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Skills representations: analysis of the media and the views of professionals

The authors' contribution aims at putting into perspective two types of skills representations: the social representations gleaned from a body of French national press material and the representations of guidance professionals. An analysis of this press corpus was carried out using the IRaMuTeQ software (Ratinaud, 2014), which provided a window onto ideology-marked semantic organisations and themes for the two sub-objects “transversal skills” and “transferable skills”. After ascertaining that the notions of “transversal” and “transferable” are actually representational elements of the skill concept for the guidance professionals surveyed, the authors attempted to apprehend their professional representations. Put into perspective, the results show that the social representations disseminated in the media do indeed inform professional representations of the skill object, thereby confirming Feyel's postulate that “the media reflect society. They mirror its cultural, political, social and economic development” (2007, p. 186). Certain ideologically marked elements, however, appear not to be present in guidance professionals.

Keywords: Social representations, professional representations, skills, transversal skills, transferable skills

The current economic context shows a labour market that is increasingly elusive and in constant mutation. “Professional trajectories are, and will continue to be, less and less linear” (Dujardin, 2017, p. 18). Professional uncertainty has become the new normal. And so, we increasingly hear about the securing of training and career paths. In the wake of these new developments, the focus is now on lifelong learning, but also on “active training, situated training, intra-company training, tailored training and so forth. All these structures emerge as bridges between experience (or work) and the training that it may provide” (Batal & Fernagu, 2013, p. 42).

As a consequence, a skills-based approach assumes a growing strategic importance in ever more diverse and broad areas such as education, training, evaluation, employment, integration, recruitment and the mobility of labour. But what is really meant by the notion of skills? This approach and what it entails in the practices of those concerned is little questioned. For more than a century we have seen an increasing number of definitions of this notion, which is sometimes said to be heterogeneous (Van Zanten, 2008, p. 105). More recently, there seems to be some kind of enthusiasm for the notions of *transversal* skills and *transferable* skills. But, once again, these notions have to be explained since depending on which publications we read we encounter various types of skills: transversal (*France Stratégie*, 2017)¹, generic (Lainé, 2018), and transferable (*France Stratégie*, 2017)¹. Our intent is to study them through an analysis of social representations in the press and of the professional representations of guidance practitioners at university.

The reason is that while the notion of skill is an old one that, according to Miguel Souto Lopez (2016, p. 135), harks back to the period following the First World War, this author also demonstrates that its appearance is linked to specific historical events (e.g., Taylorism, the progressive education and effective schools movements, the United States' entry into war in 1917 and 1941, the launch of Sputnik² and the civil rights movement) and that it parallels research work in the psychology of learning.

This notion has since never ceased being in use albeit with numerous, polysemic and divergent meanings. And with the widespread acceptance of many of these meanings, there is no consensus as to a definition, something that has not permitted this notion, however old, to stabilise to an extent sufficient to be recognised as a concept.

This is why our approach proposes to consider the skill as an object of representation requiring to be investigated no longer with a definitory intent but, rather, heuristically to understand the meaning attributed to this notion in popular imagination (for the purpose of which we mined the media in the form of press articles) and the meaning conferred on it by professionals who commonly use the term.

To this end, we devised two modes of data collection that are described below, following the presentation of the theoretical underpinnings of our approach.

¹ 2017/2027 *Élaborer une stratégie nationale de compétences Actions critiques*. (n.d.). Retrieved on 8 November 2018 from <http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/20172027-elaborer-une-strategie-nationale-de-competences-actions-critiques>

² In this case the question was one of lack of skills with the Americans being outperformed by their Russian rivals who succeeded in launching a satellite (Sputnik) before them.

From media communication to social thought

Directly linked with the social context, social thinking proceeds *inter alia* from media communication and the transmission “of norms and values (...) (inflecting) the interpretive logics of phenomena” (Pétard, 1999, p. 118). As Michel-Louis Rouquette pointed out in 2009, “it deals foremost with what concerns its creators-originators, who at the same time are its recipients, here and now” (Rouquette, 2009, p. 10). Social thought is expressed through a special channel: *social representations* (Guimelli, 1999).

For Serge Moscovici (1961), “the creation of a social representation occurs through complex historical or empirical processes, which are not limited to institutional thinking, but involve the influence of experience and quotidian communicational exchanges between individuals in a particular context” (Moreno, Marchand, & Ratinaud, 2015).

Hence, communication is a vehicle for the transmission of language impacting on the structural and formal aspects of social thought via the social representations circulating “in discourses, (...) conveyed by words, spread by media messages and images” (Jodelet, 2003, p. 48).

Amongst the fundamental characteristics of the media, we must keep in mind that their development and mode of existence depend on the social order in which they operate: a system of communication is thus a complex phenomenon occurring at a specific moment and within a particular society (Rouquette, 1972). This is why the media, with their various social markings, also refer to cognitive and social universes that are potentially distinct, something that we have endeavoured to take into account.

From social representations to professional representations

Social representations are thus a modality of thinking, “an activity consisting in appropriating the external reality and shaping the psychological and social reality” (Jodelet, 2003, p. 54). They are characterised by a phenomenal richness (cognitive and ideological components, opinions, images, etc.) that may seem to be disorder, but which is in fact highly organised “as a type of knowledge that speaks to the nature of reality, a meaningful totality” (Jodelet, 2003, p. 53). But if social representations are also a way of interpreting the world, they also translate into making judgements and into action, and therefore into professional practices as well. As everyday knowledge, social representations are examined herein in their aspect of professional representations (Piasser, 1999) that reveal a body of professional knowledge.

Social representations, then, are elements of reference that allow individuals to function in their professional settings, a tool for the decoding of professional

reality (Piaser, 1999), and they result from the collective development by and exchanges between agents who belong to the same professional area.

They may be identified by means of three components:

- ▶ Professional groups that share a common worldview (Dubar, 2000);
- ▶ Professional contexts that are specific social contexts weaving socialisation networks in which individuals interiorise modes of thinking and modes of conduct that contribute, in terms of professional identity, to intra-group undifferentiation and inter-group differentiation (Bataille, 2000);
- ▶ Professional objects characterised by professional usefulness and an identitarian value; they arise from elements of scientific and technical knowledge, elements with a practical dimension (conscious and unconscious), and elements stemming from relational, organisational and institutional cognition (Bataille, 2000).

