicate how the portfolio turns out to be the central stage where representations, negotiations, dissidence, betrayals and controversies are being played out. From that question too stems the focus on the adviser's dissenting roles as both enabler and gatekeeper; the actor through whom the unitary voice is achieved.

The answers to the third question, about the role the VAE process plays in relation to learners' experience and identities, are complex. I started to address the issue of identity in Chapter Three under 'Identities under stress'. The candidates' subjectivities shine through their accounts, but I could only infer from them the effects of such a process on their self-representation, for example. I agree with Edwards when he talks about the fact that, in the discourse of "humanistic psychology" (Edwards 2003: 65) where the VAE is undoubtedly located (Thibault 2006; Mayen 2009a), "the actant is represented as an accumulation of skills, and/or […] disembodied and dis-embedded from specific economic, social and cultural contexts" (Edwards 2003: 64).

Responses to that question, nourished by ANT analysis and aided by Foucault's notions of governmentality and disciplinary writing (as summarised in the sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2 of this chapter), indicate the extent to which the VAE, as a social practice, contributes to the ordering of the candidates' subjectivities, through technologies of the self, and through confessional practices analysed earlier.

I have been able therefore to talk about a process of centring and regrouping of their experience, which candidates have to operate in order to hold together the multiplicity and make it whole, for a time; not without stages of dissidence, and resistance, or, at times, a sense of dislocation between their own representations of their world and the portfolio's need for order.

Finally, the interview questions intended for the candidates, presented into themes in Chapter Three, enabled the heterogeneous elements of the candidates' world to enter the interview space, as mentioned in Chapter Four. The questions also enabled the candidates to express their

own representations about the VAE processes. In particular, they were able to give their reasons for entering into it - these were developed in Chapter Five and summarised in this chapter (section 6.2.1) as the 'actor-network of ordering the future, progress and betterment'; to express their fears (the 'imaginary competitor'); to offer their own explanations of their knowledge and skills, of which they were proud - thus becoming themselves 'modest sociologists' (Law 1994); to articulate their own responses to the interactions and negotiations taking place. The questions and interview interactions produced rich accounts of the candidates' multiple, sometimes ambiguous, perspectives, within the social object that is the VAE.

6.4 Tensions between the life history approach and ANT analysis

Part of my story is the also the story of a certain tension between the life history approach I initially adopted while starting the research and the ANT analysis I used to reflect on the data being generated.

I embarked on the interviews having read Dominicé (1996, 2000; Pineau 1994; Bertaux 1997; Josso 2001) and with my own background of emancipatory adult education and guidance practices. As presented in Chapter Two, the life history paradigm seemed to offer a way to give room to the actors to speak for themselves, as indeed Latour advocates (2005), accepting of course all the caveats on this subject provided by postmodernist thinkers such as Stronach and MacLure (1997).

Moreover, those French speaking researcher-practitioners offered an approach based on educational biographies where dialogue between participants was a main pedagogical tool, not dissimilar, I felt, to the candidate-adviser interaction.

Nevertheless, I pointed out the limitations of the life history approach in Chapters Two and Four, in dealing with the multi layered processes of representation and translation of the heterogeneous components inhabiting the VAE space.

There was a risk of being trapped in the double hermeneutics, had I focussed only on the actors' narratives, especially those of the candidates; however my attention was inevitably drawn to tensions and resistance occurring within the VAE process, and to the prominent role played by the portfolio, an instrumental actor in choosing ANT as a tool for analysis.

This choice, which retrospectively can be considered as risky for all the reasons discussed here, did create an epistemological tension, as explained in Chapter Three. However, in a similar way in which Law (1994) presented the Laboratory, I located myself within the ethnographic tradition, embedded, as I was, within the university VAE unit, for a fixed but intensive period of time, and focussing at first on the stories told by the human actors (stories which are part of ordering or summing up (Law 1994)), through the various devices used; a focus which is in tension with the ANT concept of symmetry whereby non-human actors have equal prominence with humans.

