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## *Editorial*

# *The Landscape of Prior Learning Assessment: A Sampling from a Diverse Field*

**Dianne Conrad**  
IRRODL Special Issue Editor

We live today, as educators and global citizens, in a time of convergence, due in great part to the phenomenal rise of social media and networking tools that have reduced barriers to and boundaries between exchange and domains, beyond what our early trail-blazing distance educators could even have imagined. This special issue of IRRODL features another exciting convergence – one that represents the somewhat narrow overlap of interests between open and distance learning (ODL) and the recognition of prior learning (RPL). In this special issue, therefore, we offer a selection of articles and practitioner-based reports that, in varying measures, span both fields.

Two important foundational issues underlying the prior learning field should be addressed here. The first concerns language. Prior learning recognition, although practiced globally, has a wide variety of labels and acronyms. In Canada, we are most likely to refer to it as PLAR – prior learning assessment and recognition. RPL – recognition of prior learning – is also beginning to become popular in certain Canadian jurisdictions. In the United States, PLA – prior learning assessment – is the most common label. Around the rest of the world, the shared understanding that informally or experientially attained learning can be recognized for credit toward credentialization is referred to as the assessment of prior learning (APL), the assessment/accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL), and a variety of other similar terms. You will notice, in the articles in this issue, a variety in terminology that would logically accompany an international publication. This short editorial uses the PLAR acronym.

A second important issue concerns the place of PLAR in the world of open and distance learning. Given that the mandate of both prior learning assessment and open universities is to reduce barriers to learning and provide learning possibilities to a wider audience, it makes sense that the two initiatives should coalesce in practice. While this is sometimes the case, it is not always the case – and the inclusion of robust prior learning and assessment practices at university level even in distance institutions is far less common than PLAR champions would like.

IRRODL's dedication, therefore, of a special issue devoted to PLAR issues within the ODL context is both exciting and challenging. And as a practitioner and researcher in the field, I have been privileged and enlightened to have had this opportunity to engage with the work of my colleagues in Canada, in the United States, and in Europe.

PLAR is, in itself, not a discipline; and whether or not it even constitutes a field of study is questionable. Certainly it is a child of adult education, springing historically from the works of Dewey, Kolb, and Knowles; but as a practice, PLAR's parameters are porous, and its principles extend out and enmesh into adult education's other sub-areas, including workplace learning, informal learning, assessment, vocational education, and, more recently and perhaps urgently, foreign credential recognition and training. Issues of policy in all these areas, together with economic and social concerns, are also related and integral to PLAR research, practice, and literature.

The broad span of PLAR interests is evident in this issue's collection of articles and field notes. Interestingly, the field notes – IRRODL's section of reports on work-in-progress research or on-the-ground work – provide a more centralized and consistent look at the field than do the five research articles. From the field notes, a rich landscape of PLAR initiatives emerges. Work from both Canada and the United States is highlighted, with Brigham and Klein-Collins' piece describing the PLAR mother-organization CAEL's (the US Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) latest broad initiative and Wihak's Canadian piece describing a recent pan-Canadian scholarly initiative. The remaining field notes describe a number of projects at various PLAR-friendly institutions, ranging from Travers and Evans' proposed PLA evaluation framework at Empire State College in New York to Santa Mina and her colleagues' description of their work with internationally educated nurses at Ryerson University in Ontario. Gordon, Ireland, and Wong also describe a PLAR IEN project.

The longer articles comprise a varied collection of PLAR-related interests. From Europe, Olaf Zawacki-Richter and his colleagues Eva Maria Bäcker and Anke Hanft present the results of a research study which explores how the competences demonstrated in e-portfolio preparation can be extrapolated for use in blended learning. Zawacki et al.'s research reflects Europe's ongoing focus on e-portfolio use in areas related to prior learning, competencies, and credential recognition.

From the United States, Barry University's Judith Brown also considers the place of e-portfolios in PLAR work as she examines their potential in promoting connections between several different types of learning – academic, workplace, and web-based. Brown contends that this type of PLAR

enables undergraduate adult learners to not only articulate and equate experiential learning to academic knowledge but also to demonstrate knowledge visually and audibly through the electronic medium.

Linda Salter's research describes the first phase of her two-phase, mixed-method doctoral study. The study reaches into foundational adult education aspects of prior learning, exploring how and to what extent adults' willingness to engage in learning in mature adulthood is influenced by prior experiences and specific individual personality variables, such as perceived locus of control and degree of self-efficacy. Salter's study provides useful insight into some of adult learning's many realms; in this case, the connection between prior learning and adult learning efficiencies is explored. Salter's notion of personality variables as factors in learning performance echoes, somewhat, Zawacki-Richter et al.'s exploration of learning types that manifest in blended learning formats. Both leave the door open for further research in these intriguing areas.

The next two groups of contributors, each from an institution that makes extensive use of prior learning practices, offer detailed insights into practice. Sara Leiste and Kathryn Jensen present an overview of Capella University's broad PLA practice, calling specific attention to their use of the online PLA lab to assist learners with portfolio preparation. As with most ardent PLA practices, Capella's system is built on CAEL's widely adopted 10 standards of good practice.

Empire State College's PLA process also adheres to CAEL standards. Describing their very robust practice, which consistently involves thousands of faculty advisors, evaluators, and learners, Nan Travers and her colleagues focus more specifically on one aspect of prior learning assessment – the language of evaluation. Their research outlines various ways in which college evaluators describe the learning presented to them in learners' portfolios. This fascinating area of study points to the many factors that underpin the nature of assessment. Although regarded by many as an unassailable entity, Travers et al.'s research demonstrates the porousness of the prior learning evaluation process and, by extension, of all assessment practices.

From Canada, a unique perspective on PLAR practice at the college level is presented by Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, who draws on his experience as a counselling practitioner in Saskatchewan's north to examine the appropriate role of PLAR facilitators in guiding and/or encouraging participants' reflections. While Robertson brings forward issues around concepts of spirituality and Aboriginal engagement with PLAR practice in a specific context, his thoughtful piece raises ethical questions that have been heard before in discussions of practice in other countries, notably South Africa.

Also from Canada, but drawing on data from an international study, Dianne Conrad investigates the role of language in portfolio learning. As with all learning and interaction at a postsecondary level, the PLAR experience brings learners face-to-face with new uses of language and the need to adapt to new ways of thinking and writing about their experiences. Conrad's research resonates with Nan Travers and colleagues' recent work on the language of assessment, which is also published in this special PLAR edition of IRRODL.

Taken together, the tally of research and field-note topics comprises an eclectic mix. What is indisputable, however, is the consistent return to issues of learning and pedagogy that permeate PLAR discussions. As PLAR grows in stature and continues to lobby for support and acceptance within the postsecondary environment, its contribution and connection to sound learning practice is critical. Its pedagogical role must not only be seen but also shared, discussed, and debated. Its literature must be developed and critically explored. I hope that this issue of IRRODL has contributed to that process.

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Athabasca University 





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## *Dwell in Possibility: PLAR and e-Portfolios in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies*

**Judith O. Brown**  
Barry University, USA

### **Abstract**

Emily Dickinson wrote, “I dwell in Possibility—A fairer House than Prose—More Numerous of Windows—Superior—for Doors” (Johnson, 1961, p.657). Dickinson’s simple yet profound reference to the expansive nature of poetry over prose may be taken as a metaphor for the possibilities of information and communication technologies (ICTs) over written modes of expression. Whether we identify with this analogy or not, what we can say today with some certainty is that the advent of ICTs has impacted prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) by expanding the potential for knowledge acquisition, expression, and delivery.

The purpose of this article is to examine the potential of experiential learning e-portfolios to promote connections between several different types of learning – academic, workplace, and web-based. The author contends that this type of PLAR enables undergraduate adult learners to not only articulate and equate experiential learning to academic knowledge but also, and most importantly, to demonstrate knowledge visually and audibly through the utilization of ICTs. Two pilot case studies of e-portfolio development are described to support the author’s position.

**Keywords:** Prior learning assessment and recognition; PLAR; information and communication technologies; experiential learning; e-portfolios, adult learners

## **Introduction**

The experiential learning portfolio in adult higher education, unlike the academic or teaching portfolio, is a purposeful compilation of document-supported descriptions of learning outcomes acquired from professional and personal experiences (Brown, 2005). Paper media experiential learning portfolios have been utilized in the United States in adult undergraduate programs since the late 1960s (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). Currently, over 1,000 colleges and universities in the USA (Flint et al., 1999) offer portfolios as a method of PLAR. Portfolios are also prevalent in adult higher education in Canada, Great Britain, Australia, the European Union, and South Africa (Evans, 1999; Osmam, 2003). Portfolios may satisfy entrance or college credit requirements. The learner evaluates and documents learning from real-world settings and equates it to academic knowledge gained in higher education. Faculty evaluators assess students' assertions of learning and determine credit awards.

In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the advent of the age of information has profoundly influenced how and where we learn. Fueling this period was the introduction of ICTs, which have had a tremendous impact on the sources and expression of learning and on educational delivery systems. As Dinevski and Psunder (2005) pointed out, "a school [and a workplace] is not separated from the system of societal values of its period" (p. 394). In their position paper, they summarized the new learning processes influenced by ICTs that have emerged in the last thirty years as representing the following shifts:

- from linear to hypermedia learning,
- from instruction to construction and discovery,
- from teacher-centered to learner-centered education,
- from absorbing material to learning how to navigate and how to learn,
- from school to lifelong learning,
- from one-size-fits-all to customized learning, and
- from the teacher as transmitter to the teacher as facilitator. (p. 395)

Experiential learning e-portfolios (ELEPs) attend to many of the new processes and social values of this new era by allowing adult students not only to capture learning from multiple venues (e.g., educational institutions, work, web-based, and community learning) but also in a variety of multimedia modalities (e.g., audio, digital photos, video). One of the unique features of ELEPs is that they demonstrate learning by using multimedia as well as the written word. Additionally they share the following features of hard copy portfolios:

- facilitating learner-constructed education,
- integrating practice with content-knowledge and theory, and
- promoting reflection and self-evaluation.

Since the mid-1990s, e-portfolios have been utilized increasingly by traditional-age students<sup>1</sup> to express learning through the utilization of various software programs, the inclusion of hyperlinks, the reference to blogs, wikis, and social networking sites, and the insertion of digital photos and videos. Noteworthy is an e-portfolio created by a Pennsylvania State University undergraduate majoring in meteorology who not only wrote about his learning from various courses but also inserted a video clip of himself giving the weather on the college's TV station. These processes underscore the changing nature of articulating learning in the age of ICTs. In the last five years, PLAR experiential learning e-portfolios have gained limited recognition among adult educators. The author argues that this mode of PLAR may augment adult learners' ability to demonstrate learning, to increase creativity, and to advance ICT skills, as well as to uncover tacit learning that is equivalent to college-level learning.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

It is well established in the literature that individuals learn in a multitude of places and ways. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, psychological studies and scientific research on brain function have delineated multiple theories on how we learn. In the last three decades, precepts on adult and lifelong learning underscored the need for different modes of expression within college degrees for this population, now well over 50% of undergraduates. Thus, the experiential learning portfolio, as noted previously, became increasingly popular as a component of degree programs designed for adults beginning or returning to college.

### **Constructivism**

Some credit Piaget as the father of constructivist thought whereby "the individual mentally constructs the world of experience" (Gergen, 1999, p. 236). Social constructionists agree; however, they purport that the construction of the worldview is done so with "categories supplied by social relationships... thereby opening a new range of possibilities" (p. 237).

Gergen points out in his seminal text, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, that "the constructionist dialogues contain enormous potential; they open new spans of possibility for creating the future. This is so in the intellectual/scientific world, in professional practice and our daily lives" (pp. 4-5). Here we have the connections between different types of learning that led Gergen to note that because of the constructionist critique of traditional modern concepts of the world "we begin to locate alternative visions of knowledge, truth, and self . . . We do not lose the old traditions of study, but rather through constructionism we add significantly to the human science inquiry" (p. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> See Helen Chen's site at <http://scil.stanford.edu/about/staff/bios/chen.html> for portfolio projects at Stanford University and Penn State University's site on academic e-portfolios at <http://portfolio.psu.edu/>.



Gergen, as others, promote a holistic vision of learning that does not abandon the familiar yet embraces the possibilities of the new. PLAR and e-portfolios are 21<sup>st</sup>-century expressions of the “new.”

## **Transforming Experiences to Learning**

While there are several models on how experiences are transformed into learning, David Kolb’s four-stage model (Kolb, 1984; Baker & Kolb, 1990), based on the precepts of Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin, is most frequently used in PLAR experiential learning portfolio programs to explain this phenomenon. The stages, while presented in a linear fashion, often involve a circuitous pattern in actual practice.

The model consists of four stages.

- Stage 1: Concrete experience – the learner’s focus is on being involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way.
- Stage 2: Reflective observation – the learner’s focus is on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them.
- Stage 3: Abstract conceptualization – the learner’s focus is on using logic, ideas, and concepts to form generalizations and theories about the experience.
- Stage 4: Active experimentation – the learner’s focus is on actively influencing people and events by testing and applying the resulting concepts in new situations. (Baker & Kolb, 1990)

Kolb’s model implies – and others agree – that no experience, whether in the classroom, in the workplace, or on the Web, can become a learning experience without critical reflection, analysis, and evaluation (Brown, 2000; Boud, 1998; Sheckley & Keeton, 2001). The portfolio, in general, is designed to enable students to make the often hidden learning in the workplace and the community explicit through the aforementioned processes. It challenges performance-based-only assessments to value reflection on and in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Marsick, 1990; Mezirow, 1996; Schön, 1983).

## **Workplace Learning**

In today’s workplace, adult learners must not only continuously increase their knowledge base but also be able to use it in new situations and environments (Artino, 2008). Identifying learning during portfolio development from concrete experiences that are related to theoretical concepts provides students with a combination of theory and practice that may serve them well throughout their lives. For example, a learner in the accounting field may be able to express how he or she used the principles of the field by transferring them from one company to another during the course of a career. Thus, experience and intellectual prowess can produce a more holistic, balanced form of learning than either alone. Over the last two decades, the workplace and the greater community have gained recognition as important sites of learning by recognizing the

interplay of practice and theory (Billet, 2008; Tynjala, 2008; Boud, 1993; Ellstrom, Ekholm, & Ellstrom, 2008).

Similar to Gergen's social constructionism and the situated learning ideas of Choi and Hannafin (1995), Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of learning in the workplace and elsewhere expanded ideas on learning as situated in actions and inextricably connected to the social environment where it is acquired. Since a great deal of an individual's life is spent at work and in the community-at-large rather than in the classroom, it is plausible to consider these venues as important sources of learning. This is underscored by the dilemma of many organizations faced with losing a large portion of their workforce to the retirement of the baby boom generation. How does an institution garner the large amount of tacit knowledge that will disappear with these retirees? One answer is to develop e-portfolios based on workplace learning experiences whereby employees can uncover and demonstrate through audio and visual guides what they have learned over decades of employment thus leaving a library of e-portfolios ready for use by new workers.

## **E-Learning**

In the era of Web 2.0, the construction of knowledge by individuals and groups through wikis, blogs, folksonomies, mash ups, and so on, and the personalization of information for social networking (YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook) are ubiquitous. Consequently, the need to recognize new ways of creating and sharing information through formal and informal education has never been greater. For adult learners, the experiential learning e-portfolio recognizes the importance of out-of-class learning experiences by promoting connections among different learning environments. The inclusion of blogs and wikis in e-portfolios enrich the expression of experiential learning just as they do in classroom learning.

Countries in the European Union are excited about learning acquired from web-based arenas. They regard the development of e-portfolios as critical economic and lifelong learning tools for all EU members. Torhild Slaatto at the Norwegian Association for Distance Education notes that the EU is excited about the utilization of e-learning and e-portfolios for students and citizens alike. He quotes the European Institute for E-Learning's (EifEL) definition of e-portfolios in a paper he presented at the European Distance and E-Learning Network Conference in Helsinki, Finland, in 2005:

An e-portfolio is a personal digital collection of information describing and illustrating a person's learning, career, experience and achievements . . . Technology has rejuvenated the concept of personal portfolios, which are now increasingly being seen as a powerful tool for personal development. The interest of a digital or electronic portfolio resides in its multiple dimensions: it is at the same time a tool for learning and a tool for assessment. In the context of a knowledge society, where being information literate is critical, the portfolio can provide an opportunity to

*demonstrate* [italics mine] one's ability to collect, organize, interpret, and reflect on documents and sources of learning. (Slaatto, 2005, p. 147)

## **Method**

Two case studies of the e-portfolio pilot programs are presented in this section. The pilot program team sought to discover if the e-portfolio format increased the creativity and technical skills of adult learners in addition to the professional and personal learning articulated and documented in paper-based portfolios.