Professional representations are then characterised by some form of autonomy; they stem neither directly nor only from social representations, and their formation depends on the professional field concerned and its related norms and practices, and so they are social representations associated with a professional role.

A structural approach to social representations with a heuristic aim

The significance of a social representation can be accessed through its content, through the elements of meaning it comprises, but also through how these constituents are organised together. For a heuristic pursuit a structural approach is therefore preferable for grasping the meaning of a representation but also its internal structure.

A social representation is thus viewed herein as “an organised ensemble of information, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about a particular object. Being socially generated, it is strongly marked by values that are consistent with the social-ideological system and history of the group.” (Abric, 2003, p. 59). The concept of an organised ensemble is therefore important and every representation relies on two components: its content and also its structure, and this is what we attempt to discern, “i.e., the hierarchy of its constitutive elements and the relationships between these elements” (Abric, 2003, p. 59).

Our contribution thus juxtaposes two types of analysis of the skill object: one based on an investigation of the French press and the other based on a survey of a group of guidance and counselling professionals in France. It is this objective of putting into perspective the representations transmitted by the media and the views of guidance practitioners (regarding skills) that we seek to achieve.

Study 1: Communication diagnosis, transferable and transversal skills in the daily press

This documentary research belongs to a qualitative approach; it allows studying forms of cultural expression, and hence also social representations (Jodelet, 2003) by means of text data, and more specifically press articles. The latter are a “fragment of social communication *par excellence*” (Haas & Vermande, 2010, p. 113) that enables the dissemination of social discourses and is characterised by the immediacy of its writing: “at the same time a discourse *within* a context and a discourse *about* the current context”. Using newspaper articles therefore gives us access to the image reflected by these potential objects of representation that are *transversal skills* and *transferable skills*.

The data were collected via the online sources directory Europresse³ using the key words “transferable skill(s)” and “transversal skill(s)” in the singular and plural forms⁴. The corpus is comprised of 246 articles taken from the following ten newspapers:

Table 1. Number of retrieved articles per newspaper

<i>L'Agefi quotidien</i>	2
<i>Aujourd'hui en France</i>	9
<i>La Correspondance Économique</i>	9
<i>L'Humanité</i>	10
<i>La Croix</i>	11
<i>Libération</i>	13
<i>La Tribune France</i>	22
<i>Les Échos</i>	44
<i>Le Figaro</i>	53
<i>Le Monde</i>	73
Total	246

Presentation of the source material

Communication in the daily press is distinguishable between the openly political and ideological newspapers (the political press, including newspapers with a religious affiliation, that provides an interpretation key in line with the newspaper's ideology) and the mainstream press, which is independent of any confession or political party (the general interest press that meets the information objectivity criteria) (De Piccoli, Colombo, Mosso, & Tartaglia, 2004).

³ <https://nouveau.europresse.com/webpages/sources/sourcesearch.aspx>

⁴ NB: The format used in French was: TEXT= “compétences transférables” | TEXT= “compétence transférable” | TEXT= “compétences transversales” | TEXT= “compétence transversale”.

The newspapers comprising the corpus can be divided into three categories: the general interest press (*Le Monde*⁵ and *Aujourd'hui en France*⁶), the political press (*L'Humanité*⁷, *Libération*⁸, *La Croix*⁹, *Le Figaro*¹⁰, *Les Échos*¹¹ and *La Tribune*¹²) and the specialised press (*L'Agefi*¹³ and *La Correspondance Économique*¹⁴).

All three kinds of press refer to *transferable skills* and *transversal skills*. These two objects of representation are referred to in the general interest press (so it is a societal issue “that we talk about”), in the political press (so it is a topic on which stances are adopted) and in the specialised press, the examples of the latter presented herein being confined to the economic and financial sphere. *Transversal skills* and *transferable skills* are thus dealt with more extensively within this sphere. We must keep in mind that *La Correspondance Économique* is a special newspaper because of its objectives and its limited, very specific readership (decision-makers).

⁵ *Le Monde* is amongst the leading newspapers in France and the most widely read paid daily. Its editorial line is sometimes considered to be centre-left, but this is contested by the newspaper itself, which claims to be non-partisan. Half of its readership, however, composed of leftist readers.

⁶ *Aujourd'hui en France* is the countrywide edition of the regional daily newspaper *Le Parisien*. This newspaper is one of the most read paid national mainstream dailies. Its editorial line is general and the newspaper covers mostly local news and minor news items. Thus its audience does not tend to be politically partisan.

⁷ *L'Humanité* is a newspaper on the political left, socialist at its beginning, then communist until the 1990s. Today, it is a voice for movements, associations and parties that claim to be on the “anti-liberal” left.

⁸ *Libération* is a daily newspaper that was originally on the extreme left. Nowadays, its editorial line is centre-left or social democratic left, and for the most part its readership is on the left.

⁹ *La Croix* is a daily newspaper that was founded by the congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption in 1883. The newspaper is openly Christian and Catholic, though its editorial positions have evolved over the course of the newspaper's history.

¹⁰ *Le Figaro* is a daily newspaper with a right, Gaullist, liberal and conservative editorial line that attracts mainly right or centre-right readers. The newspaper is positioned at the intersection of various major currents (classical liberalism, liberal eclecticism and social conservatism).

¹¹ *Les Échos* is an economic and financial daily with a liberal orientation. It claims to have an editorial line that is independent, non-partisan, and pro-market economy with a global and especially European outlook (it carries political and macroeconomic analyses for France and other countries – economic policies, public finances, stock markets, etc.).

¹² *La Tribune* is an economic and financial newspaper aiming at pluralism and investigative journalism. The ambition of its founders was primarily to popularise and to write for a larger audience while covering three sectors of the economy: industry, the stock market, and consumption. Today, its editorial policy focuses on businesses and specific economic sectors.

¹³ *L'Agefi quotidien* (L'Agence Économique et Financière) is an online daily newspaper with a weekly printed version. This newspaper deals with national and international economy and finance, and it mainly covers the banking and insurance sectors, capital markets and related services.

¹⁴ *La Correspondance Économique* is an economic and social information and documentary daily newspaper. It is part of the Société Générale de Presse, an independent press group. The newspaper writes about the economic and social environment, economic and financial public and semi-public organisations, and companies, and their structures and managements. It is intended to provide decision-makers with information on the economy, business, industrial issues, politics, and social issues.