The fact that the VAE is so firmly located in a humanistic tradition, both in practice and research, has perhaps made it difficult to focus away from the human actors. Or perhaps it is that the biographicity principle was too deeply anchored in the research design, or that my own adult education past has made me an incurable humanist. Yet, the biographical approach produced

rich 'pickings', rich narratives, and rich metaphors and descriptions, ANT descriptions, perhaps, in the way Latour recommends (2005).

I would like to add that ANT has provided me with a fruitful alternative with which to consider the French VAE process, highlighting the tensions, resistance and alliances, enabling me to encompass the complexity, messiness and fluidity of the whole process in ways which would not have been possible without it.

I too, of course, created my own ordering and centring of the stories, inevitably accepting that research is performative and enacts its own reality (Law and Urry 2002). In Chapter Three I tried to be explicit about my role as a researcher. I understood that I certainly was part of the VAE actor-network when interviewing the candidates, that I was not innocent (Harraway 1999) in the sense that I carried my mission and my past, with strong alliances with the VAE unit and its advisers.

This research and its conduct are also the result of my own brand of subjectivity; to let the people talk, and to listen. Like all research, it is unique, idiosyncratic, probably messy, but that is the reality of those actors' lives, and mine.

6.5 Contributions to the field of research, and Implications for practice

6.5.1 Contributions to research

The question remains to identify the way in which I have contributed to this field of knowledge and to the methodological approaches that I have chosen through this study. I do not wish, and

cannot, make grand statements. What I can say is that it has been an exploration of 'possibles' for me; it has also been a learning experience, of course, to turn my attention completely to the multiple voices of the actors' accounts, as an attempt to relocate their actor-networks in the forefront of the ordering process that is the VAE, and my study itself.

It was, importantly for me, and perhaps a way forward for further studies, a deliberate attempt to deviate from the traditional explanations belonging to the humanistic perspective which, as I have developed all long this work, obscures the mobilisation of subjects (Edwards 2003) that takes place through normalizing 'technologies of the self'. I talked about an exploration: I would like to think that using ANT to analyse such French validation will provide a different understanding of this social object, not so well known outside France.

I tried to follow in Law's steps by making myself 'visible' through commentaries. These were in fact a corollary of my decision to give priority to actors' voices. Just having their accounts was not terribly useful of course; so my intention was to re-create a kind of conversation between their accounts and myself, albeit a very unbalanced one, but nevertheless an 'interruption', disruption of whatever ordering process I too had to operate. I think that it is a method that deserves greater scrutiny, especially when it comes to listening to actors' voices. The research methods, as I have said, brought thick narratives. Those accounts were 'localised', unstable accounts in the way they only reflected the actors' representations and translations for that moment, which is what I wanted, as I do not believe in grand narratives, as I have explained throughout this work. It produced the results because precisely the interviewees and I understood that premise.

I have also attempted to bring together two worlds, those of the French and Anglophone academic literature. It has not been easy, a back and forth movement from one language to another, from one way of thinking to another; what Ricœur (2004: 61) calls the "translator's dilemma faithfulness/ treason (*fidélité/trahison*)".

It may be that I have translated for the Anglophone academic world some of the ambiguities inherent in the French VAE, which reflect the controversies I have just reported from the French study above, and which I mentioned in Chapter Five. I have perhaps begun to explain how the VAE could only have been born in France, a country where having a diploma does make all the difference; a country Maurin (2009: 93) calls a *'société à statut'* or a society ("unequal and hierarchical") where "social dignity is still attached to the conquest and the conservation of a status" (*ibid.*: 8). Although he does not talk about OPPs, he argues that

> "status societies have the characteristics to submit their members to a series of key-moments, of critical episodes where everything is decided (the *'concours'*-competitive exams - are the archetypes of these moments). To acquire a status, however modest, represents a form of election from which the beneficiaries will find themselves suddenly invested, for the rest of their lives, with a social supplement" (*ibid.*: 93).

There are rich fields of possible comparative studies on the ways countries mobilize their citizens into stabilised or unstable actor-networks, and how hierarchies still define the way a society such as France constructs itself.