### **Setting**

Barry University's School of Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) employs a variety of strategies to help nontraditional-age students balance the demands of family, work, and undergraduate degree completion. ACE was designed to serve adult learners in a manner similar to other undergraduate programs with a large portion of nontraditional-age students. This was accomplished by offering night and evening classes, a host of standardized test-out examinations, and a thorough portfolio evaluation. Since ACE's inception in the mid-1970s, portfolios have been a major component of degree completion for over 80% of the school's student body.

In 2005, ACE's portfolio department decided to pilot an e-portfolio model. The intent was to encourage adult learners to go beyond paper media in the expression of experiential learning. Administrators and faculty engaged in the portfolio process wanted to explore the potential of experiential learning e-portfolios to augment the connections between academic, workplace, and web-based learning by allowing learners to communicate *what* they know and also to demonstrate *how* they know it.

Members of the department hypothesized that through the utilization of various software programs and by going beyond the written word, students would have the opportunity to increase critical thinking, creativity, and ICT competencies. They proposed that these additional modes of expression could enhance PLAR in the high-tech era by employing PowerPoint designs, by hyper-linking to Web sites, by inserting pictures, and by streaming videos in portfolios. It took approximately nine months to create the policies and materials for the first pilot. A technical manual and sample e-portfolio were developed and bi-monthly meetings of the ELEP team produced participation criteria, incentives, and recruitment guidelines.

### **The First Pilot Study**

In the first pilot study, 30 adult learners with a variety of academic majors, who were in geographic proximity to each other in order to attend three face-to-face technical development workshops and who met a set of criteria (see Table 1), were solicited to create experiential learning e-portfolios. Out of the 30, 12 students accepted the invitation to participate. They

attended a face-to-face portfolio seminar and three workshops over a two-month period to gain an understanding of the various sections of an experiential learning portfolio. Then the participants attended two-hour technical workshops every three weeks over the next four months where they learned software and other applications in order to transform their paper-based portfolios into e-portfolios.

The main components of their e-portfolio consisted of

- a PowerPoint presentation;
- a navigation bar to the various sections of the portfolio, so faculty evaluators could go from one section to another;
- a series of hyperlinks to the Internet that highlighted organizations and community activities where students gained learning experiences;
- an area of scanned documentation that supported students' learning claims; and
- an opportunity to insert digital photographs and streaming video to underscore learning.

ACE's e-portfolios were not posted on the Web though they contained hyperlinks to relevant Web sites. Rather they were burned on CD ROMs or DVDs for faculty assessment to avoid possible technical problems or unwarranted display of confidential information using the University's server during evaluation.

**Table 1**

*Criteria for Participation and Incentives*

<b>Pilot 1: Criteria for participation</b>	<b>Pilot 1: Incentives</b>
1. Participants have been fully accepted and are enrolled in ACE courses.	1. Participants will be given an incentive of \$300 off their portfolio administrative fee if they submit an e-portfolio in the designated timeframe.
2. Participants have completed English 329 with a grade of C or better, or have successfully passed the English placement/test-out exam.	2. Participants will increase the body of knowledge on e-portfolio development.
3. Participants are in good academic standing (cumulative GPA of 2.0 in all Barry University course work).	3. Participants will interact with an IT professor who will support them during the e-portfolio process.
4. Participants can document five years of professional work experiences and/or community activities.	4. Participants will receive a set of instructional materials designed solely for e-portfolio development.
5. Participants are willing to fill out pre- and post-surveys and participate in a recorded post-submission focus group.	5. Participants will have additional advisor support during the development process.
6. Participants will attend a portfolio seminar in the summer session.	
7. Participants will attend six face-to-face	

portfolio workshops.	
a. Summer and fall: Development workshops held in Merritt Island and Orlando.	
b. Fall: Technical workshops held at Merritt Island only.	
8. Participants will submit ELEP in spring A or spring B sessions.	
9. Participants will submit ELEP on CD-ROM or DVD.	
10. Participants are willing to sign a letter of commitment/consent with no penalties for not completing.	
11. Participants will grant permission to use their ELEP as a model for other students.	
<b>Pilot 2: Criteria for participation</b>	<b>Pilot 2: Incentives</b>
1. All of the above and completion of Computer Science 102 and workshop attendance will be online through Blackboard.	1. All of the above, except no reduction of portfolio administrative fee.

### **Data collection.**

The first group of participants was given pre- and post-test surveys (see Appendix A). They also participated in a focus group following submission of their e-portfolios. Their survey responses were compiled as descriptive statistics in MS Excel and analyzed in a comparative manner (see Appendix B and C). The major comments of the focus group and faculty evaluator are also described in the Results section of this paper.

### **The Second Pilot Study**

In January 2007, a second pilot program was launched. This time a system-wide approach was initiated as ACE has 18 educational sites throughout the state of Florida. Nine students throughout ACE's state-wide system agreed to participate in e-portfolio development. Due to the distance between ACE sites, face-to-face sessions for technical support were eliminated. Instead, online Blackboard tutorials with voice-overs and professor support through e-mail and telephone (if needed) were offered. Moreover, the second pilot study's participants had to have completed introductory software application courses that covered PowerPoint, hyper-linking, folder creation, and scanning of documents. Thus, by selecting adult learners who had a basic understanding of ICTs, we strove to mitigate concerns noted in the first group's comments about the additional time needed to learn software programs. Moreover, while criteria 1-4 and 9-11 were followed by the second study's participants, only incentives 2-5 were offered to them.

## **Data collection.**

Students' post-test surveys were collected and analyzed by the ELEP team (see Appendix D). As in the first pilot, there were no issues of confidentiality or anonymity as all the students agreed to share their e-portfolios with other students. From the ELEP team's analysis of the participants' comments, no further revisions were required of the program delivery and materials before system-wide implementation could be offered to all ACE students, which was done in 2008.

## **Results**

Ten students completed the first pilot, which ended in 2006. Findings from the focus groups and pre- and post-surveys (see Appendix B and C) of the students indicated that the creation of an e-portfolio significantly augmented (by 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, and in some areas 60%) their technical skills while increasing academic competencies (10% to 40%) and assessment of professional/workplace learning (10% primarily to 30%). Thus, in every survey question category, learners indicated an increase in "strongly agree/agree" in all three areas of learning. However, in the focus group discussion, most of the pilot participants found the e-portfolio development process compounded their academic workload; learning how to transform a paper portfolio into an e-format proved challenging and time consuming. To paraphrase the comments of nine of the ten participants: "I never thought it would take so much time to learn how to create file folders, navigation bars, and the other e-portfolio features. I might not have participated if I knew this beforehand." In spite of this complaint, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that they increased their technical, personal, and professional competencies as a result of e-portfolio development.

The second pilot was completed in the fall of 2008. Five students developed an e-portfolio. However, only three participants completed a questionnaire on suggestions for the improvement of online tutorials and guidance materials. Even with this limitation, the participants described their learning from the e-portfolio process with enthusiasm (see Appendix D). Overall, participants were pleased with their increased ICTs in the expression of their workplace-based experiential learning. Most important, in addition to their increased recognition of their learning outside of the academy, they also augmented their technology skills and demonstrated learning through a high-tech format. The option to develop an e-portfolio is now available to all adult learners at ACE.

## **Faculty Views of Pilot e-Portfolios**

Faculty evaluators recognized the potential of e-portfolios to connect academic, workplace, and high-tech learning; however, as with students, they had to adjust to the learning curve created by the use of ICTs and spent more time than normal on the evaluation process. It follows then that faculty perceptions of e-learning and e-portfolios are a vital component of how colleges and universities address learning in the era of ICTs and the Internet. Faculty who commented on e-portfolio evaluations during the pilot programs, even those who taught programs in information

technology, were wary of the authenticity of scanned documents in the e-portfolios as compared to viewing original documents in paper portfolios. In order to mitigate this problem, portfolio intake staff (all student portfolios, especially documentation, must be signed off by the school's portfolio intake staff) included a written document with the e-portfolios verifying seeing original documents that were scanned. Learning how to navigate e-portfolios and problems with different levels of the software program utilized by the students and the evaluators were other issues that concerned faculty evaluators. Researching faculty views on PLAR portfolios in general, and e-portfolios in particular, would be advisable as student use of ICTs increases.

## **Discussion**

As shown elsewhere (Brown, 2002; Brown, McCrink, & Maybee, 2004; Mandell & Michelson, 2004; Timmons, 2008), PLAR portfolios hold the promise of learning outcomes beyond the identification of prior learning for college credit. Critical thinking and communication competencies may be augmented from the development process itself and reveal patterns of individual and career development over the lifespan.

Even in this limited study, it appears that the creation of an e-portfolio further supports the many ways and places in which individuals learn: through critical reflection on experiences; by scaffolding and building on experiences; within the social context in which it occurs; by deconstruction and reconstruction; and in workplaces, on the Web, in classrooms, and in the world at large. Moreover, e-portfolios have the potential to connect one's diverse learning experiences and environments throughout one's life through demonstration in a digital format accessible to others worldwide. Surely, the age of ICTs has no less an impact on humanity than the invention of the printing press. For as Dickinson wrote in her expansive vision, "Of Chambers as the Cedars—Impregnable of Eye—And for an Everlasting Roof — The Gables of the Sky" (Johnson, 1961, p. 657). Dickinson's image of the extensive sky is appropriate for the ever broadening capabilities of PLAR e-portfolios to facilitate knowledge acquisition and expression. Two other institutions of higher learning, one in the USA and one in the UK, underscore this perspective.

### **Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology**

A 2008 article by Paul Basken in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* detailed the transformative effects of an e-portfolio system instituted at Indiana's Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology. Basken quotes colleague Barbara Cambridge, who states, "Electronic portfolios are a way to generate learning as well as document learning" (p. A30). For administrators like Cambridge, the portfolio system is valued for its ability to produce "excellent information about what students are learning and how well... [and to see] how effectively the college is teaching ... skills and to revise its approach as necessary" (p. A30). This increases the school's ability to meet its mission and to promote college-wide accountability. Students also value e-portfolios as mechanisms to reach prospective employers in a high-tech format.

## **Open University, UK**

Herman and Kirkup (2008) produced an interesting study on the use of e-portfolios for mature students returning to employment in the science, engineering, and technology sectors. They studied 113 female students who were enrolled in a short online course that offered training in the development of an e-portfolio to replace the usual CV as they prepared “to re-enter the workforce after a career break” (p. 67). The course also allowed the participants an opportunity to engage in personal and professional development planning. Seventy-six of the participants completed the course, and 47 returned questionnaires on their e-portfolio experience. Ten telephone interviews, 16 critical incident e-mails, and 19 online discussion postings were also utilized in the data collection.

The results for this group indicated overwhelmingly that the benefits of reflection, critical thinking, and self-assessment inherent in the creation of experiential learning e-portfolios outweighed any problems they experienced with the *Profile* application they utilized. Additionally, the personal record of achievement contained in the e-portfolio was more useful than a CV. In this case, the creation of an easy-to-update e-portfolio served as a professional development tool motivating learners to re-enter the workforce with increased confidence in their capabilities.

The importance of recognizing learning, no matter where or how it takes place, is a necessity in today’s knowledge-based world. Yet, while the expansive nature of the Web beacons to many, it is important to note that critical thinking plays an important role in discerning web-based knowledge and learning from the ever-expanding sources and amount of information individuals are exposed to on a daily basis. Keeping in mind this caveat, it has become increasingly evident in this high-tech age that “change is now so great and so far reaching that no amount of education during youth can prepare adults to meet the demands that will be made on them” (Cross, 1991, p. vi). Consequently, “adult and lifelong learning represent a more and more essential part of ...traditional educational institutions” (Scuzs & Bo, 2005, p. i). Learning does not begin or end within formal educational institutions (Cross, 1991).

Accordingly, it is incumbent on the academy to continue to explore novel ways to acknowledge a broad concept of and approach to teaching and learning. Sometimes referred to as the *digital notebook*, the e-portfolio allows learners to trace the development of their thinking and learning over time and to show those competencies to the university and to employers (Maloney, 2007). By its very nature, a portfolio deconstructs barriers between workplace and university learning while maintaining each setting’s unique contribution to lifelong learning. Portfolio development requires adult learners to reflect on, analyze, evaluate, and equate their experiential learning to academic knowledge, thus encouraging the connection between practice and theory in the process. While hard-copy portfolios demonstrate competencies and skills, the e-portfolio encourages students to go a step further and exhibit these in a richer format than narrative alone by incorporating multimedia (ICTs).



The promotion of continuity between academic, workplace, and web-based learning is critical in today's world. As the sponsors of the European Distance and E-Learning Network International Conference (EDEN) wrote in their introductory conference remarks:

E-learning is evolving, like the world around us. The relationship between learning, working and the rest of life is also subject to profound changes. . . . There is an ever stronger need for the validations of the visions, for the conceptualizations of the results available, for the credible "demonstration of the possible." . . . The traditional education systems and settings are changing slowly. Together with visionaries and the socio-technical forerunners, an important role remains with the progressive practitioners, who investigate, develop, experiment with new solutions and deliver proofs of good practice in e-learning. (EDEN, 2007)

The self-inventory process of portfolio development in general, and the demonstration of knowledge facilitated by e-portfolios in particular, produces a powerful tool that promotes connections between academic, workplace, and web-based learning by exhibiting the unique talents of the learner. Unfortunately, in many higher education institutions, the emphasis is on what types of new learning academic and teaching e-portfolios may produce rather than recognizing the possibilities that prior learning portfolios in an e-format may produce.

## **Conclusions**

Reading a book, seeing a play, and listening to music are three very different media experiences, each with a unique dynamic and impact on the human psyche. The same can be said when comparing the development of a paper experiential learning portfolio with the development of an e-portfolio. What both have in common is the gaining of personal and professional learning outcomes from the process itself (e.g., communication, organization, and self-knowledge), beyond the reflection, identification, analysis, evaluation, and articulation of prior learning from non-academic venues (Brown, 2000; Brown, 2002). In the case of the e-portfolio, the use of multimedia, such as photos, videos, hyperlinks, and other ICTs, has the potential to present a different dynamic to the expression of experiential learning. "[It] is just one model for thinking about how technology can enhance teaching and learning" (Maloney, 2007, p. 27B).

As PLA portfolios become an increasingly valid mechanism in assessing learning, it is hoped that adult educators will encourage learners to use e-portfolios as an additional tool to

- demonstrate their technical skills, professional and personal competencies,
- incorporate visual and audio validation of prior learning,
- create new designs with software programs,
- augment reflection, creativity and communication, and
- evaluate different types of learning and knowledge environments.

It is no wonder that a prior learning e-portfolio moves us toward a future in which we reach for “The spreading wide my narrow Hands—to gather Paradise” (Johnson, 1961, p. 657), or if not paradise then the endless possibility of personal, professional, and lifelong diverse modes of expressing PLAR “at our fingertips” through ICTs.