We also note that *Le Monde* is the newspaper that mentions these objects the most (73 articles), with the financial dailies *Les Échos* and *La Tribune* (66 articles between them) coming a close second. Finally, the left-wing newspapers mention these objects comparatively little (13 articles for *Libération*, 10 for *L'Humanité*). These findings constitute the first result that speaks to the ideological marking of the two types of skills investigated here.

Political contextualisation

The publication dates of the articles range from 1985 to 2018 (the latter being the year when the data were collected). The diagram below shows the number of articles gathered for the various years:

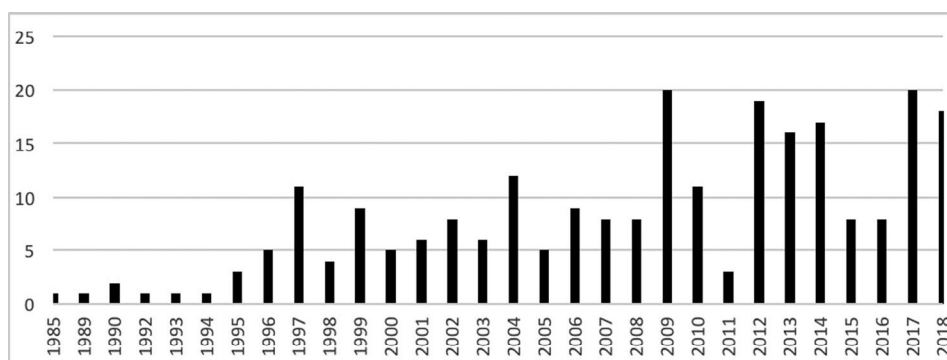


Diagram 1. Number of articles per publication year

In the diagram the years 1997, 2004, 2009 and 2017 show a larger number of articles related with our subject matter. We postulate that these peaks are due to the fact that these were years in which legislative events occurred that influenced the use of the relevant terms in the press, to wit:

- ◆ 1997 saw two major events: the establishment of the General Delegation for Employment and Professional Training (18 March) and the promulgation of the Act on the Development of Activities for Youth Employment, thereby instituting the new youth employment services (16 October).
- ◆ 2004 was the year of the Act on Lifelong Vocational Training and Social Dialogue (4 May), the Act on the Simplification of the Law, which empowers the government to re-codify labour law by decree (9 December), and the Act on the Promotion of Youth Employment in the Enterprise (29 August).
- ◆ The year 2009 was punctuated by several reforms establishing various measures in favour of income from work (30 March), the organisation and the missions of the directorates general for enterprise, competition

policy, consumer affairs, labour and employment (10 November) and the Act on Lifelong Guidance and Vocational Training) (24 November).

- ◆ Finally, in 2017 the President of the Republic signed five decrees reforming the Labour Code. Their aims are to strengthen and simplify social dialogue within companies and sectors and to safeguard work relations (22 September 2017).

Method of analysis of the press corpus

To carry out the various textual data analyses (textometry) we used the Iramuteq¹⁵ software (Ratinaud, 2014), which reveals the semantic organisations and themes addressed in a text corpus. “These analyses [will] use text segments as units of analysis: corpora are partitioned into segments of about forty words taking punctuation into account. In these segments, a distinction is made between active elements (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs) and “tool words” (supplementary elements) such as pronouns, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, etc.). Only active elements are analysed” (Moréno, Ratinaud, & Marchand, 2017, p. 54).

Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) makes for a better uncovering of the microstructure of a corpus (Moréno, Ratinaud, & Marchand, 2017). This kind of analysis, which falls under different categories (both textometry and semantics), helps to highlight various lexical fields that are present in the collected articles by contrasting their vocabulary: the principle of this analysis consists in mapping the main common areas of a discourse, the lexical fields, which are purely semiotic traces embedded in the very materiality of the text (Kalampalakis & Moscovici, 2005, p. 15, as cited in Hille, 2018, p. 508), and so to apprehend the potential contexts in which the terms under investigation are expressed.

For each discourse cluster a graph is drawn that represents a similarity analysis performed on the basis of the most significant elements in the discourse cluster. Such a graph is the format used for the presentation of the content of each cluster.

Presentation of the results: the financial and economic prism

The dendrogram below shows how the top-down hierarchical classification has partitioned the whole corpus. It presents five discourse clusters that are distinct from each other. Cluster 5 is in opposition to all the other clusters. Cluster 4 is in opposition to clusters 2, 1 and 3. Cluster 3 is in opposition to clusters 2 and 1, with clusters 1 and 2, though close, being in opposition in turn.

¹⁵ Interface R for Multidimensional Analysis of Texts and Questionnaires (Ratinaud, 2014)

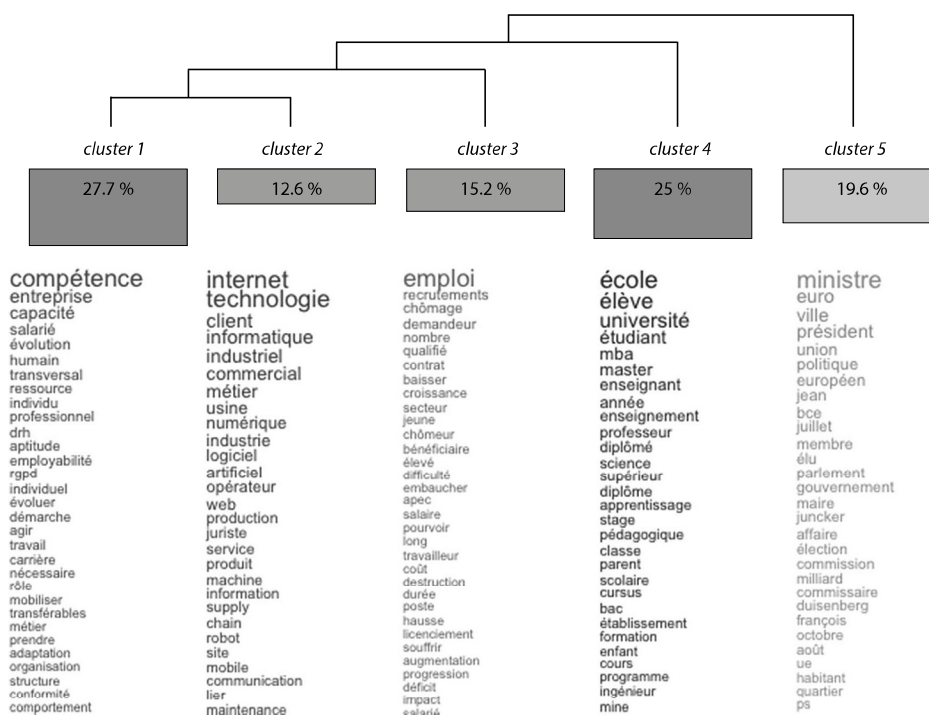


Figure 1¹⁶. Dendrogram of the analysis of the discourse addressing skills in the national press