6.5.2 Implications for practice

Here I have sought to summarise what implications for practice this piece of work might provide. These implications are meant to be general, not only or necessarily pertaining to the French VAE practices in universities. They concern the following areas:

The advisors

I have said that the advisors represented an ontological paradox; being on the side of the candidates, while speaking for, even warranting the institutional and legal processes of the VAE. They are, to take Law's ANT explanations (1992), a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, representing diverging interests and intents.

Acknowledging explicitly, rather than struggling against, this paradoxical position may enable the juries to make greater use of the advisors' role as elements in the candidates' actor-networks, counteracting the weight of academic standards, and establishing a stronger and more visible bridge between experience and academic knowledge.

Moreover, recognising their ability to make multiple alliances may also give advisers a stronger voice in the on-going search for their professional identity, while strengthening, and making visible, their 'alliance builders' function.

The portfolio

Unlike the more rigid, learning-outcome based practices ruling the Anglophone world from the UK (QCA 2008; Porkony 2006) to Australia (Wheelan 2006) the French VAE portfolio, while formatted in parts, nevertheless allows for greater flexibility in the way the candidates are able

to order their experience and analyse it; this is helped by the fact that the programmes'

objectives are not identified in very specific learning outcomes. This lack of specificity (which is

not to suggest a lack of a specific kind of rigour) is paradoxically what enables the process to be

performed to its conclusion; it is at the heart of the candidate-adviser dialogic interaction,

requiring of the advisors negotiation and mediation skills. The portfolio becomes an active and

even sometimes unpredictable participant in the search for alliances on the part of all the actors.

The paradox of objectives

In Chapter Two I reflected on the tension between the earlier humanist intentions of the VAE

and the more recent utilitarian objectives to do with employability and labour market

adaptability. This tension is reflected in candidates' and advisers' struggle around the ordering of

experience on the portfolio's pages.

We have seen how candidates in the end 'play the game', developing specific subjectivities in

order to conform to the demands made upon them, at the cost of obscuring parts of their

experience to which they otherwise had given much value, and perhaps at greater, difficult to

defined, costs to their own sense of identity.

When diplomas and qualifications are given so much societal worth, it is difficult to see how this

paradox can be resolved; unless greater alliances are made between the world of academic

standards and the world of work or 'lifewide experience'.

Insights into the specificity of the French VAE

One of the unique features of the French VAE is undoubtedly the prominent role of the VAE advisers, who support the candidates from beginning to end, attend the jury, and who are able to establish a dialogue with the academic staff - members of the jury throughout the process.

I have already intimated that the French VAE system is unique in Europe in the way it is well established as a social object (albeit in itself an effect, not always stable, of heterogeneous networks) within clear legislative paradigms; this is hardly the case in the majority of European countries, and indeed elsewhere. VAE practices might vary quantitatively and qualitatively; nevertheless, they are bound within defined frameworks and discourses.

The dialogic process between most actors lends the French VAE its distinctive characteristics; I have shown the iterative process in which all the actors engage, and the negotiations, including the jury's decision making, which mark the whole process.

The results of this research have also highlighted the inherent difficulties that even the French VAE faces when considering the nature of the knowledge being validated, and the effects such centring process may have on the candidates' sense of professional and personal identity.

Moreover, I have rendered visible the ways in which the VAE acts as a boundary object where all speak in the end, for a specific time only, with the unitary voice, denying or obscuring the multiplicity of experience, through the act of disciplinary writing.

In the end, however, it may be possible to state that the French VAE represents a 'heroic' (Law 1994) effort to reconcile opposites; perhaps it reflects a society's longing for an ideal of

reasonable conformity and wholeness, a longing for the modernist project of "the purity of order" (Law 1994: 4), while individuals hold on to their unruly and messy experience; or others are excluded because the gap in the conformity stakes is too wide. Not all knowledge is equal in value, not all individuals are equal in accessing the game.

6.6 Conclusion, perspectives

6.6.1 The structure of the thesis: an overview

The object of this research has been the *validation des acquis* in France. In the introduction I gave an overview of the state of RPL in Europe (more commonly designated as 'validation of informal and non formal learning'), and in the Anglophone world, before presenting the specific French context.