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## Appendix A

Pre- and Post- First Pilot ELEP Surveys,  $N = 10$

### Pre-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Technical Skills Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current ability with the following:

### Post-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Technical Skills Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current ability after e-portfolio completion with the following:

1 = *None*; 2 = *Poor*; 3 = *Fair*; 4 = *Good*; 5 = *Excellent*

1. Using Microsoft Word	1	2	3	4	5
2. Using Microsoft PowerPoint	1	2	3	4	5
3. Using Microsoft Excel	1	2	3	4	5
4. Using the World Wide Web	1	2	3	4	5
5. Using/inserting video in a Word or PowerPoint document	1	2	3	4	5
6. Inserting graphics such as photos/clip Art in a Word/PowerPoint document	1	2	3	4	5
7. Creating hyperlinks in a Word/PowerPoint document	1	2	3	4	5
8. Creating and inserting videos in a Word/PowerPoint document	1	2	3	4	5
9. Saving/burning documents to a CD	1	2	3	4	5
10. Scanning documents	1	2	3	4	5

### Pre-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Professional Skills Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current perception of the following:

### Post-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Professional Skills Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current perception after e-portfolio completion of the following:

1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 2 = *Disagree*; 3 = *Somewhat Agree*; 4 = *Agree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*

11. I have a good understanding of my professional accomplishments	1	2	3	4	5
12. I have pride in my professional achievements	1	2	3	4	5
13. I have a good understanding of the role of work in my career development	1	2	3	4	5
14. I have a good understanding of how the value of work experiences promote to learning	1	2	3	4	5
15. My understanding of my work accomplishments helps me plan my future career goals	1	2	3	4	5
16. I recognize the role of mentors in my career	1	2	3	4	5
17. I understand the role of work in my adult development	1	2	3	4	5
18. I recognize the value of past/present community activities in learning	1	2	3	4	5

Pre-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Academic Competencies Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current perception of the following:

Post-Test ELEP Pilot 1 Academic Competencies Survey of Student Participants

Using the scale below, rate your current perception after e-portfolio development of the following after e-portfolio completion:

1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 2 = *Disagree*; 3 = *Somewhat Disagree*; 4 = *Agree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*

19. I have highly developed written communication skills	1	2	3	4	5
20. I have highly developed critical thinking skills	1	2	3	4	5
21. I have highly developed organizational skills	1	2	3	4	5
22. I have highly developed reflection skills	1	2	3	4	5
23. I have a great deal of self-knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
24. I have a good deal of self-esteem	1	2	3	4	5
25. I have a good deal of self-confidence	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix B

ELEP First Pilot Participants Pre-Test Survey Results,  $N = 10$

	5= <i>Excellent</i>	4 = <i>Good</i>	3 = <i>Fair</i>	2 = <i>Poor</i>	1 = <i>None</i>
Q #1	30%	40%	30%	0%	0%
Q #2	10%	60%	20%	10%	0%
Q #3	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%
Q #4	30%	60%	0%	10%	0%
Q #5	0%	20%	40%	30%	10%
Q #6	30%	50%	0%	20%	0%
Q #7	20%	10%	40%	30%	0%
Q #8	0%	10%	50%	30%	10%
Q #9	10%	40%	40%	10%	0%
Q #10	20%	40%	30%	10%	0%
	5= <i>Strongly Agree</i>	4 = <i>Agree</i>	3= <i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	2 = <i>Disagree</i>	1 = <i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Q #11	50%	40%	0%	10%	0%
Q #12	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
Q #13	40%	50%	10%	0%	0%
Q #14	70%	20%	10%	0%	0%
Q #15	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
Q #16	50%	30%	20%	0%	0%
Q #17	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
Q #18	50%	30%	20%	0%	0%
Q #19	20%	30%	40%	10%	0%
Q #20	50%	10%	40%	0%	0%
Q #21	60%	30%	0%	10%	0%
Q #22	30%	50%	20%	0%	0%
Q #23	30%	50%	10%	0%	0%
Q #24	40%	20%	40%	0%	0%
Q #25	30%	40%	30%	0%	0%



## Appendix C

ELEP First Pilot Participants Post-Test Survey Results, *N* = 10

	<i>5 = Excellent</i>	<i>4 = Good</i>	<i>3 = Fair</i>	<i>2 = Poor</i>	<i>1 = None</i>
Q #1	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
Q #2	30%	50%	20%	0%	0%
Q #3	40%	40%	10%	10%	0%
Q #4	70%	10%	20%	0%	0%
Q #5	20%	20%	40%	10%	0%
Q #6	70%	10%	20%	0%	0%
Q #7	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
Q #8	10%	30%	40%	10%	0%
Q #9	50%	40%	10%	0%	0%
Q #10	70%	30%	0%	0%	0%
	<i>5 = Strongly Agree</i>	<i>4 = Agree</i>	<i>3 = Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>2 = Disagree</i>	<i>1 = Strongly Disagree</i>
Q #11	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Q #12	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Q #13	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
Q #14	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Q #15	70%	20%	10%	0%	0%
Q #16	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
Q #17	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
Q #18	45%	55%	0%	0%	0%
Q #19	40%	50%	10%	0%	0%
Q #20	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Q #21	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
Q #22	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
Q #23	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Q #24	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%
Q #25	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%

## Appendix D

### ELEP Second Pilot Post (No Pre-Questionnaire) ELEP Questionnaire Responses

Thank you for your participation in our second ELEP pilot. Your participation has provided valuable information and insight into our program. To provide further understanding from a student's perspective and in order to assist subsequent ELEP students better, we are asking you to take a few minutes to complete the following questionnaire.

1. What value, if any, did the electronic version add to your Portfolio experience?
  - It enhanced my PowerPoint presentation skills.
  - It was truly a wonderful experience! Not only did I update my PowerPoint skills, but it is nice to have all of my important documents in an electronic presentation format.
  - I was able to be more imaginative with the PowerPoint presentation, so more of me came out.
  
2. Why did you choose to complete the electronic format instead of the paper-based format?
  - I think the electronic format is more creative and is interesting.
  - I liked the fact that you could really make this your own, unique presentation versus the paper format that limited my creativity to some degree.
  - I felt that it would be easier for me with my IT background, and I did not want to kill a couple of trees to complete my project.
  
3. Please indicate (X) the materials you utilized during your ELEP development/completion process and circle or indicate your level of satisfaction for each.

Scale = Strongly Satisfied; Satisfied; Dissatisfied; Strongly Dissatisfied; N/A

a. Portfolio Module Guide	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
b. Technical Module	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
c. Julia Winthrop Sample – paper-based	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
d. Julia Winthrop Sample – CD	Strongly Satisfied	3 = 100.0%
e. Blackboard (Course Tools)	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
i. Announcements	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
ii. Samples	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%
iii. Technical Manual	Strongly Satisfied	2 = 66.7%
	Satisfied	1 = 33.3%

- |                                  |  |                                     |
|----------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| iv. Calendar                     | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied        | 2 = 66.7%<br>1 = 33.3%              |
| v. Discussion Board              | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied<br>N/A | 1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3% |
| vi. Questions for the Moderators | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied<br>N/A | 1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3% |
| vii. Comments & Suggestions      | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied<br>N/A | 1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3%<br>1 = 33.3% |
| viii. Contact Us                 | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied        | 2 = 66.7%<br>1 = 33.3%              |
| ix. Individual Folders           | Strongly Satisfied<br>Satisfied        | 2 = 66.7%<br>1 = 33.3%              |
| x. Other (_____)                 | Satisfied                              | 1 = 100.0%                          |
- f. If you utilized the Technical Module
- |   |           |                        |
|---|-----------|------------------------|
| i. Were the instructions clearly written?         | Yes       | 3 = 100.0%             |
| ii. Were the instructions easy to follow?         | Yes       | 3 = 100.0%             |
| iii. Was there any missing material/instructions? | Yes<br>No | 1 = 33.3%<br>2 = 66.7% |
- If yes, please specify (no comments included)
- g. If you utilized Blackboard, was there anything we could have developed differently?
- Not at all—very helpful
  - None
  - I was trying to use the Blackboard site like a web class but did not see it utilized by the school very much.
- h. What additional resources and materials do you think are necessary for the ELEP program?
- None that I can think of at the moment
  - None
  - No comment included
4. What was the most helpful aspect of the current resources available to you?
- The sample CD
  - Julia Winthrop Sample – CD
  - No comment included
5. What was the least helpful aspect of the current resources available to you?
- n/a
  - None

- The fact you had to make the attachment PDF. Not everyone has that capability and the software is expensive.
6. What technical skill level, if any, do you think a student needs in order to complete the ELEP?
- A solid background in PowerPoint and an understanding of hyper linking
  - Computer skill is a must, especially familiarity with PowerPoint.
  - They should have Microsoft office and some web to develop the project fully.
7. What advice would you give to students interested in completing an ELEP?
- I would say to follow the sample CD as closely as possible and touch base with your assigned IT personnel for any technical difficulties you may have.
  - They must have confidence in their computer skills before they choose to do an ELEP.
  - Go for it. I enjoyed the whole experience.
8. Other Comments:
- The staff was very helpful and made the completion of my e-port a breeze...
  - It would be nice if we could have more space for creativity portfolio instead of following the format in the sample. You might want to reformat the LAW form. To my knowledge, all of us had trouble with the margin setting when we worked on the LAW form.
  - I enjoyed it; the whole experience was an eye opening experience. Thanks!

Thank you for your time and effort in completing this questionnaire and for your participation in our second ELEP pilot!





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## *Preconditions for Post-Employment Learning: Preliminary Results from Ongoing Research*

**Linda Salter**  
Capella University, USA

### **Abstract**

This article describes the first phase of a two-phase, mixed-method study. The study, now in progress, explores how and to what extent willingness to engage in learning in mature adulthood is influenced by prior experiences and specific individual personality variables, such as perceived locus of control and degree of self-efficacy. Study participants in this phase are 20 active adults over the age of 50 who participate in various formal and informal programs at a YMCA in a suburb of Seattle, Washington. Preliminary results thus far are discussed with respect to how they may inform educators of mature adults in open education settings. A profile of the characteristics of mature adults likely to be engaged in learning activities is beginning to emerge. A larger sample of participants taken from the same population is now being studied to confirm or refute the value of this profile.

**Keywords:** Locus of control; mature learners; preconditions; prior experience; self-efficacy

## **Introduction**

The accumulated body of knowledge and prior experiences encapsulated in the concept educators refer to as *prior learning* is a characteristic of adult learning that sets it apart from learning earlier in life. In higher education contexts, prior learning is becoming the focus of adult learner assessments in order to evaluate how much relevant information and skill the mature learner brings with him or her to a formal learning environment. Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Eric Hoover notes that the benefits of taking prior learning into account include an increase in graduation rates and a decrease in the amount of time taken to complete degree programs when such assessments are used (2010).

As well as being used by educators to evaluate incoming students and to assign credit in some cases, prior learning has also been studied as a topic for reflection in an effort to facilitate transformative learning. In a study of a sample of current and former students at an open university, Stevens, Gerber, and Hendra (2010) report that the process of preparing a portfolio of prior learning experiences appears to enhance learning transfer between the classroom and the real world as well as to alter learners' perspectives about themselves. The latter finding satisfied Stevens et al. that transformative learning was fostered by the prior learning portfolio writing process and had enabled the participants in their study to become "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow as cited in Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010, p. 382).

Along with being influenced by more prior learning experiences, mature adult learning is also distinct from earlier learning with respect to the role of self-regulation. In a study of the implications of increasing longevity for society and for individuals, Freund, Nikitin, and Ritter (2009) found that as adults age, they are progressively less constrained by social norms and more dependent on self-regulating mechanisms in many domains of their lives, including education. With respect to activities later in life, Freund et al. suggest that prior development and subsequent maintenance of self-regulatory competencies, such as setting and pursuing personal goals, are preconditions for what they describe as successful or positive aging.

This article describes ongoing doctoral research being conducted by the author. The study explores how and to what extent willingness to engage in learning in mature adulthood is influenced by prior learning experiences and specific individual personality variables related to self-regulation, such as perceived locus of control and degree of self-efficacy.

## **Self-Directed Learning**

Adults' desire to take responsibility for their own learning and their capacity to do so are key assumptions of the andragogical model of learning, a model that describes processes unique to learning in adulthood. With respect to how this assumption is related to the practice of adult education, proponents of andragogy have emphasized that "it is the sense of personal autonomy, not self-teaching, that seems to be most important for adults" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 189) and that "the biggest problems arise when adult learners want to have more

independence in their learning but are denied that opportunity” (p. 189). Providing such opportunities is central to the practice of learner-centred education of the type often delivered in non-traditional formats such as open and distance learning environments (see [www.col.org](http://www.col.org)).

## **Self-Directed Versus Self-Regulated Learning**

According to Loyens and Magda (2008), self-directed learning “as a design feature of the learning environment stresses students’ freedom in pursuit of their learning” (p. 418); whereas, self-regulated learning refers to a process in which learners choose to engage in learning and to employ strategies on tasks that may have been selected independently or assigned by a teacher. The importance of this distinction lies in the implication that self-directed learning is the broader concept, is a characteristic of both the learner and the environment, and assumes the learner has complete control over the experience. Self-regulation, on the other hand, is a learner characteristic, enabling learners to engage in learning with or without the initial input of an instructor.

## **Open Learning**

The term *open learning* first came into common use early in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during a time of increasing international focus on issues of social justice. As an element of social justice, proponents of open learning took the position that education should be available and accessible for everyone, without barriers based on ethnicity, race, gender, age, and socio-economic status. Although in recent years the term has been somewhat conflated with others such as *e-learning* and *mobile-learning*, a distinction can be made between open learning and these other concepts. Open learning can be defined as “both a process which focuses on access to educational opportunities and a philosophy which makes learning more client and student centred” (Paine as cited in Gaskell, p. 1, 2007). E-learning and mobile learning are narrower concepts, more specifically associated with particular methods of delivering education. However, these technological advances do not necessarily guarantee openness in learning because access to education delivered in these manners is dependent upon the availability of specific equipment and the ability to use it (Gaskell, 2007). In the current study, all participants had access to the same learning opportunities and, as mature adults, could all be described as members of a demographic group – adult non-traditional learners – explicitly served by open learning institutions.

## **Non-Traditional Learners**

Mature individuals enrolled in education programs are considered to be non-traditional learners. The U.S. Department of Education (2005) defines non-traditional students as “students who possess one or more of several characteristics, including delayed enrollment, part-time student status, full-time employment, financial independence, responsibility for dependents, and enrollment after the twenty-fifth birthday.” Mature adult learners typically possess one or more of the traits associated with non-traditional learners.

Learning environments provided by open and distance learning institutions are designed to meet the needs of such non-traditional learners. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Web site describes open and distant learning as being characterized by

. . . the convergence of open and distance learning methods, media and classroom strategies; learner-centred philosophy; recognition of diversity in learning styles and in learners' needs; recognition of the importance of equity in curriculum and pedagogy; use of a variety of learning resources and media; fostering of lifelong learning habits and skills in learners and staff (COL, 2000).

## **Mature Learners**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), 12% of the U.S. population was 65 or older in 2003, and it is expected that by 2030, that percentage will have risen to 20%. Earlier studies predicted that this segment of the population would become increasingly diverse with respect to ethnic backgrounds, native languages, and formal education levels attained, and would include proportionately more women than men as compared to demographics around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Manheimer, 2002; Sticht, 1998). A 2006 report prepared for Congress by a specialist in demographic research describes trends consistent with such predictions (Shrestha, 2006). Between 1950 and 2005, the population of the United States became older, more likely to be female, and more ethnically and culturally diverse.

Because older learners seem to engage in what is essentially a cost-benefit analysis when contemplating learning new skills and are influenced by their own personalities as well as by previous learning experiences in conducting that analysis, both internal factors (such as motivation) and external variables (such as learning environments) must be better understood if learning is to be facilitated throughout the lifespan (Wlodkowski, 1999).

## **The Dual Role of Experience in Adult Learning**

Experience is explicitly used to facilitate adult learning through the use of strategies and activities such as field-based learning, active learning classroom work, and community-based social action (Fenwick, 2003). Additionally, for adults, there is evidence that previous learning experiences impact motivation to learn and expectations regarding outcomes (Belzer, 2004).

### **Learning through experience.**

Experiential learning in adulthood “involves adults connecting what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past as well as to possible future situations” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 246). The process during which adults engage in experiential learning is described as *meaning-making* and *problem-solving* by adherents of constructivist and



transformative learning theories, two influential theories in the evolution of adult education (Fenwick, 2003).

### **Influence of prior experience.**

In a study of the impact of prior learning experiences on middle-aged adults currently enrolled in a General Educational Development (GED) program, Belzer (2004) found that “experiences of learning contexts themselves *may* play a significant and sometimes confounding role in adult learning and are worthy of further examination” (p. 56). Specifically, the findings of the study indicate that learners’ expectations of current learning activities arise directly out of earlier learning experiences. If those earlier experiences were either negative or sharply different from the current experience, there is likely to be a negative impact on attitudes and outcomes.

### **Locus of Control**

Locus of control refers to one dimension that can be used to describe how individuals explain the events they experience. Using this dimension, these explanations are examined with respect to whether the individual attributes events and outcomes to forces within or beyond his or her own control (Ormond, 2004). Increasing age appears to be associated with an internal locus of control (Siri, Gemlk, & Sur, 2007).

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a set of beliefs held by an individual concerning his or her ability to perform. This set of beliefs is thought to impact learning with respect to willingness to engage in learning, having or lacking motivation and perseverance, and the realization of successful outcomes. Belief about the self tends to be “specific to particular domains, tasks, or situations” (Ormond, 2004, p. 142). According to a study of mature adults in rehabilitation after serious illness or injury, positive self-efficacy beliefs about ability to recover seem to be associated with optimism and with favorable outcomes (Resnick, 2002).