Having analysed the words they comprise, the various clusters were titled as follows:

- ◆ Cluster 5 (19.6%): The political dimension of skills
- ◆ Cluster 4 (25%): The settings of skills development
- ◆ Cluster 3 (15.2%): Skills in the service of employment
- ◆ Cluster 1 (12.6%): The emergence of skills via the new technologies
- ◆ Cluster 2 (27.7%): Skills as a mediation tool between training and the enterprise

It is according to this classification that we attempted to understand how the national press deals with the question of skills in general and the question of transversal and transferable skills in particular.

¹⁶ To preserve their authenticity we have elected to show both the data as well as the results of our work in their original language, the figures thus allowing the reader to see the method employed.

1. The political dimension of skills (cluster 5)

Cluster 5, titled “The political dimension of skills”, accounts for 19.6% of the entire body of discourse.

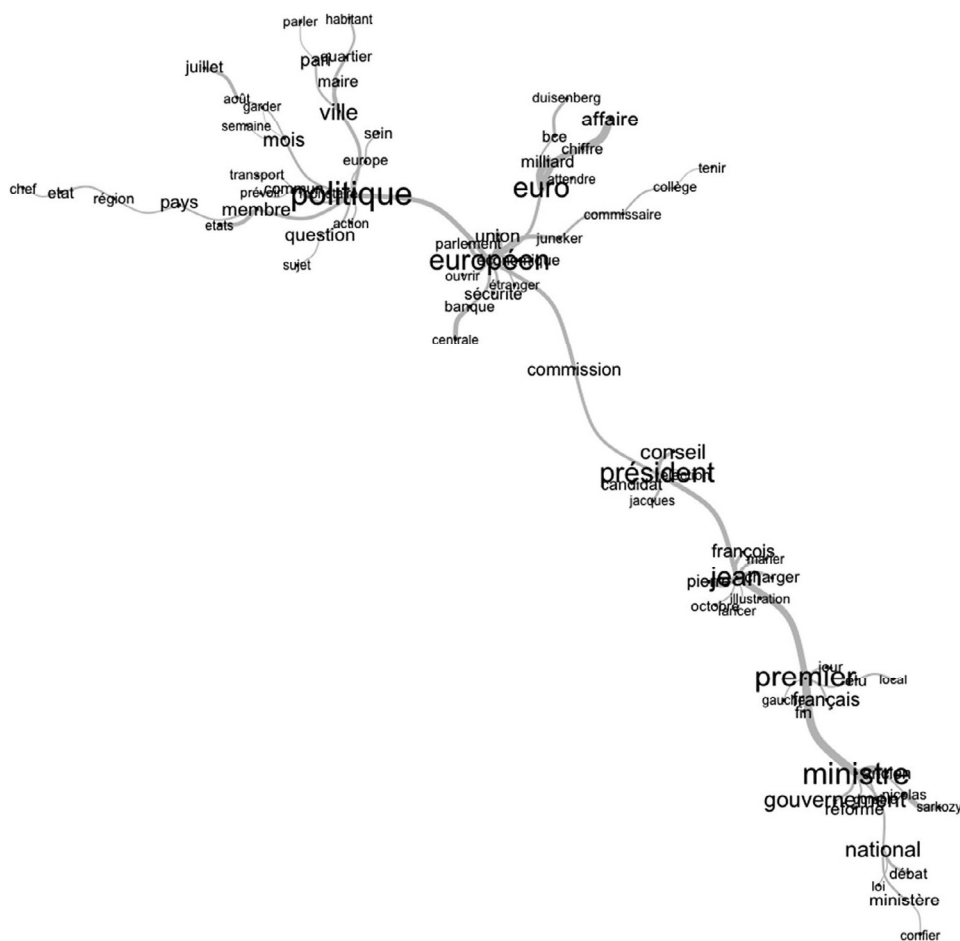


Figure 2. Graph of cluster 5

Looking at the most significant terms in the cluster and at its graph we can see that here, the press discourse is organised around the following central terms: *policy*, *European*, *first*, *minister* and *government*. These words evoke the lexical field of political decision-making bodies and convey the idea that in some way, incentivising skill development depends on political will. And so the central term *policy* is linked with terms like *city*, *member*, *mayor*, *district* and *commission*. They confirm the idea of a localised political and administrative management (one policy for one

The graph of cluster 4 above shows that the word *training* is at the centre of the similarity analysis of the cluster. This central term has also relationships with other words like *school*, *student*, *year*, *university*, *teacher* and *learning*. Clearly, the theme covers skill training. An even closer look reveals that the term *training* is linked with the words *school* and *student* that, taken together, constitute a semantic field. This semantic field contains the terms *university*, *diploma (degree)*, *graduate*, *engineer*, *young*, *master* and *academic*.

It is interesting to observe the clear distinction between the three potential environments of skills development made by the media in our sample:

- ▶ Higher education, including engineering schools and universities (with young people, students and lecturers as players);
- ▶ Work-study programmes, traineeship and continuing education where we may have expected to find the enterprise, but where instead much emphasis is placed on experience and pedagogies relying on practice, however without sufficiently mentioning (in our opinion) the workplace (the players of which are, in this case, absent from the lexical field);
- ▶ The educational world where guidance holds a place next to evaluation and that includes multiple players: school children, parents, teachers, even researchers.

At this point, we find that an important potential player as a setting for skills development is missing: the enterprise! This seems to evidence that in the representations transmitted by the press, responsibility in the matter of skills development has been devolved to the education system. This representation then differs from the two approaches put forward by *France Stratégie* in 2017, according to which the education system and the professional world should, on the contrary, share between them the development of core, basic or transversal skills besides the development of specific skills (*France Stratégie*, 2017).

We also note that this cluster does not contain the terms *transferable* and *transversal*, and that here too mention is only made of skills in general.