In Chapter Two I carried out a review of the literature on experiential learning and RPL, reviewing concepts and development of the VAE in the French context. I chose to give space to review and critique the traditional humanistic psychology perspectives, since they weigh so heavily on current practices. I explain how postmodernist critique had been useful in identifying questions around the concept of experience, and I presented the two perspectives which have determined the way I conducted the research; the life history perspective and Actor-Network Theory, used as the analytical frame of reference, and complemented by Foucault's concepts of disciplinary technologies and governmentality.

In Chapter Three I presented the methodology and the issues relating to the research questions arising out of the VAE practices which I intended to explore, such as issues of representations and translations, of power relations, and of identities. I reflected on my chosen method and on

my role as researcher-interviewer, and attempted to open the 'black box' of the research methods.

I introduce ANT's main concepts in Chapter Four with the four moments of translation according to Callon (1986), and explained in some details how these would be used to analyse the French VAE process as the data unfolded in the following chapter.

In Chapter Five the actors' voices are heard. I use ANT concepts in commentaries that signpost an initial analysis; these 'interruptions' intersect the flow of narratives extracted from the interviews to create or re-create a conversation between the accounts and myself. I highlight stories of resistance, ordering and disciplinary writing among the main themes covered.

Finally, in this chapter, I selected the main ANT concepts for discussion, which emerged more prominently through the actors' narratives in the previous chapter. I reviewed the original research questions, and considered the contribution this piece of 'modest sociology' might have contributed to academic knowledge, and to practice. I also reviewed some of the tensions in my approaches.

Now I will consider what new perspectives this work might indicate for further research, or perspectives which I might have liked to explore but for the lack of space and for the fact that it is not possible to cover all possible concepts and ideas.

6.6.2 New perspectives

I am interested in the way the validation process attempts to erase the complexity of human experience, while paradoxically attempting to conjure up all the elements, only to tame them into selected, even sanitised, version of themselves.

Attending to the complexity of experience is also to attend to the multiplicity of voices. How to, in Star's words, "use multiplicity as the point of departure for *all* analysis, instead of adding perspectives to an essentially monolithic model"? (*ibid.*: 34).

The VAE encourages detailed descriptions, and recollections, and let the candidates reconstruct their representation of their lives, before all is coded into abstract lists of knowledge and skills (Fenwick 2006). The issue therefore is that of standards. At the end, if RPL / VAE is conducted for validation, then whatever has been recognised will be faced with the reality of being evaluated against standards, or, the stabilized networks as discussed by Star (1991: 48):

> "Stabilized networks seem to insist on annihilating our personal experience, and there is suffering. One source of the suffering is denial of the co-causality of multiple selves and standards, when claims are made that the standardized network is the only reality that there is. The uncertainties of our selves and our biographies fall to the monovocal exercise of power, of making the world."

I think that my study of the validation through the lens of ANT has opened up some new perspectives for research. This will be my concluding line, that there is scope for investigating further the recognition and value of heterogeneity, the possibility of multiplicity of voices and

experience, of things escaping categories and norms. I think too of multiplicity of cultures and

agencies, of multiple identities, in a complex, borderless and multiple world.