### **Formality**

Learning in the context of older adulthood has been studied primarily “in terms of formal, institutionally sponsored programs” (Chen, Kim, Moon, & Merriam, 2008, p. 17). However, learning later in life tends to be an informal activity in the sense that it is usually optional and not likely to be related to employment. It is often characterized as being a leisure time or recreational activity and typically occurs in “nonformal learning projects existing outside of educational institutions” (Chen et al., 2008, p. 17). After reviewing the relevant literature published between 1980 and 2006, Chen et al. (2008) concluded that more research by and for adult educators is needed in order to better understand the characteristics and interests of older learners and to examine “the potential for lifelong growth and development in nonformal and informal learning” (p. 17).

## **Learning Styles**

Using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (1976), Truluck and Courtenay (1999) conducted a study of 172 adults ranging in age from 55 to over 75. They found no significant relationship between age or gender or educational level and learning style preference in the study group as a whole. With respect to age, when the researchers examined the data of sub-groups in increments of 10 years of chronological age, they did find some indication that learning preferences change over time during mature adulthood. Younger mature adults indicated an inclination to use hands-on learning, the next older group tended to prefer a combination of visual and auditory modes, and the oldest group also preferred visual and auditory modes but also believed they learned by thinking. Such results suggest that in order to better understand learning in older individuals, it is necessary to move beyond demographic variables such as age, gender, and level of educational attainment.

## **Mature Learners as Members of the Pre-Digital Generation**

The recent increase in the use of digital technologies in daily life and in education has highlighted a generational difference between older and younger adults with respect to learning styles and the new media that dominate learning environments. Evidence is beginning to be found suggesting that adults under the age of 30 who have been exposed to digital technologies for their entire lives are developing learning styles and strategies distinct from their 'pre-digital' elders. Digital generation learners seem to be more skilled at processing more than one task at a time, less dependent upon linear thinking and more open to random input of information, more comfortable with graphics, more likely to be active as opposed to passive learners, less likely to make a distinction between work and play, and more likely to expect a reward of some kind for their efforts (Salopek, 2003).

The influence of digital technology on learning has also been studied with respect to new concepts of literacy. Learners for whom pre-digital media were and are dominant may have not yet developed digital literacies sufficient to be considered competent in technologically based learning environments. Mature, pre-digital learners may find themselves at a disadvantage compared to their younger counterparts with respect to their ability to "cope with a complex mix of visual, oral, and interactive media as well as traditional text" (Cilia, Aiello, & Bartolomé, 2006, p. 440).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The 20 participants in this study are enrolled in various YMCA senior citizen programs and classes, are over the age of 50, describe themselves as physically and mentally active, and agreed to voluntarily participate after a brief interview with the researcher.

Regarding employment status, nine participants described themselves as retired or semi-retired, and six reported being retired and doing volunteer work. The remaining five participants indicated they were semi-retired and employed. In addition, two of the retired participants described themselves as caregivers. As shown in Table 1, the participants include men and women ranging in age from 50 to more than 80 years old. Highest level of educational achievement was also recorded.

Table 1

*Age and Gender of Participants*

<u>Category</u>	<u>Number of participants</u>
Men	9
Women	11
50-60	2
60-70	4
70-80	12
80+	2
Some college or vocational training	6
College degree or vocational certificate	5
Graduate degree or professional training	9

## **Procedures**

### **Sampling.**

A sample of opportunity was used in this study. Twenty participants were recruited by the researcher from the membership of a YMCA branch in a suburb of Seattle, WA. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), the county in which the participants reside is characterized by a population that is above the national averages for income and education and that is less ethnically diverse. Sample size was arbitrarily chosen by the researcher, taking into consideration time and space constraints. The YMCA facility was selected because of the extensive services offered to mature members. Access was granted to the researcher by the executive director of the facility.

### **Data collection.**

The researcher met with each participant individually or in small groups in an on-site room provided by the YMCA. The meetings occurred over a span of one business week and lasted 20 to 30 minutes each. During the meetings, the participants read and signed the informed consent form, answered one oral question, and completed the three data collection instruments.

The three data collection instruments included two commonly used scales and a questionnaire written by the researcher. To measure self-efficacy, Schwarzer and Jerusalem's General

Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale (2000) was used. Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (1966) was employed to determine the participants' tendencies to attribute control to either internal or external forces. The questionnaire, which was pilot tested for clarity prior to use in this study, consisted of 12 items soliciting information regarding the participants' prior and current learning experiences, as well as limited demographic data. At the conclusion of the meeting, the participants were asked for a brief description of the characteristics they associated with adults in their own age group who continued to engage in learning activities. The researcher recorded the responses to the interview question in written form.

## **Results**

### **Oral Question**

Each participant was asked to briefly describe the characteristics they observed in actively learning adults in their own age groups. The researcher assigned each descriptor to one of five domains (affective, cognitive, health, psychomotor, or social) and then totaled the number of descriptors in each domain or combination of domains. The most commonly used descriptors were those assigned to the cognitive and affective domains.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Out of a possible score of 40, with high scores indicating strong self-efficacy beliefs, all of the participants indicated at least moderate, and in many cases, elevated self-efficacy beliefs. Scores ranged from 30 to 38, with the most common score being 35.

### **Locus of Control**

The lower the score on this scale the more the respondent is categorized as tending to attribute outcomes to internal versus external forces. Possible scores range from 0 (maximum internal locus) to 23 (maximum external locus). The scores obtained ranged from 2 to 12, with most participants scoring between 5 and 10.

### **Questionnaire Responses**

Nine of the questionnaire items were non-demographic in nature. Those of most interest in this study at this stage are briefly discussed below.

Question 3 asked participants to select all that applied from a list of 18 activities that they might engage in on a typical day, and responses were subsequently categorized as belonging to creative, cognitive, physical, social, or learning domains.

Activities categorized as belonging to the learning domain--the domain of interest in this study--are those that explicitly involve learning, teaching, or practising new skills or knowledge.

Informed by the writing of Plumb (2008), for the purpose of this study, learning is defined not as a result of another activity but as an activity in itself that is engaged in, to varying degrees, by all developing humans throughout the life course. Responses to question 3 by assigned domain are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

*Daily Activities Distribution by Domain*

<u>Domain</u>	<u>Total number of responses (all participants)</u>
Creative	27
Cognitive	40
Learning	37
Physical	40
Social	37

Other questions that elicited potentially useful results asked participants to indicate what they believed to be their most productive learning age, environment, and sources.

The most commonly selected learning environments were *in a school or other formal classroom* (32 selections) and *at work or in the military* (31 selections). *At home* and *at a church or another community organization* were the other two choices and were chosen 24 times each.

Participants were given six choices from which to select what they perceived to be the age(s) most conducive to their learning: *as a child*, *as a teenager*, *as an adult under 50*, *as an adult over 50*, *in the past 5 years*, and *in the past year*. *As an adult under 50* was chosen 12 times, *as an adult over 50* was chosen 7 times, and *in the past 5 years* was chosen once.

Information regarding productive sources for learning was gathered by asking participants to select from informal choices, such as *family members*, *friends*, *spiritual advisors*, and *public figures*, and the more formal choices of *schoolteachers or other instructors* and *work or military or other organization supervisors*. Participants selected *schoolteachers or other instructors* 16 times. The number of times the other options chosen were as follows: *older family members* (12), *younger family members* (11), *peers* (11), *workplace or military or other organization supervisors* (10), *spiritual advisors* (4), and *public figures* (2).

One item asked participants to select one or more from a list of four categories of memories as their strongest type of recollections about their learning experiences. Responses to this question are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3

*Distribution of Learning Experience Memories*

<u>Memory</u>	<u>Total number of responses</u>
Tests, grades, passing, failing	6
Friends	11
Teachers, supervisors	11
Subjects, skills	17

In another item, participants were asked to indicate whether they found *self-study* or *study facilitated by an instructor* to be most productive for them. One respondent chose neither, one chose independent study only, six chose facilitation by an instructor only, and twelve participants selected both.

Participants were also provided with several options from which to select to describe what learning methods they believed to be most useful for them. Their responses are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4

*Learning Style Preferences*

<u>Style</u>	<u>Number of times selected</u>
Watching others	9
Listening to others	10
Reading instructions	7
Trial and error	11
Two or more of the above	18

## **Emergent Themes**

Scores from the two scales, responses from the questionnaire, and answers to the oral question were examined using NVivo™ qualitative analysis software. The purpose of the analysis was to search for themes or tendencies with respect to prior learning experiences, levels of self-efficacy, and type of locus of control that appear to be typical of this sample of actively engaged mature learners.

Question 3 on the questionnaire elicited responses regarding typical daily activities. Responses were coded by domain. The domains coded were physical, social, cognitive, creative, and explicit learning. Respondents who indicated typical daily activities in the learning domain were designated as cases of currently engaged learners. This trait was subsequently examined to determine whether a relationship appears to exist between currently engaged learning behavior and other variables. Following completion of coding, associations between learning behavior and

several variables were identified. Current engagement in learning was found to be associated with numerous preconditions: internal locus of control, strong self-efficacy scores, a focus on learning process versus learning outcome, designation of formal learning environments and sources as more influential than informal environments and sources, a perception that mid-adulthood represented the most productive learning period, and current engagement in social relationships and activities. An association was identified when more than half of the cases are characterized both by evidence of current learning engagement and of the other variable in question. Table 5 depicts the thematic evidence used to justify the identification of several preconditions for engagement in learning in mature adulthood.

Table 5

*Relationships between Current Engagement in Learning Activities and Preconditions*

<u>Precondition</u>	<u>Current engagement</u>
Focus on learning process	Associated (12/20 cases)
Focus on learning outcome	Not associated (2/20 cases)
Preference: formal learning environments	Associated (13/20 cases)
Preference: formal learning sources	Associated (12/20 cases)
Strong self-efficacy	Associated (12/20 cases)
Internal locus of control	Associated (15/20 cases)
Current social engagement	Associated (14/20 cases)
Continuous learning through adulthood	Associated (16/20 cases)

## **Limitations**

The qualitative nature of the data collected, the small size of the sample, and the non-random sampling used limits the inferential value of the study at the phase one stage. However, in the second phase, data collected from a larger sample is being compared quantitatively to the findings from phase one using a student t-test. If the t-test results indicate that the samples are similar with respect to variables relevant to the research, some amount of population validity may be indicated (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this first phase of this study is to generate a list of possible preconditions for willingness to engage in learning activities in post-employment adulthood. Data from a second, larger sample of participants from the same population will be analyzed and compared to the first set of data using a student t-test to determine if the same preconditions appear to be present. At this point, a profile describing the history, personal attributes, and current lifestyle of well-educated, mature adults currently engaged in learning activities is beginning to emerge:

- an educational history associated with success, personal relationships with peers and instructors, and a focus on the subjects studied or skills acquired as opposed to a focus on tests and measured outcomes;
- learning activities extended beyond traditional school years and continuing through adulthood;
- personal attributes including positive self-efficacy and internal locus of control;
- a current lifestyle that includes physical activity and regular social engagement.

If this profile proves to be a valid and reliable indicator of the conditions that pre-dispose mature adults to continue learning, there are numerous implications for researchers and practitioners in the field of adult education.

## **Implications for Today**

Mature learners at this time in history are members of the so-called *pre-digital generation* and have been referred to as *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001). They did not grow up with the digital technology that the generation born after 1980 has been exposed to throughout their learning lives, and do not appear to make a strong connection between the use of such technology and education. They are also more likely than younger learners to have traditional, teacher-centred education backgrounds and traditional expectations for learning environments and sources.

Prensky's generational predictions appear to be borne out in observations made incidentally in a recent study of the effectiveness of a constructivist online learning environment for adults (ages 20 – 49). The researcher noted some differences between the younger and older adults in the study. For example, it was observed that the older adults spent more time on their course work, and were more interested in collaborative learning, more inclined to seek out direct contact with their peers, less motivated by course achievement, and less concerned with real-world applications than their younger colleagues (Ruey, 2010).

As noted earlier in the Results section, a majority of the participants in this study believe formal, traditional learning contexts have been the most productive for them. Anecdotally, conversations with participants revealed that they continue to believe they learn best when they attend a traditional class led by an instructor who is a subject matter expert. When recollecting their prior learning experiences, they tended to refer more often to the subject matter studied and the process of learning itself, along with relationships formed with peers and instructors, than to outcomes in the form of grades achieved.

A previous study found that learning is inhibited when current experiences differ from prior or expected experiences (Belzer, 2004). If the findings of phase one of this study are confirmed in the second, larger sample without a significant difference between the samples, it could be interpreted as indicative of the need to provide older learners in open and distance learning contexts with hybrid learning environments, including regular and interactive engagement with a facilitator and with their peers. Another set of findings that may argue for flexibility and variety



with respect to the delivery of education to older learners is reflected in their self-reported learning style preferences. Nearly all the participants selected at least two, and in many cases, more than two learning styles.

It appears that non-traditional learning designers and facilitators can best meet the needs of the current generation of mature learners by attending to the comfort level they have with the learning context. That comfort level is impacted by how similar the context is to their prior contexts and can be improved not only by modifying the context where possible and necessary, but also by providing mature learners with explicit details about what to expect when they enter a program. Future generations of mature learners will probably have more experience with what are now considered non-traditional learning contexts, including the use of technology in distance programs. However, as older learners, they will have other prior experiences and tendencies that will continue to impact learning in spite of this expected increase in familiarity with non-traditional learning environments.

## **Implications for the Future**

The profile that is being suggested here is one in which today's engaged mature learners are likely to have a history of positive experiences with learning, learning that was perceived to have continued through adulthood, positive self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control. Regarding other aspects of their lives, the participants in this study also shared active social lives and regular physical exercise. In order to prepare for the mature learners of the future, the fields of adult education in general and open learning in particular might benefit from more attention being paid by researchers and practitioners to these experiences, attributes, and lifestyle characteristics now.

In broad, societal terms, a case can be made for adult educators and other members of the helping professions to advocate with public agencies and in the business sector on behalf of their learners with respect to improving access to continuing education throughout their adult lives and on and off job sites. The participants in this study perceived their adult years and activities to have been characterized by continued learning. Within learning institutions, this advocacy could also be extended to working with administrations to encourage the expansion of opportunities for social interaction and participation in physical fitness programs for adults of all ages. Since it may be the case that physically fit, socially active mature adults are predisposed to engage in learning activities, it follows logically that it could be helpful to attend to these aspects of adult lifestyles before these adults reach older adulthood.

There are, of course, also implications of direct interest to practitioners of adult education. These implications apply especially to the use of social and collaborative learning and transformative and critical learning practices in physical and virtual classrooms.

Participants in this study indicated via their recollections that their prior educational experiences had included social connections and a sense of *belonging*. Evidence abounds for the essential nature of social and collaborative learning for adults and particularly for adults in distance education programs (Bruffee, 1999; Clark & Mayer, 2003). Some advocates of collaborative

learning assume that “all knowledge is socially constructed . . . in an ongoing negotiation to consensus that involves increasingly larger and more complex communities of knowledgeable peers” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 52). In the context of higher or continuing education, an instructor committed to promoting this kind of learning needs to be skilled both in using and fostering collaboration. According to Bruffee (1999), fostering such learning depends on the ability of the facilitator to assist learners in creating a so-called *knowledge community* and in developing the linguistic and communicative skills necessary to be an engaged, contributing member of that community.

These collaborative communities can be formed and have been found to thrive in online learning contexts. Collaborative tools found to be effective include providing concurrency such that a group of learners is proceeding through a program at the same time, and including curricular activities that require learners to work in groups via whatever technology is available and appropriate (Clark & Mayer, 2003).

Providing younger adult learners now with collaborative and socially engaging learning environments may pay off for learners and educators alike in the future if the mature learners of the future come to the learning environment with a personal history of ongoing membership in a knowledge community. However, it seems that engagement in learning is also associated with positive self-efficacy beliefs and an internal locus of control. Fostering these individual attributes presents a different challenge for educators than facilitating social learning does.

In order to encourage positive self-efficacy and an internal locus of control in younger adult learners who do not demonstrate such traits now, educators could consider using techniques such as critical questioning. The goal of such techniques is to “actively encourage critical reflection through which individuals can investigate their meaning schemes and perspectives” (Cranton, 1994, p. 169). In other words, learners who currently have low expectations regarding their abilities and learning outcomes and/or who tend to attribute outcomes to external forces rather than to themselves could be helped by analyzing how and why they came to hold these beliefs and recognizing the impact of those beliefs on their learning. Transformative learning theory holds that learners who successfully engage in such critical reflections will ultimately be able to construct new, more effective and realistic sets of assumptions and expectations.

## **Questions to be Answered**

As is often the case, preliminary results raise more questions than they answer. These questions are beyond the scope of this study but warrant further investigation.