In conclusion, cluster 5: “The political dimension of skills” and cluster 4: “The settings of skills development” have the particular feature that they do not contain the term *skill* in association with the adjective *transversal* or *transferable*. These discourse clusters, constituting a sizable portion of the entire discourse (44.6% for these two clusters alone), present spatial dimensions: areas both for the transmission and the development of skills. The second division, grouping clusters 1, 2 and 3, is particularly remarkable since these clusters are the only ones in which the terms *transferable* and *transversal* appear.

The issue here is the development of skills linked with fast-evolving sectors such as the *new technologies*, *digital* professions, *IT* and *industry*. And it is here that we find explicitly the expression *transversal skills*.

In graph 3 semantic fields are formed around the three central terms of the graph, i.e. *new* (NB: masculine form of the adjective in French), *skill* and *profession*. The first semantic field comprises the adjective *new* (NB: masculine form of the adjective in French) as the focus of interest and other words like *technology* and *communication*. These words in turn have a relationship with other significant terms such as *new* (NB: feminine form of the adjective in French), *create*, *system*, *IT*, *player* and *expert*. This lexical field points to the necessity of developing new skills related to new technologies (information and communication technology given the computerisation and robotization of industries). These new environments are the source of a new dynamics that requires that skills be adapted to meet the needs of the workplace.

The second semantic field is made of the word *skill*, around which the words *development* and *software* are organised. Other elements such as *site*, *task*, *software*, *technical*, *operator*, *tool*, (to) *use*, *product*, which are technical terms, indicate that the new environments require new skills. Transversal (a significant term of this cluster) skills now seem to offer a solution to the evolution that professions and their know-how require.

The third semantic field, built around the word *profession*, seems to fall within the same frame of reference. As words having a strong digital connotation, such as *web*, *internet*, *IT* and *digital*, co-occur with words like *project* and *future*, the notion of skills lets us envision the future of professions in a world affected by profound changes, thanks to the development of transversal skills.

So when the question is that of the significant changes that work and professions will continue to undergo, the skills theme is present in the popular imagination and is relayed in the media.

5. Skills as a mediation tool between training and the enterprise (cluster 2)

This cluster accounts for 27.7% of the corpus analysis (the highest percentage of the five clusters) and is therefore the most visible theme of the representation.

Synthesis of the correspondence factor analysis and of media markings

A correspondence factor analysis was also conducted; it sheds light on the organising principles of the semantic environments described in the foregoing. We now put forward a synthesis in order to apprehend the various dimensions of the representation and to discern the contexts in which the terms *transferable* and *transversal* are expressed in the collected corpus and the newspapers that are representative of the semantic dimensions.

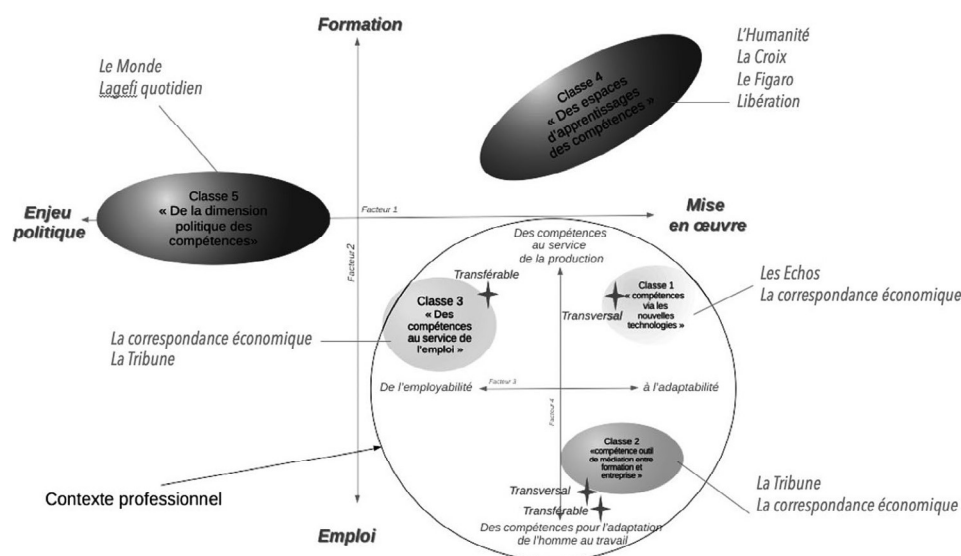


Diagram 2. Synthesis of the lexical analysis with a focus on the occurrence of the terms “transferable” and “transversal” in the discourse clusters (marked with stars) and significant press articles (inspired by Marengo, Vidaller, Labbé, & Alabi, 2019, p. 70)

Factor 1, which best summarises the most important tensions within the corpus, differentiates between two semantic environments: on the one hand the political issues that highlight and promulgate skills (cluster 5) and on the other hand (the four other clusters) their actual applications and the areas in which they are expressed and develop. On the left-hand side of the diagram, cluster 5 on “The political dimension of skills” is associated with *Le Monde*. As general interest press, this newspaper apparently deals with the question of skills from a political and economic perspective, showing skills within a certain context and through a particular prism. The presence of *Agefi quotidien* adds to the economic and financial coloration of the discourse.

A second factor (factor 2, vertically) distinguishes different contexts where skills are expressed: the areas where skills are acquired (above factor 2, cluster 4)

and the areas where they are needed, i.e. the professional world (below factor 2, clusters 1, 2 and 3).

Cluster 4 exemplifies the discourse of the political press on the issue of skills, with the particular feature that it subsumes publications with differentiated political leanings under the theme of the areas where skills are learned. The issue of skills in primary and secondary education is a topic representative of the leftist discourse (*L'Humanité, Libération*). The reference to skills from the perspective of new learning and systems (*Master of Business Administration*), in association with the management theme, is illustrative of a newspaper with a rightist, liberal orientation: *Le Figaro*. The type of communication in this case would be propagation. Because if each of the newspapers places skills within a certain framework, the goal of this latter type of communication is not to bring about a new conduct or to strengthen an existing conduct but to make possible the congruence of behaviours and norms adhered to by the individuals (Moscovici, 1961).

While the terms that we searched for are absent from the clusters distinguished by the first two factors, with factors 3 and 4 we see the occurrence of these terms (marked with stars in the diagram). Clusters 1, 2 and 3 all refer to the economic and financial press (either *La Correspondance Économique* or *Les Échos* or *La Tribune*). These clusters, then, mark once more the economic and financial dimension mentioned above and, from this angle, reinforce the propagation of the transferable and transversal skills objects.