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Appendix A

1. Individual interviews with candidates, advisers, and observed sessions candidates - advisers; jury

Name/pseudonym /number When interviewed	Gender/ Age	Other personal characteristics	Present occupation/sector Qualifications	Programme targeted	Stage reached in VAE process	Stated reasons for applying
MP indiv interviews (12)						
A3 Luc Interviewed straight after his session with adviser	M 30	Initial interview with senior adviser. Has a difficult interview with her: not expressing himself, and his objectives very clearly (in her view)	Unemployed. Worked in the oil industry Technician level with a DUT (*Diplôme Universitaire Technique*) or Bac+2	Unsure Master/ PhD Physics?	Initial interview with Senior adviser. Very beginning: process not started – feasibility stage. Not successful	Change of professional field. Wants to do a Ph.D thesis
B1 Christian Interview straight after session with adviser	M 27	Enthusiastic about his job Keen to learn	Responsible for Health and Safety in a military hospital Bac	DUT hygiène sécurité et environment	Ready to submit.	Career advancement and awareness of competition from better qualified younger people once he is back into civilian life
(jury) Raoul Interviewed immediately after jury session	M 45	Interviewed after the successful jury session.	Managing Director of own company Bac+2 Technical & instrumental Physics	Masters 2 Management/ Mecatronics	Candidate presenting at the jury. Successful VAE	Gain credibility for his company and obtaining contracts. Would have liked to do a PhD
I 1 (jury) Jean-Marie Interviewed a week after jury	M 53	Desperate to find employment at the right level. Situation creates financial problems at home. Interviewed after the successful jury session	Un/ed for 1 yr Maintenance engineer-technician/ Electronic systems BTS (Bac+2 technician Qual)	Electronics Eng BSc	Successful VAE Candidate presenting at the jury.	(Unemployed) Look for work commensurate with his level of expertise; Qualification would give him more credibility
H1 Denis	M 49	Comes over as	EDF: electricity	Electronics	Post validation,	To have more

		confident, entrepreneurial. Interested in not staying in the same place Has lived in south America, plans to go back Pilot Licence Speaks Spanish	company Quality and electronic system Technician level Started with submarines-Navy Official qual: Bac	Eng BSc	successful candidate Completed	qualifications in order to gain credibility when setting up his own company abroad
K2 **Fabien** Interviewed straight after his session with adviser	M 34	Very involved with his work, keen to progress in his career.	Assistant Director 8 yrs with leading company road building equipment BAC+2/3 Production management in construction industry BTS (Bac+2)	Master Sc & Technology Civil Eng	Mid-validation process Beginning- 1srt adviser interview	Career enhancement- similar position in bigger company- Directorship in similar company (50+employees)
F1 **Colette** Interviewed 5 days after her session with adviser	F 46	Has done a lot of CPD as shown her portfolio, in social legislation, management of elderly and adolescents etc	Administrative position as "socio educative adviser" – computerised systems Current qualifications: Bac+2 Special needs educator +Univ diploma Business Management	Master in HR Management	Beginning: 1st adviser interview	Wants the 'right' qualification to reflect her experience; Career progression; Awareness of the importance of diplomas in the public sector
G1 **Thérèse** Interviewed 7 days after her session with adviser	F 38		Secretary- HR-training assistant 4 yrs FT	Professional BA in HR management	Mid-validation	Career enhancement now and outside present company; professional recognition
D1 **Benoît** Interviewed straight after his session with adviser	M 39	Voluble, South West candidate Extremely personable	Responsible for production unit in a paper mill 6 yrs Bac+2: BTS paper industry	Equiv to Masters Pro Management & Production)	Beginning: 1st adviser interview. Beginning of the process.	Career enhancement; fear competition from better qualified entrants For future promotion
Joseph	M 43	Worked in different regions in France. Come from an Italian and	Unemployed. Before: Foreman/ responsible for painting contracts with Navy 4 yrs	Management	End of process. I did not attend his session with adviser.	Looking for work; wants recognition for his management experience

			military background	Bac+2/ BTS Business Management			
Martine Interviewed straight after her session with adviser	F 32	Sibling issue re qualifications. Need for valorisation within her family	EDF Management of employment contracts HR3 yr Bac+ 2 (BTS management)	Professional BA Management in small and medium organisations	Beginning: 1st main interview with adviser	Strong personal motivation for a university qualification, to prove to her family that she is intelligent enough
J1 Julien Interviewed 6 days after his session with adviser	M 39		Responsible for tenders and computing systems: Civil Eng company 15 yrs Bac+2 Industrial drawing	BA Sc & Techno, Civil Eng	Towards completion of portfolio End of the process – ready for the jury.	Feels needs qualification: fear competition from better qualified and younger entrants

2. Observed-recorded sessions candidates -VAE advisers

8
observed advisers sessions (8+1 tel)
A1 Luc - Sylvie
Christian - Sylvie
Thérèse - Alice
K1 Fabien - Alice
F2 Colette - Alice
Benoît - Alice
Julien - Alice
Martine – Véronique