1. Are social engagement and physical activity as preconditions characteristic of the learners’ lives throughout adulthood or can they play a particular role in enhancing motivation to learn later in life?
2. How do self-efficacy and locus of control beliefs develop and how amenable are they to intervention and modification by means of educational practices?

3. The majority of these successful mature learners had high levels of education and/or professional achievement. Are mature adults with lower levels of education and occupational status who nonetheless had positive prior experiences with learning equally predisposed to continue learning as they age?
4. Did prior learning success predispose these learners to focus on the subject matter and processes of learning rather than on outcomes?
5. Comparing formal to informal prior learning, do late-in-life learners rely on one more than the other when constructing new understandings? Are the skills and knowledge previously acquired stored and subsequently accessed based on whether the original experience was formal or informal?
6. What is the role of learning in promoting successful aging as perceived by the mature individuals themselves? Is it beneficial for all mature adults, assuming nominal physical and cognitive functioning, or is the desire to continue learning itself an individual attribute?

### **Final Thoughts**

In this first phase of the study, an item on the questionnaire completed by the participants asked them to indicate how they felt contemplating learning something new (*excited, calm, worried, or no change*), and another asked them how they felt after they learned something new (*proud, satisfied, relieved, or no change*). Regarding their pre-learning experience attitude, the majority of participants selected the adjective *excited* to describe their feelings, and with respect to how they felt afterwards, most chose either *proud* or *satisfied*. One participant added a write-in option to the item asking him how he felt after acquiring a new skill or new knowledge. He said he felt *surprised*. To have learners who are excited at the prospect of learning and who feel pride and satisfaction as a result of their learning experience--and even some whose level of comfort with learning allows good-humored self-deprecation – should be the goal of educators of adults at all stages in their lives. But to find these attributes in a group of such mature learners is as heartening as it is intriguing. In a future that will doubtlessly be characterized by an aging population of learners, there is reason to believe that there is much we in the field of adult education can learn from the successful mature learners of today to prepare for those of tomorrow.

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## *Validation of Competencies in E-Portfolios: A Qualitative Analysis*

**Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Anke Hanft**  
University of Oldenburg, Germany

**Eva Maria Bäcker**  
FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

### **Abstract**

This paper uses the example of an Internet-based advanced studies course to show how the portfolio method, as a competence-based form of examination, can be integrated in a blended learning design. Within the framework of a qualitative analysis of project portfolios, we examined which competencies are documented and how students reflected on their competence development process using portfolios.

**Keywords:** Competence development; competence-based assessment; e-portfolio

### **Introduction**

Along with the Bologna process in Europe came the paradigm shift from input orientation (what shall be learned?) to outcome orientation (what should students be able to do?). This change required a reorganization of examination performances which focus on the competencies that are to be acquired. While the conversion of course organisation has been almost completed, competence-based assessment can be regarded as an “unsolved assignment” within the European context (Stratmann, Preußler, & Kerres, 2009). Reinmann (2007) even refers to a “competence lie” (p. 13). Current examination practice in universities usually consists of a triathlon, in which written examinations, presentations, and research papers compete with each other.

At this stage, the conversion towards competence-based assessment has been realized only insufficiently. Methodological difficulties, which arise when measuring competencies (Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2003), are one reason for this lack. Weinert (2001) describes competencies as the cognitive abilities and skills to solve problems, which are innate in individuals or can be learned by them. In this sense, competencies involve motivational, volitional (intention-related), and social dispositions and abilities that allow the individual to successfully and responsibly solve problems in various situations. The interweaving of cognition and motivation is a characteristic feature of competent action (Weinert, 1996). A mechanism of competence development can then be expressed by self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975). The latter includes the learner setting goals independently, developing and testing plans and strategies in order to realise these goals, and learning from the resulting experiences. Accordingly, Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003) define competencies as self-organisational dispositions. Competence is therefore composed of knowledge, experiences, and abilities for the *application and implementation* of knowledge, strategies, abilities, and skills (Zawacki-Richter, Hasebrook, & Muckel, 2009). Similarly, Connell, Sheridan, and Gardner (2003) describe competencies as “realized abilities,” which is exactly to the point. This *performance* in new, unpredictable contexts can be documented in order to make competencies visible and therefore assessable as well. In this context the essential difference between qualification and competence becomes especially visible. Traditionally, qualification documents a performance in an artificial situation, e.g., an examination in which knowledge is tested. However, competent action cannot be measured in such simulated test situations.

One method that is suitable to measure competence is the portfolio – or e-portfolio for the electronic form: “Portfolios...are always a goal driven, organized collection of items (artefacts) that demonstrate a learner's expansion of knowledge and skills over time” (Walti, 2004, p. 157).

In the Internet-based continuing education courses offered by the University of Oldenburg, learning portfolios are embedded in the examination regulations. In this paper, the instructional embedding of portfolios in degree courses and modules will be presented first, using the example of the MBA in Educational Management. Secondly, portfolios from various course modules will be evaluated within the framework of qualitative text analysis. By applying the coding paradigm of grounded theory, we will examine and describe how students reflect on competencies in the portfolios. Thus, Erpenbeck and Heyse’s (1999) competence model provides initial access to the empirical data used in this study. This model divides competencies into four classes: personal competencies, activity-and action-oriented competencies, socio-communicative competencies, and methodological and professional competencies. The “competence explorer” (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2004) based on this model serves us as an orientation (see Figure 2).

Based on our empirical data, the study investigated how students reflect on their competence development and which competencies are documented in this way.

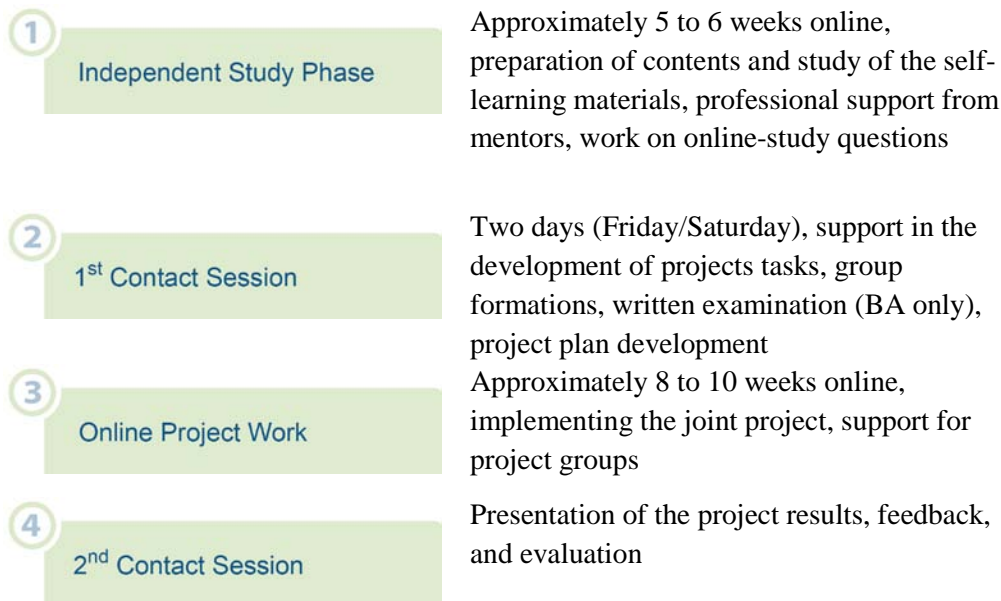


## **Integrating Portfolios in Internet-Based Degree Courses Using the Example of the University of Oldenburg**

The University of Oldenburg is playing a pioneering role in the development of extra-occupational and continuing-education courses. The first Internet-based, advanced-study bachelor's degree course in business administration was introduced in the summer semester of 2003. In 1999, the university started developing an online Master of Distance Education degree in cooperation with the University of Maryland University College in the United States. At present, the following continuing education degrees are offered:

- Business Administration (BA)
- Business Economics for Top Athletes (BA)
- Master of Education Management (MBA)
- Information Law (LL.M.)
- Master of Distance Education (MDE) in cooperation with the University of Maryland University College (USA)
- Renewable Energy (MSc)
- Innovation Management (MA)

All degrees mentioned above are designed to meet the needs and requirements of working adult learners. They focus on practical and active learning within real projects that students bring in from their own employment contexts and work on in teams. Six programs use a blended learning approach in order to enable maximum spatial and temporal flexibility while establishing direct interaction between students and teachers as well as between students (making social contacts, forming groups, finding subjects, presenting and discussing findings) (Sauter & Sauter, 2002). Figure 1 illustrates the blended learning structure of such a course.



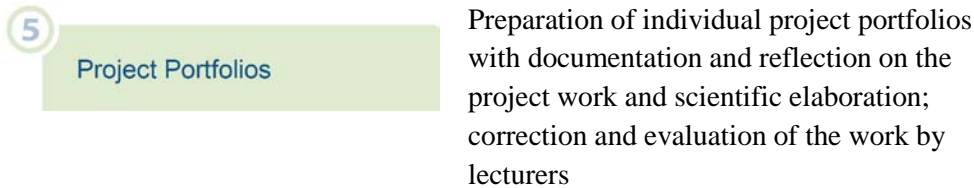


Figure 1. Structure of blended learning courses at UOL in the MBA Educational Management program.

The following remarks refer to the MBA in Education Management program. The focus of interest is the project portfolio, which is created individually by all students upon completion of a course module. According to Baumgartner, Himpf, and Zauchner's framework (2009), this is an individual personal portfolio that includes both product-oriented (summative) and process-oriented (formative) reflections on the learning process.

The guidelines for students and faculty in the MBA in Education Management program explain the function of the portfolio as follows:

The portfolio is a specific collection of material and documents, with the purpose of documenting a specific range of performance over a period of time. Thus, the portfolio serves as a component of self-evaluation and provides participants and outsiders with an overview of personal learning success, goals and results of the projects.

The guidelines also contain information for students on how to structure the portfolio work.

The project portfolio phase follows the second contact phase and consists of two parts:

- demonstration of the project work and of one's own growth in competence, and
- a scientific elaboration on a central question of the project.

Since the examination regulations for the degree course stipulate the project portfolio (learning portfolio) as mandatory coursework, it contributes significantly toward the overall module grade: "The overall grade for the specific course module consists of one third of the evaluation of the presentation of the results while the remaining two thirds derive from the learning portfolio for processing the project assignments" (§13, sentence 9, MBA examination regulations). Lecturers receive an evaluation template they can use when evaluating the presentation of results and the learning portfolio.

Students in the MBA in Educational Management program are on average about 37 years old. Nearly all are employed and hold positions within senior management (e.g., vice-chancellor, executive director, head of department) or positions in middle management (e.g., division manager, faculty executive director, programme manager) in educational and scientific institutions. Thirty to forty percent of the students come from publicly financed or private

education providers. About 10% work in educational policy or administration (e.g., in ministries or accreditation agencies). All MBA students hold a degree (60% have a university degree, 25% have degrees from a university of applied science, and 10% hold doctorates).

## **Methods and Sample**

### **The Competence Model**

With regard to the systematic taxonomy of individual competencies, Erpenbeck and his colleagues (Erpenbeck & Heyse, 1999; Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2003; Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2004) developed a competence model with which different competence dimensions can be operationalized in order to design “an instrument that takes up little time for measuring competencies and competence developments” (Erpenbeck & Heyse, 2007, p. 24). Competencies are divided into competence types, classes, and groups and are summarised in a competence explorer (see Figure 2). The four competence classes include

1. personal competencies (e.g., the ability to act reflexively and on a self-organised basis, to evaluate oneself, reliability, willingness to learn);
2. activity and action competencies (e.g., flexibility, independence, creativity, initiative);
3. methods and professional competencies (e.g., objectivity, project management);
4. socio-communicative competencies (e.g., team skills, ability to accept criticism).

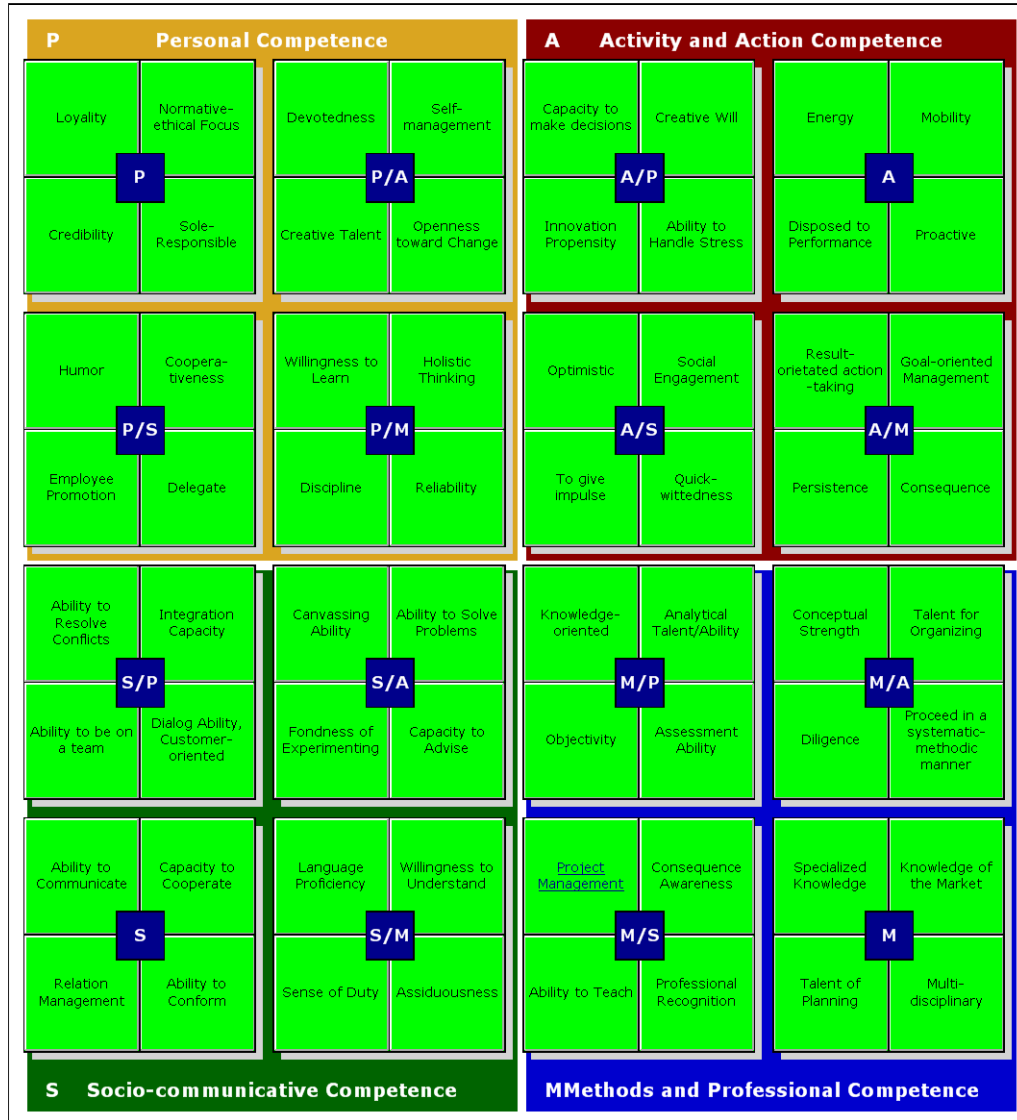


Figure 2. The competence explorer (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2004, p. XXI).

Cross-sectional competencies are complex competencies whose facets influence all four competence classes. Examples of cross-sectional competencies are media competence, management or leadership competence, innovation competence, and intercultural competence (see Zawacki-Richter & Hasebrook, 2005). In this context, cross-sectional competencies are also referred to as meta-competencies (Weinert, 2001).

## Qualitative Analysis of Competencies in Portfolios

Against the background of the competence terms described here, competencies of students, their acquired methodological and professional knowledge, cannot be tested directly. Only the application of concrete abilities in actual situations (performance) is assessable. Based on the question of how students reflect on their competence development processes in the portfolio and

which competencies are documented for teachers in this way, this study intends to analyze whether the portfolio, as a competence-based examination, is a suitable method for making students' competencies visible by means of their reflections on their individual learning processes.

The first part of the written project portfolios for the MBA in Education Management program serves as the data basis for this study. This examination performance is followed by the presentation of the findings within the second project phase and comprises a presentation of the project work as well as the individual competence growth observed from the student's (subjective) perspective. Based on the four competence classifications (personal competence, activity and action competence, socio-communicative competence, and methods and professional competence) from Heyse and Erpenbeck (2004), the competence explorer is used for the analysis of the written reflections of students taking the course. The students' portfolios were coded using grounded theory in order to facilitate the assignment of the reflections as theoretical constructs to the competence fields in the competence model. Grounded theory is known as a theory "that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 12).