Near cluster 3 the term *transferable* is evocative of labour mobility, and in this instance skills serve the employability of the individuals [looking at the concordance we see that the term is used by guidance professionals rather as a tool to promote recruitment (for example, professionals and the APEC (*Agence pour l'Emploi des Cadres* – Agency for the Employment of Executives) are frequently cited to provide a description of what a “transferable” skill is]. As for the term *transversal* (near cluster 1), it is associated with needs for versatility or flexibility, and the expression of transversal skills may apply to both the person and the machine. Consequently, they appear more necessary to businesses, in order to adjust to production conditions and technological developments. This language is thus mostly reflective of the discourses of employers, conveying the idea that such skills may constitute an added value.

Near cluster 2 we find the two terms, *transferable* and *transversal*. *Transversal* is the most fundamental term of the cluster and it expresses the idea of a transfer from training to work. It also refers to the idea of adaptability present in cluster 1. *Transferable* is, on the other hand, clearly more centred on the person (person and individual (adjective) occur frequently near the term in the concordancer).

While leftist newspapers focus on the early years of schooling (primary and secondary education) those on the right and with a rather liberal leaning are concerned with the new settings of training (business school, management). The theme of skills developed at university (cluster 2) and of their meeting the requirements

of the labour market (cluster 3) has the distinguishing feature of being a concern of the general interest press (propagation).

Whether they appear in *Le Monde*, where they are covered in the political, financial and economic sections, or are topics in the economic and financial press, ultimately transferable and transversal skills are confined to a single domain in the daily press: economy and finance. The representations of these objects are thus disseminated by financial and economic newspapers with a more or less liberal orientation. They promote the marking of transversal and transferable as an answer to a societal issue and to the evolution of the world of work.

Whilst these representations may be illustrative of social thought, we now turn to examining whether these ideological markings and semantic dimensions are present in professionals for whom the skill object is part of their daily practice.

Study 2: Professional representations of the skill object in guidance professionals

Methods used to collect data from professionals

Professional representations are social representations specific to a professional corps. For this study we interviewed guidance practitioners about the “skill” object. The objective was also to explore how the notions of transversality and transferability are used in their practices.

A questionnaire¹⁷ was distributed by mailing to a regional network of guidance and counselling professionals working in the SCUIO-IP¹⁸ (Career Advisory Services) of the universities of the Greater South of France. These are guidance and occupational integration professionals responsible for counselling and supporting various audiences (A-level pupils, university students, adult learners returning to school, mature students) from the start of training until occupational integration. The survey was conducted over the course of March 2019 and data were collected from 28 respondents. The surveyed population accounts for 10% of the total number of guidance professionals in France.

For this second data collection exercise, relying on a more quantitative approach, the tool used comprised two parts. The first part consisted in collecting data through free evocation with the aim of gaining access to the representation of the skill object in our population¹⁹. Closed-ended questions also ensured that the

¹⁷ For data collection we used the FRAMAFORM open access online survey platform.

¹⁸ Service Commun Universitaire d'Information d'Orientation et d'Insertion Professionnelle.

¹⁹ The questions had the usual formulations: “What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the term ‘skill’?” and “Rank the words in order of importance (with word number 1 being the most important and word number 5 being the least important)”.

skill object was relevant for the interviewed group of professionals²⁰. Lastly, open-ended questions²¹ were used to gather information on the potential specificity of the two sub-objects, *transversal skills* and *transferable skills*.

Data analysis

After a stage of the classification of the terms collected, we performed a set of analyses that gave us access to the content of the representation and its internal structure.

Similarity analysis

Similarity analysis (SA) is a traditional tool for the analysis of social representations on the basis of free association, which relies on the automatic analysis of networks of associated words where “the relationships between words (...), [and] their occurrence frequency are deemed to be rich in inferred meaning” (Bardin, 2003, p. 267). SA derives from graph theory, its aims being to “reveal the underlying structure of a representational field (and to) show the strong relationships between items” (Abric, 2003, p. 382). In line with these principles the focus is on “the similarity or proximity relationship between the elements of the representation. The larger the number of the subjects who dealt the same way with two items the closer these items will be considered to be” (Abric, 2003, p. 382), the statistical index applied being a co-occurrence index.

Prototypical analysis

Originally put forward by Pierre Vergès (1992), prototypical analysis intends “by means of a kind of lexicographic analysis (frequency of appearance of terms) and by the analysis of the order number of appearance of the terms, (...) to get as close as possible to the notion of prototypicality” (Vergès, 1992, p. 204). The two prototypicality criteria defined by Vergès (1992) are the traditional criterion of frequency of appearance and the no less traditional criterion of rank of appearance according to which, for example, if a term appears in first or in last place is relevant and conveys information (Vergès, 1992). Thus, it is necessary to determine the frequency of each word and its average rank of appearance. Abric (2003) suggests “to abandon this ‘rank of appearance’ criterion and to replace it with the ‘rank of importance’, resulting from a hierarchical ordering made by the subject themselves” (Abric, 2003, p. 63).

For the entire sample we have therefore collected two indexes for each element generated: the frequency of appearance and the importance score.

²⁰ “In your daily work, do you use the word ‘skill?’” (Yes, No, I don’t know). The same question was then asked for transversal skills and transferable skills.

²¹ “Could you tell us in a few words what you mean by ‘transversal skills?’” and the same question was asked for “transferable skills”. Finally, the questionnaire ended with the question “Is there anything you would like to add?”

Presentation of the results: a representation built around three items

The first part of the questionnaire, which was a precondition for the study of our object, indicates that 100% of professionals say that they use the term “skill”. More precisely, 89% of the respondents say that they use the expression “transversal skill” and 82% the expression “transferable skill”. Therefore, the skill object seems relevant for a representational analysis for the population surveyed.