3. Observed jury sessions (2): candidates presenting to jury

Name/pseudo /number	Programme targeted	Result of jury
Jean-Marie	Electric and electronics eng Bsc	Successful
Raoul		

4. MP Interviews with academic staff and advisers

Name/pseudo /number 4 VAE advisers 6 Academic Staff 1 professional/ researcher	Role
A3 Sylvie	VAE (senior) adviser
E1 Alice	VAE adviser
B2 Bernard	VAE adviser (IUT)
Véronique	VAE adviser
B3 Paul	Head of Deprt (IUT)
O1 Christophe	Lecturer (Maître de Conf) (IUP) **Jury member**
C1 Claude	Lecturer, Director of Research Lab (IUP) **VAE jury President**
P1 Michèle	Lecturer Director of programme (Social care…)
Jeanne	Lecturer/ Director of programme (IUP)

L1 Gérard	Researcher (research lab IUP) 'professional' **Jury member**
René	Lecturer (respon. formation Continue IUP)

Interviews with candidates – pilot - Post session with adviser

Interview avec candidat après entretien avec accompagnatrice

Candidate: .. ………………………………. Pseudonym …………………………

Stage in the VAE process**: ……………………….date of session**
Etape dans le processus: ………………..
…………………………………………………………………….
…………………………………………………………………..

Name of adviser: ………………………………..Pseudonym ……………………..

General Qs

1.   How do you feel, in your own words, that this session went?
Selon vous, comment votre entretien avec l'accompagnatrice s'est-il passé?

2.   What did you know about the process? Did you have a clear idea of what to expect?

Que saviez-vous du processus a suivre ? Aviez-vous une idée claire de ce qu'il allait se passer?

3.   Did you have a clear idea of the programme you wanted to do before you met with the adviser?

Aviez-vous une idée claire de la formation que vous visiez avant de rencontrer l'accompagnatrice pour la première fois ?

Identity - experience

4.   How did you come to be involved? Why? What are you looking for from this process? Was it your
own choice […]? *(amended) A personal decision? Because of your work? Both?*
Pourquoi, et comment, vous êtes-vous intéresse à la validation des acquis? Est-ce que c'était une décision personnelle, ou à cause de votre travail, ou les deux […]?

5.   What did you think you had, in terms of experience and knowledge, that you felt was of value to be 'validated' or given credit? In other terms, what does for you constitute the kind of knowledge which can be recognised and for which credit can be given?

What do you consider more important: your professional experience, or your personal (i.e. not-professional) experience?
Quels aspects de votre expérience, en regard des savoirs que vous avez acquis, vous ont parus comme ayant une valeur propre a être reconnue, validée ? En d'autres termes aussi, qu'est-ce qui constituent, pour vous, des savoirs propres à la validation ?

Que considérez-vous le plus important : votre expérience professionnelle, ou personnelle (autre que professionnelle) ?

6.   Do you see yourself as someone who is self-confident, or has a good deal of confidence in her ability? Have you always been like that?
Est-ce que vous vous voyez comme une personne qui a confiance en soi, et confiante en ses capacités ? Avez-vous toujours été comme ça ?

7.   What do you understand by competences, and how do you define your competences?
Que comprenez-vous par le terme de compétences, et comment définissez-vous vos compétences?

8.   [How do you see your experience (competences, knowledge) fit in with the programme you are targeting?
Comment envisagez-vous que votre expérience (compétences, savoirs) soit pertinente pour le niveau de la formation que vous visez ?] *(Amended 90305)*

   Do you have a framework or a grid of outcomes for the programme you wish to follow, or for which you are seeking a validation, and how much do you compare your experience to it?
Avez-vous une grille de compétences pour la formation que vous souhaitez faire ou pour laquelle vous demandez une validation, et dans quelle mesure vous en servez-vous ?