Using the coding of grounded theory, constructs or theoretical terms are formed in connection with indicators, which are based on the so-called concept-indicator-model (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Schnell, Hill, & Esser, 1992).

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore data collection, analysis, and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant is allowed to emerge. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

Strauss and Corbin emphasize the importance of thinking comparatively. "Coding, as noted in a previous section, is an essential procedure" (Strauss, 1989, p.27). During the total of three coding steps, categories and subcategories can be noted and labelled, interpreted and related to each other. The pivotal role of coding is finding terms (concepts, constructs, categories) and not paraphrasing the data. The essential contents of the portfolios are thus clustered in concrete terms on a more abstract level.

The coding steps build on each other: Open coding is characterised by a line-by-line analysis of the data, in which each line is labelled with a code. Descriptions of phenomena are labelled with abstract terms that are potentially appropriate. Comparable with brainstorming, this coding form maintains possibilities for interpretations and different ways of reading the data. The purpose is to

form object-related, standardising, and abstract terms, enabling the comparison of data across different cases.

## **Qualitative Sampling and Thematic Coding**

The sample for this study contains 23 portfolios from the modules Technology-Enhanced Learning and Instructional Design, which are taught within the MBA in Educational Management program. Preceding the selection of the random sample for the comparative analysis, all portfolios were coded in the open coding process and subsequently subdivided into groups of counter-examples according to a contrasting case selection. To verify whether the four competence classes of the Heyse and Erpenbeck (2004) model are reflected in the written reflections, we selected those portfolios that contrast most with one another. Therefore, the sampling is oriented towards the categories from Heyse and Erpenbeck (2004) in order to stand a systematic examination of how far the competence explorer can be applied to the portfolios in the later analysis. The selected contrasting portfolios passed through yet another step of open coding, which was carried out using the computer-based analysis software program MAX-QDA. Whilst the data, which had been reduced to four contrasting portfolios by this time, were coded, the selected portfolios were continually compared.

For the next step of analysis, the classical coding process path of grounded theory was modified in order to be able to apply Heyse and Erpenbeck's 64 competence groups to the categories based on the portfolios, thus increasing the comparability of the data.

Following the process of the second run of the open coding, the 64 competencies from the competence explorer were summarized in a predefined categories system, and as such entered in MAX-QDA. This procedure, also known as thematic coding (Flick, 1996; Kuckartz, 2007), is suitable especially for comparative data with predetermined categories, as is the case with the defined competencies of Heyse and Erpenbeck. The categories, in this case the competencies, are defined as thematic groups and assigned to each individual case. The interpretation of the data assumes a theoretical "concept of the distribution of perspectives on a specific object or process" (Heyse & Erpenbeck, 2004, p. 210).

By applying the procedure outlined above, a thematic structure of competencies for each portfolio is obtained, allowing a precise placement within Heyse and Erpenbeck's (2004) competence groups. This classification also serves to identify similarities and contrasts between the students' reflections on their competence processes. Consequently, the validity of Heyse and Erpenbeck's (2004) competence explorer can be verified on the basis of the reflections in the portfolios.

## **Discussion**

The categories, as ascertained by the open coding, could be clearly assigned to the four competence classes. In the portfolios, the students' actions were made visible, strategies traced, and attitudes detected. By the use of thematic coding, the students' portfolios could be further converted into so-called "competence maps."

The phenomenon of students' competencies can be described using the coding paradigm (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and it is useful to systematically identify and compare complex relationships within the data. To be precise, by applying the competence-grid to the portfolio-texts, this examination aims at identifying those competencies that lead the students to align their individual study goals with the required group project and the subsequent presentation of the findings within the group. In order to be able to compare the aggregate of competencies, which is required for online group work, the categories found in the first open-coding run from the portfolios were contrasted with the codes of the 64 competencies of the thematic coding, to determine how they differ regarding the individual competence types. In the following section, four contrasting cases are presented to represent and illustrate the four competence classes. They are coded as SCC (socio-communicative competence), MPC (methods and professional competence), PLC (personal competence), and AAC (activity and action competence).

### **Type SCC: Socio-Communicative Competence**

The presentation of the results starts with the competence type "socio-communicative," referred to as type SCC. According to Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003), social competence equals a disposition

enabling the individual to independently act in a communicative and cooperative way; in other words, to be capable to deal and work with others creatively, to act in accordance with the needs of the group, and to develop new plans, tasks, and goals together.  
(p. XVI)

For type SCC, the code distributions with regard to the identified competencies show that socio-communicative competence, with a total of 17 attributions, quantitatively outweighs all others. It is certainly not expected that type SCC consists exclusively of socio-communicative competencies; otherwise, this would demonstrate a competence distribution that is one-sided and impractical for studying. In order to study successfully, the student needs methods and professional competencies, which are represented in her portfolio. Her methodological and professional competence is further characterised as a mixed form, blending social and communicative competencies.

The student, classified as type SCC, starts her portfolio by describing the initial phase of the contact session. Her portfolio demonstrates clearly that her attention regarding the course module is focused on the group process. This can be concluded not only from the language used, but also from the formal arrangement of the reflection, as the first chapter is titled "Reflection on the group phase" and the second is entitled "Finding the topic for the project work."

From the student's perspective, the functional result of the project work represents solely the "means to an end." As such it takes on a secondary role in the process. Her attitude towards the online work is further characterized by the fact that she evaluates the group process, rather than

the processing of the subject matter, as a challenge. The group's assignment is to examine methods and models of e-learning. On the selection of the topic, the type SCC student stresses her affinity to group work, at the same time placing herself as a "passive" member of a group (SCC, ability to be on a team). She describes the process of finding a topic for the project phase as a "process, which was arranged effectively and meaningfully, and performed to the satisfaction of all participants" (SCC, capacity to cooperate).

The position of type SCC within the group is that of an unobtrusive group member. Even though she behaves very cooperatively, she does not contribute much to the group process. Instead of turning towards the group in order to find strategies that make the work on the module easier, she works "by means of a project plan" (MPC, proceed in a systematic manner). An individual problem-solving strategy cannot be seen. Whenever problems arise she does not take the initiative, but behaves passively, with a wait-and-see attitude. Looking retrospectively at a communication problem which arose at some point within the group, she complained that "at this point, carrying out a telephone conference could have probably helped me personally." In this way she displays little personal competence by feeling responsible for her problems, but rather shows behaviour that awaits the reactions of the group.

Initially, type SCC feels reserved toward the new tool in the online learning environment. Later, the shared use of this tool by the group alters her attitude and it becomes an "appreciated instrument" (SCC, ability to conform) for the student. Consequently the group also takes on the role of a "safe room" because the student does not feel like an isolated being in the course.

When presenting the results to the plenum, the acceptance (as a public image) of the entire group by the other groups in the module is important to type SCC. The group's results and its democratic notion are prevalent here. The result of the group work takes on a subordinate role once again. Type SCC is not so much interested in the other groups accrediting the topic as in the assessment of the group by others. As indicated in the portfolio, it seems that type SCC attaches more value to the group work being assessed positively "as a group" than to the actual result of the group work. Apparently, she attaches only little value to personal success since she identifies exclusively with the group in which she takes on a public role without taking on a performance role (Luhmann, 1999). Type SCC behaves cooperatively towards the other groups and acknowledges their achievements: "I was eager to see the results of the other teams."

In her summary of the module, type SCC eagerly anticipates a new group process in another online course. As a learning effect she wishes to be integrated "more continuously and effectively in my new group."



## Type MPC: Methods and Professional Competence

Type SCC, whose actions are focused on the group process, contrasts with the “methods and professional” competence type, described here as type MPC. Methodological and professional competencies are defined by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel as the dispositions of a person

to act mentally and physically in a self-organised way when solving factual and objective problems, i.e., to solve problems creatively by applying professional and functional knowledge, skills and abilities, to classify and evaluate knowledge sensibly; this implies the ability to design and develop activities, tasks and solutions using creative and innovative methods. (2003, p. XVI)

The code distribution of type MPC consists of 12 methods and professional competencies. The activity and action competence also designates a mixed type for methods and professional competence. Both characteristics of the socio-communicative competencies include the “ability to solve problems” as well as the “assiduousness” that exists in the group. Consequently, we find a “professional” in its purest form in this particular portfolio (in the sense of Weber's *Fachmensch*).

As the student does not mention preparation of the module in her portfolio, the phase preceding the actual course remains inaccessible for analysis. The module focuses on becoming acquainted with new online instruments, which were tested within the group for their usefulness in online courses. As such, this module contrasts that of type SCC, whose focus is on the group process of the learning effect. For type MPC, the group process, arranged around the testing of the instruments, is seen as a necessary “means to an end.” The student defines her personal learning success as acquiring “knowledge of educational technologies” and “trying them out” (MPC, specialized knowledge, professional and methodological competence, diligence).

Type MPC sees the challenge of project work from a technical perspective. The point is to research, categorize, arrange, and try out educational technologies. Type MPC is integrated in a group in which the technical aspect appears to be the primary focus. The topic conforms to the technical theme: “First of all, the central terms learning goal, learning effect and internet-supported learning were defined and the instructional theories of learning are examined more closely” (MPC, proceed in a systematic-methodological manner). Then “the instrument that was found was tested if procurable and the application described to the other two participants of the project” (MPC, objectivity, professional and methodological competence, talent of planning). Whereas the cooperation of the project group within the project work poses the biggest challenge for type SCC, type MPC regards the “organisation of the variety of the instruments and then to try out all the instruments individually” during the project work (MPC, talent of planning) as a challenge.

Type MPC does not once mention the other group members. There is only one chapter entitled “Own contributions to the project work.” These contributions consist merely of taking over the definition of the “learning targets and learning effects.” The integration of type MPC in the group

can be defined as a “cog in the system” because rather than the social position in the group, type MPC displays the subject-specific position in the group. Thus, type MPC occupies a position in the group that is objective and legitimated through specialist knowledge. Above all, she feels responsible for the definition of the specialist topic, not for the maintenance of a communicative process in the group.

For type MPC, the time load connected to the intensive online phase (presentation of the project’s results) represents the “sole disadvantage” of this phase: “shortly before the presentation phase I had reached my limits.” The student’s “limits” become visible here as she assesses the technical effort for the project as being very high and she underestimates the duration. It can be suspected that type MPC demands professional and high-quality results because the workload is justified in such a way that the requirements for the project contents become noticeably less important as the technical effort increases. This corroborates the image of the technical aspiration of a person with high methodological and professional competence, that he/she reaches his/her personal breaking point when the technical contents are “at risk.”

In the final presentation of the group results, it is important to type MPC that the researched instruments are used in an optimal way. The group can be interpreted as a “means to an end” for reaching the technical goal. Type MPC does not reflect on any more information regarding the group process.

Finally, the module is assessed for its technical benefits, which turn out to be positive: “The project enhanced my focus on my work and on which instruments are really suitable for my target group.”

## **Type PLC: Personal Competence**

The next competence type, “personal competence” (type PLC) can also be contrasted with the aforementioned “socio-communicative” and “methods and professional” types. According to Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel (2003), this competence type is characterized by the dispositions of a person

to act in a reflexive and self-organised way and to evaluate oneself. This implies the ability to develop productive attitudes, value positions etc., to unfold one’s own talents, motivations, intentions, and to develop and learn creatively and learn within the scope of the work and outside of it. (2003, p. XVI)

Based on Heyse and Erpenbeck’s (2004) model, this portfolio identifies a student who possesses a high level of personal competence. In contrast to the two previous types, in this case the personal competencies are present to a high degree; however, they are less useful for group work. Type PLC arranges the module, including the project group, around his personal course goals and reflects on the course as an “individual learner” who expects that the whole course is tailored to his needs. It is useful to note that with the socio-communicative competence type, the online

module was focused on the group process, while the methodological and professional type focused on the technical topic.

The use of the self-referential pronouns *I* and *me* in this portfolio is striking. Many sentences start with “answered by me on time,” “I selected in accordance with my expectations,” “I initially placed this in the assignment field,” “was posted by me,” and so on.

Before the course officially started, type PLC had intensively engaged with the module. He thoroughly researched the functions of online tools in advance: “In order to prepare for the demands of the module, I tested the functions of WebCT and studied guidelines and materials that were offered there beforehand.” While this behaviour shows a high degree of personal competence regarding individual responsibility, it could also demonstrate an egocentric point of view. Accordingly, the particular type PLC, identified in these portfolios, is interpreted as a “lone wolf” within the group project. He only has eyes for his own goal and uses other members of the course to accomplish it.

Type PLC aims at “organising his course around his central occupational topic.” Thus, the online module is turned into a course that is precisely tailored to his needs. At the beginning, he carefully plans and fathoms the technical and functional facilities to see whether they match his expectations. Moreover, the assessment of the course by others is very important to type PLC. After advisory services on the module are accessed (“I obtained detailed advice”), the advantages of the course are related to his occupational goals and desires: “In addition, I emailed two students, whose names were given to me by Mr X, and asked them about their experiences.” Furthermore, type PLC regards this online module as an opportunity “to test studying.”

With regard to problem-solving strategies, type PLC behaves similarly to type SCC in this study, namely passively. But unlike type SCC, who waits and sees, type PLC rather “complains” if there are any problems, especially when these are of a technical nature, instead of contributing to concrete solutions. Particularly when technical problems occur, he automatically expects the university to solve them but never questions his foreign Internet connection as a possible cause of these technical difficulties. Whenever there are communicative misunderstandings, type PLC lays the blame onto the lecturers: “Unfortunately, because of communication problems with the lecturer, not all participants had prepared a PowerPoint presentation.”

Where type SCC displays reservations towards the foreign online tool, type PLC expresses “concerns” that technical faults could occur, which might keep him from “starting optimally.” As will be shown in the following section, type AAC (activity- and action-oriented competence) uses technical problems as a challenge to learn the correct way of handling new technical tools. This range of responses is remarkable insofar as the reflections in the portfolios originate from the same online module. The same module is therefore considered from different perspectives from the point of view of different competence types.

The idea of realising his project pervades the attitude of type PLC towards the online project work, the choice of topic, and the group. Type PLC selects a topic that is directly related to his work context, which the others (may) fall in line with. In this respect he writes:

Instead of uploading my project sketch in the general forum, I accidentally uploaded it to the assignment area of WebCT. After this fault was corrected and the lecturer had commented in detail on the sketches, two participants X and Y, joined the project.

He does not suggest the topic in a democratic discourse, but publishes it in the forum where he then has the lecturer comment on it in detail. After that he selects “his” group members in accordance with their technical knowledge and “efficiency”; they subscribe to the topic, which is now organised by type PLC. Thus he takes on the role of leader and degrades his group members to marginal figures. This “perfectly functioning” personal competence illustrates that type PLC possesses a high level of individual responsibility and “looks after himself well.”

His position in the group becomes that of a “pioneer” and “evaluator.” In this context it is characteristic for type PLC that the group work functions smoothly according to his rules (“...that the project idea that I submitted should be the basis for further cooperation”). Unexpected incidents endanger the progress of the group work; for example, during the presentation of the results, he states, “Ms. X experienced a serious private problem situation for a few days.” There are no individual concrete socio-communicative competencies that could be identified here for problem solving and exhibiting empathy with Ms. X. Instead, type PLC reports that the rapid intervention of the group ensured that nothing got in the way of the presentation of his project idea.

In contrast to the socio-communicative type SCC, to whom the well-being of group members is important in a problem situation, the focus of type PLC on his own project idea can be seen clearly here. The general rule of the socio-communicative type, “all for one and one for all,” seems to turn into the principle “all for me.” In contrast, the methodological and professional competence type could be assigned to the principle “all for the collective topic.”

Type PLC displays strengths by means of the competencies “persistence” and “diligence.” For example, in his reflection, he explicitly lists the items of the tasks he carried out in the group (“I did the following work”). These include those tasks that form the basis for further tasks of the group members, e.g., literature research and establishment of an Internet platform, which implies that the group would have failed, had it not been for his “basis work.” As an example he states, “I also generated all the diagrams for the presentation from this table.”

Type PLC’s summary after the course is characterized by strong personal interests:

What I also liked was being able to bring in my professional background and that I enjoyed the freedom to work on a practical problem as part of a very committed project group. Our

results have already been partly implemented in a concrete project.

What is not mentioned at all is how the other group members, having appeared only in “supporting roles” within the project, can integrate this “group result” into their own professional work.

