

## **OBSERVAL-Net on-line debate 17Sep-04Oct FR**

### **Summary**

Assessment is central to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Among the debates around this topic, that of assessment methods is one of the most important.

The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2009) list several assessment methods. Among them are two types of methodological approaches that often divide stakeholders in VPL: the portfolio method (written proof) or methods involving an explanation of competences (interviews) on the one hand, and observation at the workplace or simulation (proof by action) on the other.

The debate reflected a distinction between declarative knowledge (concerning a person's knowledge, beliefs and theories about a subject) and procedural knowledge, which comes more from know-how. Language (either written or oral) is thus put up against action, or *doing*, although actions can still be explained even as they are happening. The supporters of written proof using a portfolio defend the point of view whereby competences or knowledge may be demonstrated through explanation. They argue that the assessment portfolio allows for a detailed description of the various activities and the means used to perform them. Their hypothesis is that candidates cannot speak about what they have not already experienced. Moreover, by explaining their experiences, candidates also become more aware of them. This is an essential dimension of the VPL process.

In contrast, the supporters of proof by action refer to the old adage, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." They feel that observing candidates "on the job" or putting candidates in realistic situations by asking them to produce a workpiece or carry out an activity in their field is a faster and even essential means of confirming their level of competence. They argue, in particular, that methods that rely on written proof can sometimes be unsuited for certain candidates.