9.   How important is it for you? (=Why did you embark on the process?-90305*)* What does this process mean for you in terms of: what you have done in the past, what you want to do now *(the distance travelled)*, what you feel you can achieve in the future (the *'pro-ject'*)?
Quelle est l'importance de la validation des acquis pour vous? (= Pourquoi vous êtes- vous embarqué là-dessus ?)
Qu'est-ce que ça signifie par rapport à :
Ce que vous avez fait dans le passé, maintenant, *(la distance parcourue)* et ce que vous pensez pouvoir faire dans le futur *(le projet)?*

10.   What impact do you think going through this process is going to have for you personally, as well as professionally?
Quel effet pensez-vous que le processus de la validation va avoir sur vous personnellement, aussi bien que professionnellement?

Role of Adviser - interaction – life history narrative

11.   How important do you think, the adviser is for the VAE process? Would it be possible to carry out the validation without this person? What does she represent for you?
Quelle importance, à votre avis, a la présence de l'accompagnatrice pour la validation des acquis ? Est-ce que ce serait possible sans cette personne ? Qu'est-ce qu'elle représente pour vous ?

12.   What did you think about the interaction between yourself and the adviser: did you feel the adviser listened to what you had to say? Did you feel the adviser understood what you were saying about your experience, about yourself?
Que pensez-vous de l'interaction qui s'est établie entre vous-même et l'accompagnatrice? Est-ce que vous pensez qu'elle a bien 'entendue' ce que vous avez dit sur votre expérience, sur vous-même ?

13.   [What sort of details about yourself/ your experience do you think you have disclosed? Were they purely of a professional nature, or more personal?
   What do you feel about revealing details about your life to an adviser, and how important do you think that is for the validation process?] *(Deleted/ Amended)*
[Quelle sorte de détails sur vous-même et votre expérience avez vous révélés a l'accompagnatrice ? Etaient-ils de nature purement professionnelle, ou de nature plus personnelle ?]

[Que ressentez-vous à propos de révéler des détails de votre vie à l'accompagnatrice, et quelle importance cela peut avoir pour la validation ?] *(Deleted/ Amended)*

> I noticed in the files I have seen/ interviews I have observed, that there is little use of personal(i.e. non-professional) experience: have you, and what kind , identified learning from your non-professional experience?

J'ai remarqué que dans les dossiers que j'ai vu/ entretiens auxquels j'ai assistés, il y a peu d'expérience 'extra professionnelle' qui paraît; qu'est-ce que vous pensez du rapport entre le 'personnel' (i.e. non professionnel) et le professionnel ? Est-ce que vous avez identifie (et lesquels) des acquis de votre expérience non professionnelle ?

14.   Building a 'dossier' portfolio is part of the process, in order to 'demonstrate' your knowledge, competences, or capacities: How do you feel about *[constructing a portfolio and]* presenting yourself through writing about your experience and knowledge? What effect does this have? *(Added 90305)*

Une partie de la validation consiste à faire un dossier ou portfolio pour 'démontrer' vos savoirs, compétences, voir vos capacités : que pensez-vous du fait d'avoir a vous présenter a travers une écriture de votre expérience ? Quel effet cette écriture a ?

15.   If this is your first interview with the adviser, how do you feel now about the process? Are you ready/ keen to continue?

Si c'était votre premier entretien avec l'accompagnatrice, qu'est-ce que vous pensez du processus? Etes vous prêt (e) à – heureux (se) de continuer ?

About my research

What do you think about the objectives of this research project? Are they clear to you?

I am interested in your views on the conduct of this research: do you think I am asking the right questions? Or that I am conducting this in the right way (for example, by recording your interview with the adviser, interviewing you afterwards etc…) ? Should/ Could I do things differently?

Que pensez-vous des objectifs de ce projet de recherche? Est-ce qu'ils sont clairs pour vous ?
J'aimerais avoir vos vues sur la conduite de cette recherche, en particulier de savoir si vous pensez que je pose les bonnes questions, ou que je m'y prends de la bonne façon (par exemple, enregistrer votre entretien, vous interviewer après etc…). Est-ce que je pourrais ou devrais m'y prendre différemment à votre avis ?