Similarity analysis

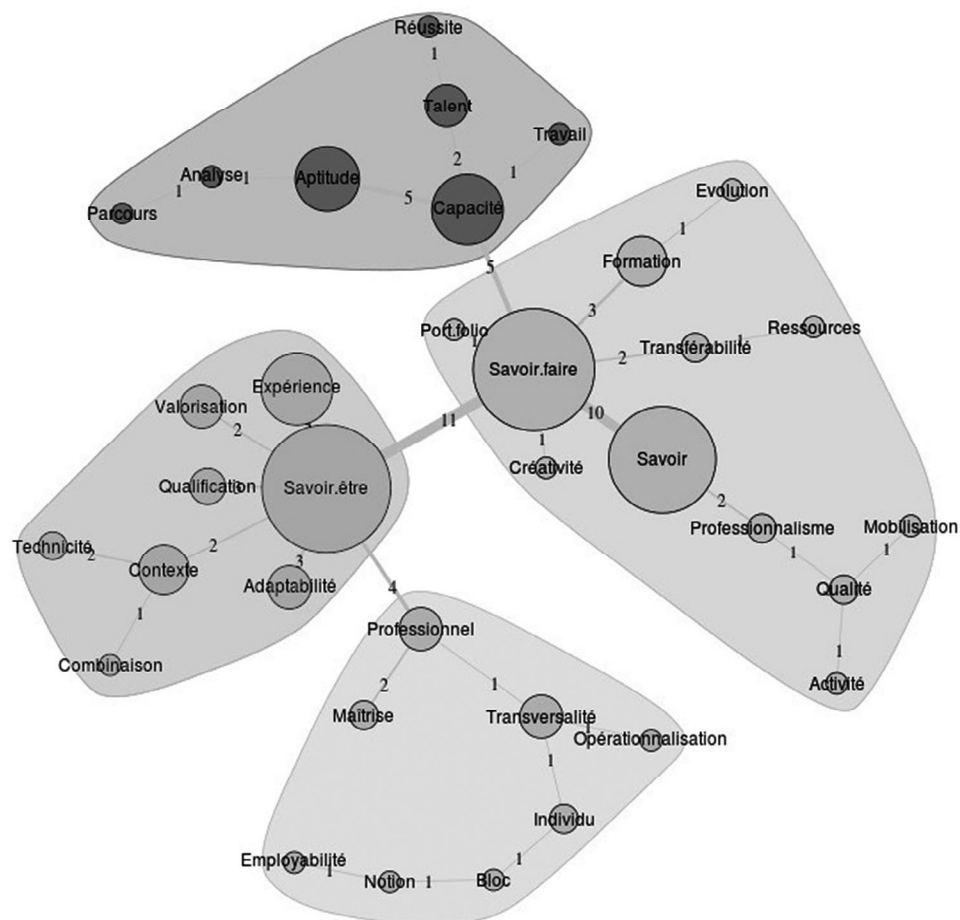


Figure 7. Similarity graph

The results of the similarity analysis highlight that the professional representation of the skill object is organised around three cores: *know-how*, *behavioural skills*, and *knowledge*. We may think that for the professionals concerned, the arrangement

of these three items constitutes the elements defining the skill object as in the reference literature and in conformity with the definition given by bodies such as *Pôle emploi* (Unemployment Agency) as well as with the definition commonly agreed upon by professionals, which is often attributed to various authors.

We can see that transversality is directly linked to behavioural skills via the professional and operational sphere of the individual and their employability. *Behavioural skills* refers to the terms *experience*, *adaptability*, *value creation* but also *qualification*.

As for transferability, it is directly linked to *know-how*. Other ramifications linked to what we could call resources are associated with it, such as *portfolio*, *creativity*, and *training*. The terms *knowledge* and *know-how* are also strongly linked and seem to be central to the internal organisation of the representation.

A more isolated zone (in purple) could evoke elements required for a diagnosis or for the need for anticipation in a guidance context. They could refer to a more evaluative dimension through the terms *ability*, *aptitude*, *talent*, which are useful in the framework of a diagnosis that makes support possible.

Prototypical analysis

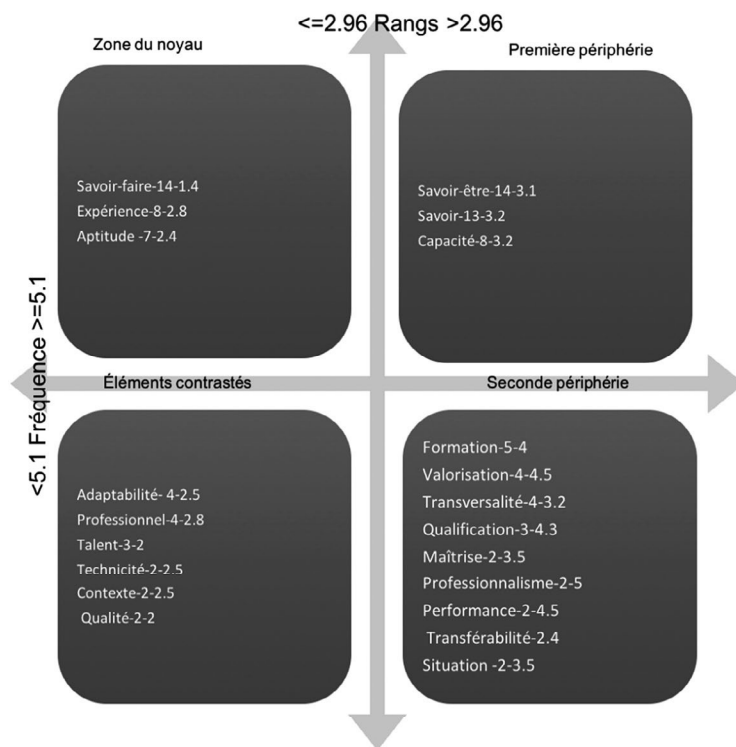


Figure 8: Prototypical analysis

Before proceeding further in our approach, a prototypical analysis was performed. This analysis shows, at the structural level, three hypothetically central elements, since the core zone contains both the most frequent and the most important terms, “all that is in this square is thus not central, but the central core is in this square” (Abric, 2003, p. 64). It would then seem that guidance practitioners define the skill representation object primarily as *know-how*, *experience*, or *aptitude*. The terms *behavioural skills*, *knowledge*, and *ability* in the first peripheral zone complement these preceding terms. We note a higher frequency of appearance for the terms *know-how*, *knowledge* and *behavioural skills*.

We see the terms *transversality* and *transferability* in the second peripheral zone, which is formed of terms with a low frequency and of little importance in the representational field. At the level of the contrasted elements, as previously elements appear that may be directly linked with professional support practice and with the diagnosis that precedes it.