After the end of the project phase, Type PLC closes the course with a “last word” by using the forum to provide feedback for the tutor, commenting on the course and making various suggestions for improvements.

## **Type AAC: Activity and Action Competence**

The activity and action competence type (identified as type AAC) is highly motivated, as is type PLC, in the competence areas of diligence and engagement. The creative power of both competence types is pronounced; however, the intentions that motivate the actions originate in type AAC from pleasure in innovation and enthusiasm for the subject and in type PLC from achievement of a personal goal.

Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2003) describe activity and action competence as dispositions of a person

to take action in a self-organised way, and to focus on the implementation of intentions and plans – either for themselves or for others and with others, in a team, in a company, in an organisation. This implies the property to integrate one’s own emotions, motivations, abilities and experiences across all other competence categories, and to follow actions through to successful completion. (p. XVI)

Type AAC’s reflection starts with an English quote commenting on the various possibilities of online tools for collaborative learning. Type AAC sees the challenges of online learning in terms of technical innovation and development. Personally she regards attending the course as a challenge as well.

In the first section of the portfolio, type AAC refers to her motivation for taking this course as “driven by the practical relevance.” The student titles the first chapter of her portfolio as “motivation in terms of the project topic,” which implies her motivational objectives for starting the module. By comparison, type SCC (social-communicative) starts the portfolio with a “reflection on the group phase,” type PLC (personal competence) reflects in the first section on his personal goals in the course, and type MPC (methodological and professional competence) starts the introductory text with a technical, objective description of the project’s goal.

Besides the online module examined in this study, type AAC is also engaged in the organisation and mentoring of another open university course. In her reflections in the text, type AAC stands out due to a high degree of motivation and interest for the module. Type AAC describes technical problems as “challenges,” prompting her to learn how to deal with technical online tools. In this context, the text contains strikingly positive statements. Type AAC talks of motivation, interest, challenges, additional benefit, gains, processes, and so on.

This process-oriented thinking recurs in her reflection on the group work. Type AAC sums it up this way:

At the beginning we still had the goal of developing a list of criteria for quality assurance. However, over the course of the project we had to give up this goal, as we realized that this is not a profitable project. Since each organisation is unique, the respective criteria to assure the quality vary for each institution.

Type AAC’s position in the project group is characterized by active participation and cooperation. The group is formed in accordance with the competencies of the individual group members and tasks are assigned on the basis of individual abilities (“the priorities and the competencies of the individual group members were quickly and clearly defined”). Furthermore the climate within the group is dominated by equality. Consequently, Type AAC describes the group as a “dream team.”

Type AAC devotes a long section of her portfolio to the description of her parallel course module and her activities as a tutor for this module, offered by the same university. Many processes in her field of activity are not defined, and because of her “Internet affinity” the student becomes “the e-learning representative of the whole university.” In spite of the double workload, type AAC becomes more “active” and more motivated because the situation increases her interest in grappling with the subject matter more intensively. The example of type MPC’s breaking point stands in contrast. Type MPC reaches a breaking point under the pressure of time, especially because the quality of the technical topic could not be maintained; whereas, “pressure of time” induces type AAC to increase her workload as well as her interest for the project. Type AAC regards the online presentation as a challenge “to cope with the technical realisation of the Internet presentation.” At the same time she discovers the advantage of “not having to travel” in order to hold the presentation.

Type AAC believes that she has fully achieved the learning goals of the module. Thus she states in a chapter, entitled “gain for practical use”: “In fact, I can now transfer the acquired results one hundred percent to my practical work.”

In this examination, the strongest presentations of the “ability to be on a team” and the “ability to solve problems” are seen in the the socio-communicative competencies of type AAC.

Within the methodological and professional competence – the “systematic-methodological approach” – project management skills and a sense of “consequence awareness” are apparent, indicating a mix of methodological and professional competence with socio-communicative competence.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In summary, the competence explorer from Heyse and Erpenbeck can be used as a suitable instrument for making students’ competencies visible in their portfolios and thus for identifying students’ existing competencies. Based on the students’ reflections, the explorer can further contribute to drawing conclusions regarding the type of competencies that were acquired during the learning processes. Using the explorer can also help to detect the particular types of competencies that students employ in specific learning situations, when specific problems arise, and when students reach their limits.

However, this text analysis cannot explain the origin or what causes the emergence of the competencies found in this study. Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether any and which of the identified competencies existed before the students enrolled in the modules or were acquired or modified during the learning process. Likewise, this approach does not allow an increase or change of a competence to be correlated with the module. Therefore, it could be interesting for future research to examine in a longitudinal analysis whether the identified classifications change over the course of the studies as a result of the instructional design of the course modules.

However, the qualitative text analysis based on the competence explorer does enable students’ competencies to be identified on a much more differentiated basis than would be possible without other forms of examination. Even though we are unable to derive from the text, written in the form of minutes or a working report, why students possess these competencies and not others, or to identify reasons for students’ behaviours during the project phase or the reflection phase, this procedure does in fact enable feedback guided by criteria.

The prerequisite for competence-based assessment is that the courses of study are themselves based on recognised competence models, which contribute to making a portfolio not merely a collection of artefacts but a systematic presentation of acquired competencies accessible to an assessment by third parties. The model used in this study appears to be suitable for this purpose. However, it should remain transparent for the learners, so they can refer to it explicitly. Furthermore, the competence portfolios – based on a coherent competence framework – provide the basis for use as a valuable resource for the recognition and assessment of prior learning in systems that recognize that practice.

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## *Creating a Positive PLA Experience: A Step-by-Step Look at University PLA*

**Sara M. Leiste and Kathryn Jensen**  
Capella University, USA

### **Abstract**

A prior learning assessment (PLA) can be an intimidating process for adult learners. Capella University's PLA team has developed best practices, resources, and tools to foster a positive experience and remove barriers in PLA, and uses three criteria to determine how to best administer the assessment. First, a PLA must be motivating, as described by the ARCS model. Second, it must enable success. Finally, it must use available resources efficiently. The tools and resources developed according to these criteria fall into two categories, staff and online resources. PLA programs can use both to ensure that all departments provide consistent communication to learners about the PLA process, which will foster a positive experience. The PLA online lab houses centralized resources and offers one-on-one interaction with a facilitator to assist learners step-by-step in the development of their petitions. Each unit contains resources, examples, and optional assignments that help learners to develop specific aspects of the petition. By following the examples and recommendations, learners are able to submit polished petitions after they complete the units. The lab facilitator supports learners throughout the units by answering questions and providing recommendations. When learners submit their petitions, the facilitator reviews it entirely and provides feedback to strengthen the final submission that goes to a faculty reviewer for an official evaluation. All of these individuals and tools work together to help create a positive experience for learners who submit a PLA petition. This article shares these resources with the goal of strengthening PLA as a field.

**Keywords:** Prior learning assessment (PLA); student experience; barriers; positive experience; learner experience; facilitator; practitioner experience; practitioner learning; learning narrative; prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR); ARCS model; practitioner knowledge; Capella University; competency-based; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL); The Standards for Assessing Learning

## **Creating a Positive PLA Experience**

Learners know that prior learning assessment (PLA) can help them meet their program requirements in less time and at a reduced cost, but they are uncertain about the PLA process and nervous about their petition being denied. This perception of PLA as a high-risk endeavor can prevent learners from pursuing PLA opportunities. Learners generally understand how to be successful in a classroom setting, but working through a PLA is a more challenging task. Learners are often able to describe their practitioner experience, but do not know how to write an academic description of their knowledge. To address this, the PLA team at Capella University has crafted a positive learner experience to assist learners through the PLA process. Critics might wonder why it is necessary to create a positive PLA experience. It is Capella University's PLA team's philosophy that by creating a positive PLA experience, both learners and the PLA program benefit, creating a win-win situation. There are three criteria which are used to evaluate the PLA process/experience: motivating learners, promoting success, and making efficient use of time and resources.

First, the PLA must motivate learners. By its very nature, a PLA requires self-reflection, in-depth writing, and a significant time investment, all of which can be challenging to learners, causing them to reconsider the decision to challenge a course. Capella's PLA team strives to make the process as motivating as possible, so that learners will persevere through the challenges. According to Keller's (2008) ARCS model, there are four aspects of motivation: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. First, attention is related to curiosity and engagement in a task. Second, relevance is the perception that the task is applicable to one's goals. Because a PLA helps learners meet the goal of finishing a degree program faster at a reduced cost, the relevance of working through it is clear. Third, confidence is the belief that one will successfully complete the task. To improve confidence, the PLA team provides the necessary resources at appropriate times. Finally, satisfaction reflects positive feelings derived from an experience and an interest in continuing that experience. Satisfaction is influenced by the appropriateness of the amount of work as well as consistency between goals and required tasks. The remainder of this article will describe the efforts to address each aspect of motivation.

The second criterion is that the PLA experience must enable the learner to succeed. It is critical for the PLA program to anticipate common problems and provide useful resources at appropriate times. These resources clarify expectations, give positive examples to emulate, and provide flexible support. One important part of this is to encourage learners to be realistic about the PLA they attempt, to accurately assess their own competence as compared to the expectations of the faculty. The PLA team works hard to eliminate barriers to learner success. From the perspective of PLA practitioners, the overall goal is an accurate assessment of prior learning. If there are too many barriers in place, the PLA will instead become a test of the learner's ability to fill out paperwork, master bureaucratic hassles, and seek out hidden resources. Eliminating any barriers to accurate assessment ensures that learners can focus their energy on meaningful assessment activities rather than extraneous requirements.

Finally, the PLA experience must be efficient, making good use of learners' time as well as staff time. This efficiency enables the PLA team to support many learners while maintaining the motivational and supportive aspects of the PLA. It is another reason for eliminating any barriers that prevent learners, staff, or reviewers from focusing on an accurate assessment of a learner's competence.

With the criteria of motivation, enabling success, and efficiency in mind, the authors present Capella University's approach to creating a positive experience throughout the PLA process. The tools and resources for creating a positive PLA experience fall into two categories, staff and online resources. After a literature review and brief introduction to Capella, the authors address the departments across the university that interact with learners and describe how the PLA team enables those departments to counsel them. Then they explore the online resources that allow PLA staff to efficiently support learners as they write their assessments. Capella's PLA team has found that learners benefit greatly from the combination of knowledgeable counselors, resources to guide them through the process, and feedback from reviewers.

## **Literature Review**

Conrad (2008) described the high-stakes nature of PLA, outlining how learners may use a PLA to gain significant rewards: the assessment allows them to move through their requirements faster by not having to complete certain courses. However, the written portion of the assessment is highly challenging for many learners. Michelson and Mandell (2004) provide several examples to illustrate how creating a PLA portfolio may be the most difficult challenge for the very students the PLA intends to serve. Creating a portfolio is time-intensive, and therefore learners who have multiple roles find it hard to give time to the sustained effort required to build the portfolio. Adults who have been out of school for some time may also have difficulty conforming to academic norms and writing standards.

Thus, while learners are motivated by the potential rewards of a PLA, they are also apprehensive about their abilities to successfully challenge a required course. For most learners, the PLA is challenging because of the requirement to express their learning in terms that correlate to the institution's courses or criteria. This process requires learners to break their knowledge down into constituent parts. In many instances, this is the first time learners are required to analyze their own learning and identify how they have acquired knowledge. This can be a very difficult process, as it requires the learner to identify common themes in work experience and the academic requirements of the courses he or she is challenging.

Even with a significant amount of support, learners experience major cognitive challenges when attempting to express their learning in terms that will be accepted by reviewers. On the one hand, there is a minority opinion that the responsibility of the institution should be to recognize learners' knowledge even if it is not in an academic framework (Michelson & Mandell, 2004; Starr-Glass 2002). On the other, the majority of researchers advocate for institutions to help learners understand how to present their knowledge in a format that is acceptable to the institution (Conrad, 2008; Brinke, Sluijsmans, & Jochems, 2009).

A PLA serves as a way of “honoring and building on mature learners’ past experiential learning” (Conrad, 2008, p. 140). The assessment is a mechanism through which learners ask institutions to value experiential learning, but it first requires learners to recognize and value their own learning. They have to “focus critically on how they have come to be where they are” (Conrad, 2008, p. 146). Through this process, they develop a more academically sound understanding of their own learning. Many learners are amazed by the extent of their learning. Miller and Morgaine (2009) point out that “Reflection can be an awakening for students and serves to distill the meaning from experiences” (p. 10). They state that the process of creating a portfolio for assessment can build learners’ identities as academics. This may be a particular benefit for learners in distance education who are often working adults who have been away from formal education settings for some time.

The PLA literature most often speaks about “facilitating” the PLA process rather than “teaching” learners how to work through a PLA. Arscott, Crowther, Young, and Ungarian (2007) highlight the importance of learners having access to facilitators throughout the PLA process. Some of the responsibilities of a facilitator include creating a shared discourse in which learners can reflect, developing a positive environment, and encouraging self-recognition in learners who lack self-confidence. When facilitators have subject matter expertise in addition to PLA expertise, they are able to help learners present their knowledge in ways that are recognized by other experts in the field.

## **Capella University**

Capella University is an online institution that serves more than 37,100 adult learners at the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral levels (Capella University, 2010b). It offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in 137 specialized areas of study, including business, information technology, psychology, public safety, public administration, nursing, and health administration (Capella University, 2010a). The degree programs focus on learning outcomes that are based on professional standards and employer recommendations. Capella University’s mission is as follows:

The mission of Capella University is to extend access to high quality bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral, and certificate programs for adults who seek to maximize their personal and professional potential. This mission is fulfilled through innovative programs that are responsive to the needs of adult learners and involve active, engaging, challenging, and relevant learning experiences offered in a variety of delivery modes. (Capella University, 2010c)

Capella’s mission statement echoes the focus of many institutions, providing access to a more diverse audience by offering innovative models of program delivery with more flexible learning opportunities. Capella’s educational philosophy parallels Keeling’s (2004) description of

transformative learning. Experiences that focus on helping learners understand major periods of transition and transformation in their thinking through openness, reflection, assessment, and celebration of accomplishments are integral parts of transformative learning (Keeling, 2004). A prior learning assessment serves as one of the delivery models to do just that.

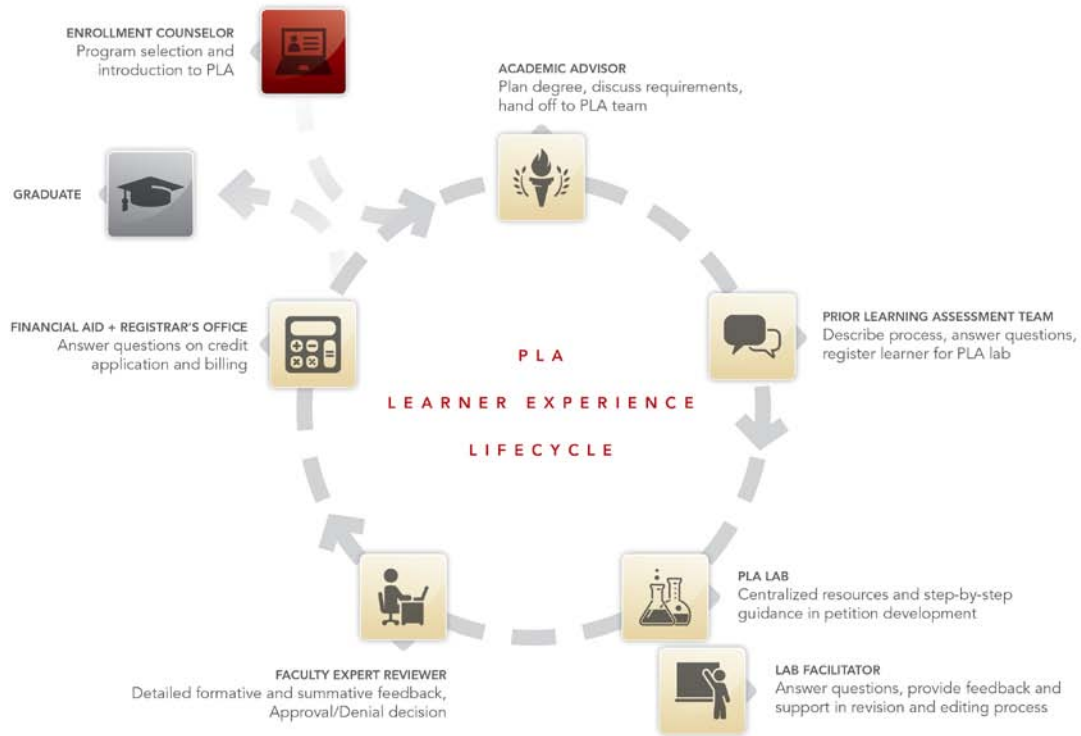
Until 2007, PLAs at Capella University were supported by staff members in individual academic departments. A centralized team was formed to improve efficiency and create additional resources for learners. The team has worked to determine best practices, develop helpful tools for PLA learners, improve operational practices, and increase outreach to learners. The number of learners participating in PLAs at Capella University is growing steadily each year.