Analysis of open-ended questions

A manual analysis of the open-ended questions used to elicit a description of what professionals think are transversal and transferable skills shows that, ultimately, those concerned draw a distinction between the two expressions.

In the case of transversal skills the emphasis is on how they are expressed in various contexts and fields of activity. They are also labelled as generic skills or even non-specific skills.

As for transferable skills, the surveyed subjects view them as related to new contexts, to the notion of mobility and transfer across contexts. It is in fact the idea put forward by Ali Yakhlef (2007) that “the transfer of knowledge from one context to another entails the transformation of both the content and context of knowledge” (p. 54). So, this transformation affects skills themselves as well as the recipient contexts. The transfer process then “should be thought more as a process of reconstruction than a mere act of transmission and reception” (Szulanski, 2000, p. 26).

Results in perspective

In the press analysis we see the coexistence of the discourses of two types of newspapers, the specialised press (*La Correspondance Économique*) and the political press (*Les Échos*, *La Tribune*), targeting two different types of audiences: “decision-makers” (*La Correspondance Économique*) and a more general audience (*Les Échos*, *La Tribune*). The positions adopted by these newspapers regarding transferable and transversal skills are thus similar, with in the case of *La Tribune* and *Les Échos* a dissemination amongst a wider readership. The type of communication taking place in these newspapers, and especially in *La Correspondance Économique*, could be

likened to propagation (a structured message intended to create norms and a corresponding behaviour). This newspaper urgently recommends “encouraging the development of jobs in the digital sector, automation and services, to bank on skills rather than on diplomas (degrees) by enhancing skills that are transferable between professional sectors, and to increase geographic labour mobility” (*La Correspondance Économique*, 30/9/2014), and reminds its readers that “technology, engineering and mathematics as well as transversal skills (...) the young workers who grew up as digital natives should be well positioned to adjust to new jobs and to continuous change in the workplace” (*La Correspondance Économique*, 22/11/2017) and that “the necessity of developing transversal skills, hybrid professions that are at the intersection of various fields and must be promoted and developed” (*La Correspondance Économique*, 23/1/2013).

The role of the newspaper that performs this type of communication is to prepare a message with a certain orientation to be taken in by the readership and transmitted as is through the search for a common denominator between the object and the doctrinal foundations. Propagation is characterised by the integration of the social object (transferable and transversal skills in this case) into an existing framework (policies to combat unemployment, the transformations of work, etc.). The aim of this kind of communication is for the whole group to accept a conception that is dominant in one of its fractions (Moscovici, 1961), and views conveyed by *La Correspondance Économique* are also found in *Les Échos* or *La Tribune*. These papers in turn propagate the original stances. The goal of this type of communication is not to bring about a new comportment or to reinforce an existing one but to achieve congruence between behaviours and the norms to which individuals conform. The objective of propagation is then to infuse behaviours with a certain meaning by the assimilation and adaptation of lay notions, by the search for a (ideological) conception of the representation object (Moscovici, 1961).

Skills, specified from the perspective of transversality and transferability, are thus directly linked with issues of employment and flexibility in the service of businesses in general and of new technologies and digital businesses in particular. In other words, the question of transversal and transferable skills may be envisioned as part of a potential answer to a societal problem, namely unemployment.

Clearly, the surveyed practitioners express certain ideological dimensions that are found in the press. The role of skills as being in the service of employment (or recruitment) is indeed integrated into professional representations but more to the benefit of the individual than to that of society. Contrary to the study conducted by Lynda Lavitry (2016), we do not observe a dichotomy in the discourse in relation with the professionals’ stance. In the present case, they are rather positioned in a “guidance ethic” (Lavitry, 2016), which favours the human and relational aspect of guidance, as opposed to an “ethic of work placement” (Lavitry, 2016) centred more on objectives to be achieved. This may explain why the economic dimension

is absent from the discourse of professionals, who are not themselves subject to this dimension in the performance of their activity.

From a theoretical standpoint, putting in perspective social representations and professional representations by comparing the representations disseminated by the press and by the discourse of professionals allowed us to discern and investigate the ideological dimensions underlying all representations. While the methodology we advanced is still in its infancy, we nevertheless believe that it offers a promising approach to investigating representational dimensions in collectives – and *inter alia* professional groups – that are sometimes indescribable and for which the assumed obviousness of certain facts is no longer challenged or for which certain unknown influences are yet to be unearthed.

Conclusion

The objective of our contribution was to put into perspective two types of representations, social representations and professional representations, by using two sets of data, one gathered from the national press and the other from guidance professionals.

In the case of the first data collection (extracted from the printed press), while we were looking for distinctive significances between the two terms, *transversal* and *transferable*, we found that the term *transversal*, centred on the person but also on machines and processes, is used by employers to meet their needs for flexibility and that the term *transferable*, centred on the person, is used by professionals to refer to needed mobility and the safeguarding of the employability of individuals.

Examined from the perspective of transversality and transferability, skills are directly linked with the issues of employment and fluidity in the service of businesses in general and of businesses in the new technologies and digital sectors in particular. More precisely, skill transferability emerges as a solution to tackle the social problem that is unemployment (and especially youth unemployment). It is a dimension shared by the guidance professionals that we interviewed at the second stage. Thus, some representational elements, disseminated in particular by the liberal press and envisioning skills as a tool to promote employability, appear indeed to be integrated into professional representations.

The ideological dimensions conveyed by the financial and economic press with a more or less pronounced liberal inclination (promoting the marking of transversal and transferable skills as an answer to a societal problem and to the accelerating evolution of the world of work) seem to impact on professional representations. The skill-employment pair must therefore be seen as indissociable.

Future research with training and professionalising objectives should survey again the professionals about this dialectic between social representations and professional representations and the ideological dimensions they contain. Because

other guidance professionals interviewed elsewhere say that they ascribe special importance to the humanistic dimensions in their work. We shall see to what extent this ideological dimension is compatible with the one, rather liberal and with a more economic function, identified in the press.

“The sentiment [of attaining] multi-professionalism” as emphasised by François Cros (2006) speaking about research with professionalisation purposes [the present type of research] “constitutes a training tool and, as such, its process is more important than its product to the extent that it gives rise to a relationship with professional practice that is both more fluid and more removed. It allows the creation of different representations of the profession, the opening of possibilities faced with a landscape that was until then seen as a dead end where things had to be done always the same way” (Cros, as cited in Mias & Piasser, 2015, p. 57).

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