Capella University is a competency-based institution. The competencies form the core of the curriculum, determine course content and activities, and assessments are designed to measure the attainment of these competencies. Morrissey et al. (2008) recommended that institutions develop learning outcomes for all course offerings to facilitate PLA. At Capella University, PLA uses the course competencies as the basis for the assessment of prior learning. In PLA, learners demonstrate that they have met the course competencies through a combination of written narrative and documentation. Learners receive the competencies in a template that outlines the type of narrative and documentation that will help demonstrate competence in a given area.

The PLA program at Capella University uses the standards for assessing learning created by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006) as the foundation of practices in every aspect of the PLA program. The standards provide several safeguards for learners and are an important basis for the PLA field. Building on the foundation provided by the standards, Capella has created a process and tools that enable learners to be more confident in PLA submissions.

## **Learners' PLA Experience**

At Capella University, people in many roles work with learners throughout their PLA experience. These roles include enrollment counselors (ECs), academic advisors (AAs), PLA staff, faculty reviewers, registrar's office staff, financial aid representatives, and so forth. Each of these individuals is involved in creating and fostering a positive experience in the PLA lifecycle. Figure 1 shows the various roles and the kinds of interactions those who fill them have with learners throughout the PLA lifecycle.



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*Figure 1.* PLA learner experience lifecycle.

Prospective learners have an increasing number of institutions to choose from when deciding which school to attend. In addition to program offerings, two main deciding factors are time to completion and total cost of the program. PLA offerings can help to reduce both. Therefore, the option to undertake a PLA may be a factor in the decision to attend a particular institution.

At Capella University, ECs have an in-depth conversation with prospective learners to discover the appropriate program for their needs. When prospective learners have the appropriate knowledge and experience, ECs will discuss PLA options. The EC is the first person to set expectations about timelines, to describe the PLA process, and to connect a learner with the PLA team. Setting the right expectations from the first point of contact is integral to fostering a positive experience in the PLA process. Therefore, the PLA team meets with ECs on a regular basis to provide ongoing training and to answer questions to ensure that learners are receiving consistent information.

In their first quarter at Capella University, learners will meet with their AA to plan their degree program. AAs direct interested learners to the PLA Center from the university's Internet portal to learn more about the PLA process. Learners and AAs then discuss how a PLA will fulfill degree

requirements to ensure that learners plan their PLA for the right courses and in the best order. By providing consistent explanations of the PLA process and setting the right expectations, both ECs and AAs prepare learners to work with the PLA team to develop their assessments. Without guidance from these two individuals, learners may challenge a course that is not applicable to their degree requirements, or may wait until the last minute in their degree program to start the process, creating an unnecessarily rushed experience. In addition, enabling ECs and AAs to communicate proactively with learners about the PLA process helps to increase awareness among learners about PLA opportunities.

Because ECs and AAs play such important roles in counseling learners about the PLA process, the PLA staff has created resources to help them feel more comfortable speaking with learners about their options. Job aids describe the detailed steps of the PLA process, along with policies, fee structures, and credit application; contact information for the PLA team is also included. These aids can be used by counselors and advisors as quick visual references while talking with learners. When ECs and AAs need additional assistance, they refer learners to the PLA team for more information. In addition, the PLA team has created standardized email templates for the ECs, AAs, and PLA staff to use, encouraging consistent communication about the PLA process. ECs and AAs report that they feel more credible when speaking with learners about PLA options because of the resources and ongoing training they receive. The PLA staff has found that learners are more informed about PLAs and have more accurate expectations as a result, which helps to foster a positive PLA experience. In addition, by empowering ECs and AAs with these tools, PLA staff members are able to focus on the learners who need in-depth assistance, making the best use of their expertise in PLA.

The PLA team plays an important role in counseling learners through the PLA process. PLA staff members are available to work with learners via telephone, email, and the online PLA lab. Learners usually start working with the PLA team after meeting with an AA about their degree requirements to address questions or concerns and to understand the requirements of the PLA process. Sometimes, a learner has misconceptions about the process. In these instances, the PLA team coaches the learner to better understand both the requirements for PLA credit and his or her ability to meet those requirements. Although the PLA staff members are not subject matter experts in the various academic areas, they advise learners based on their experience with PLA. They use their own knowledge of PLA, combined with trends in feedback from faculty reviewers, to help learners avoid common pitfalls.

Learners come into the PLA process as highly skilled and knowledgeable practitioners in their fields, but often have less understanding of how to describe their knowledge in an academic framework (Conrad, 2008; Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The PLA team has developed tools in a centralized lab to help learners navigate the PLA process. While staff members are always available to work one-on-one with learners, most learners enroll in the PLA lab to develop their petitions. (A petition is the actual document a learner submits for PLA credit, referred to as a portfolio in some institutions.) The lab is a free, self-paced minicourse that guides learners step-by-step as they craft their petitions. One of the PLA staff members facilitates the lab to answer questions and provide feedback, as advocated by Arscott et al. (2007). The positive online



experience created by the availability of online resources and expert feedback has greatly reduced the anxiety of learners working through the petition process.

Before the lab was created, learners read about the petition process on a static Web page and completed petitions on their own, with little guidance. PLA staff members were inundated with the same, repetitive questions from learners struggling with the PLA process and were challenged to provide the kind of help that enables learners to feel confident in their submissions. Historically, many learners expressed interest in PLA but did not follow through to submit a petition. In response to this, staff used Keller's (2008) principles of motivation, especially confidence, to redesign the lab to provide centralized resources, reduce anxiety about the process, and alleviate the volume of repetitive questions. Having centralized resources and a structure for addressing questions has allowed a staff of three to simultaneously support hundreds of learners working on petitions. It has enabled the learners who need more assistance to get help, and those who can work independently to access resources as needed. Learners respond to the lab favorably and have reported that the resources are appropriate and timely for the development of their petitions.

## **The PLA Lab**

The lab was designed to function as a supportive and open environment to learn about the petition process. It was created with two perspectives in mind. From the perspective of content and flow, decisions were made about what learners need to know to petition, the steps they should take, and the resources they needed to have available at each step. The second perspective was the support provided during the lab. From this perspective, decisions included how to keep track of learners' progress without being intrusive, and how to provide individualized help when needed. The lab was designed to look and feel like a regular Capella University course, so that the learner does not have to struggle with learning a new courseroom platform when he or she should be learning the PLA process, thus improving the efficiency of the lab experience. This is in line with the second criterion for a positive PLA experience, breaking down unnecessary barriers to enable success.

The lab is divided into four separate units that correlate with different elements of the petition and supportive documentation. Each unit provides detailed explanations of the requirements coupled with resources and examples for the learners to utilize when developing each aspect of their petition. Optional assignments provide more in-depth guidance and targeted resources for each concept. The petition assessment templates are housed in the lab and are available for learners to review when they are deciding whether their knowledge and experience meet the requirements to be assessed.

## **Content of the Lab**

This section will briefly introduce the units in the lab before going into detail about how the individual resources foster a positive PLA experience. Like a course, the lab begins with a syllabus, followed by content units. Each unit provides guidance on specific aspects of a well-developed petition submission. Table 1 provides a summary of the unit contents.

Table 1

*Lab Outline*

Section of lab	Contents
Syllabus	General advice about petitioning PLA policy regarding credit application, limits, and assessment fees
Unit 1: Assess Your Qualifications for PLA	Reviewing petition requirements Prewriting: Exploring how knowledge and experience fits with the competencies of the courses
Unit 2: Supporting Evidence for Prior Learning	Résumé resources with link to career center Gathering supporting documentation Examples of recommended documentation Example reference letters
Unit 3: Writing Your Petition	How to address each competency Examples of appropriate writing style with link to writing center A summary of the common errors in petitions, written by a faculty reviewer Reminders about academic honesty
Unit 4: Submitting Your Petition	Reminders about editing, proofreading, and presentation Expected turnaround times on petition processing and faculty reviewer decisions

## **Syllabus**

The syllabus starts by providing general advice, similar to the coaching that the PLA team provides to learners. Including this advice in the lab ensures all learners have the opportunity to see important messages in a consistent and clear manner, reinforcing the expectations ECs and AAs have established. When learners do not follow the suggestions, an otherwise positive, self-actualizing experience can become a negative one.

The PLA team has found that the timing of petitions within a learner's program impacts all three of the criteria for a positive PLA experience: motivation, enabling success, and efficiency. Therefore, most of the advice in the syllabus centers on appropriate planning. It is suggested that learners petition early in their degree program for a number of reasons. First, by petitioning early, learners are able to better plan which courses they will take rather than petition. Early petitioning can also help in planning around prerequisites. If a learner's petition is denied, he or she will have

more time to consider the options. In addition, learners who petition early are likely to be more invested in completing their degrees because doing so allows them to essentially leap further ahead, creating a sense of investment and momentum. If a learner is planning to petition multiple courses, petitioning early allows him or her to utilize the feedback from one petition to strengthen future petitions. Having one petition approved will also reduce learners' anxiety about the viability of future approval, and will help them feel less rushed. This addresses the confidence aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008).

Other advice expressed in the syllabus focuses on creating a strong presentation. Learners should be aware that PLA is a serious assessment; approval is not guaranteed. Learners are often surprised at the amount and quality of writing expected of them in order to earn PLA credit. Writing is often a challenge for adult learners who are returning to the academic environment (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), and academic writing, specifically the description of knowledge, is difficult for many learners. The lab suggests utilizing feedback from the PLA facilitator, writing center resources, and insights from the lab discussions.

The syllabus also addresses PLA policy with regard to credit application, limits, and assessment fees. This information can be found in the university catalog, but it is important to highlight it in the syllabus so that learners are aware of their rights and the requirements they must meet. For instance, the policy states that a PLA assessment fee is charged for the assessment of their submissions whether a petition is approved or denied, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). If learners are unaware of this policy, they could assume that there is no financial risk involved, and become upset when a fee appears on their billing statements. When learners are unaware of the credit limits, they might petition courses that do not apply to their degree requirements. Because this information is highlighted, learners are able to avoid such pitfalls, which results in a better experience for them.

After reading the syllabus, learners can find the petition assessment forms for each individual course in the Petition Template section. In the forms, learners can see which competencies they will be assessed against. Learners can also see examples of petitions that faculty reviewers have recognized as being exceptional in quality. These model petitions help learners understand the appropriate writing style, documentation requirements, and the level of detail expected by faculty reviewers. The four units of the PLA lab (referenced in Table 1) help learners transform the blank assessment form into a fully developed petition.

## **Unit 1: Assess your qualifications for PLA.**

The first unit asks learners to make sure they understand the requirements of the courses they intend to petition. When considering which courses to petition, learners often focus exclusively on their work experience and certifications. The prewriting exercise in this unit helps learners brainstorm about other areas of their lives that have contributed to their learning, such as work experience, volunteer experience, training, certification, self-study, and so on. Conrad (2008) states that a PLA can be a reflective process that helps learners draw meaning from their learning histories. The prewriting exercise encourages such reflection and asks the learner to focus not

only on current learning and knowledge but also to uncover knowledge he or she attained at an earlier point in time. Some learners even decide to petition more courses as a result of identifying additional knowledge in this exercise. In the prewriting exercise, the learner lists his or her accomplishments and sources of knowledge. Having this list on paper can be one of the first times a learner identifies how much knowledge he or she really has. Miller and Morgaine (2009) mention that reflection can cause learners to be amazed at what they have accomplished. This can be a very fulfilling exercise for learners.

Unit 1 also introduces a hypothetical example that continues through the remaining units, where a hypothetical learner is petitioning for the course DRV1000 – Driving a Motor Vehicle. When staff developed this scenario, they chose a driving example because most adult learners can relate to driving knowledge. In this unit, the learner begins to think about her background related to DRV1000, and reviews the competencies to determine whether she is ready to petition the course. Through the prewriting exercise she identifies several aspects of her background related to driving that she will use in her petition.

The work learners complete in Unit 1 helps them build confidence in their ability to successfully petition courses, as prescribed by the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). The brainstorming list helps identify documentation for Unit 2 and forms an outline of knowledge to further develop in Unit 3, when the learners will write the actual petition content.

## **Unit 2: Supporting evidence for prior learning.**

Most learners want to start the petition by documenting their experience because they find it easier to gather documentation than to describe their knowledge and how they have attained it. Unit 2 helps learners identify which types of documentation are appropriate and relevant. There are two common mistakes learners make regarding documentation. The first is to include little or no documentation. Learners who fail to provide adequate documentation have not thought creatively about what they can include, or do not realize it is necessary. The opposite problem is including too much documentation, overwhelming the reviewer with unnecessary or unneeded documents. Learners who do this tend to dislike the limits on petition size (5 MB, including all attachments), but their petitions usually benefit from the requirement to include fewer, more relevant documents. This unit also describes how to tie the relevant documentation to the course competencies in support of the learning narrative (developed in unit 3). Additional resources provided include information about the career center for résumé help and suggestions for acquiring effective letters of reference.

In this unit, the hypothetical learner petitioning DRV1000 gathers many pieces of documentation and carefully considers the relevance of each piece. After consideration, she chooses the most relevant, including her driver's license, training records, and awards for safe driving from her job. One function of the example is to demonstrate the thinking process for learners. In the example, the learner goes through the process of taking her initial list and identifying the most relevant pieces of documentation. While the model petitions only show the end result, this exercise helps learners see and follow the decision-making process.

### **Unit 3: Writing your petition.**

This unit focuses on the narrative portions of the petition. This is the most intensive and important section of the lab, and conveys the importance of the narrative in describing learning. Many learners want to eliminate or ignore the writing aspect, allowing their résumés and work products to stand on their own. They state their job title, assuming it will explain the knowledge they possess to the reviewer—but this approach is too simplistic and assumes the reviewer can infer what learning has occurred based on industry-specific titles. PLA facilitators and the resources in the lab help learners describe their knowledge within an academic framework. According to Conrad (2008) and Brinke et al. (2009), it is the responsibility of the PLA facilitators to help learners understand how to present their knowledge in an acceptable academic context.

Unit 3 includes links to relevant departments within the university, such as the writing center and academic honesty resources. Learners are encouraged to utilize the writing center for feedback, just as they would for their course assignments. This unit also includes the most popular element in the lab, a summary of the common errors in petitions. This resource was written by a faculty reviewer to clarify the reasoning reviewers employ and their approach to petitions. Everything in the summary is included elsewhere in the lab, but in this unit learners pay more attention to the voice of an actual faculty reviewer and have found this resource very insightful and helpful for writing the learning narrative.

The hypothetical learner in the DRV1000 example finds unit three to be challenging but also satisfying, because she begins to see an overall pattern of her development as a driver. She discusses how she initially learned to drive, as well as the efforts she has made to improve her knowledge and skills. She also explains how she has used this learning in her professional and personal life. The DRV1000 example builds on the model petitions and the summary of common errors to demonstrate acceptable writing styles, format, and presentation. By having access to these examples, learners can develop a more polished presentation of their learning and feel more assured that their petition submission is strong, addressing the confidence aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). Before these resources were available, learners had few references when developing their learning statements. These resources set a consistent standard for learners to meet and provide a benchmark for success. Learners can compare their drafts to the model petitions and the DRV1000 example to ensure that they are on the right track.

### **Unit 4: Submitting your petition.**

This unit helps learners develop the strongest presentation possible with simple, yet critical reminders. At this point, learners are either really excited about submitting their petition, or they are tired of working on it. In both instances, they often dismiss the importance of editing and proofreading in developing a strong petition. A petition with numerous spelling and grammatical errors or a weak structure can be denied or returned, creating a poor experience for the learner. Unlike a course, which includes multiple assignments and drafts for major papers, a petition is a

one-time presentation of prior learning. Therefore, the importance of editing and proofreading is heightened. Unit 4 strongly encourages learners to take a step back and review their petitions as if they were the reviewer to uncover areas that need improvement. The goal is to put them in a more critical frame of mind when editing and proofreading. Confusing wording, grammar and spelling errors, or missing attachments can result in a petition being denied. Learners have to appeal denials, which adds time and stress to the petition process.

In this unit, the hypothetical learner in DRV1000 demonstrates attention to detail and provides a careful presentation of her petition, which reinforces these suggestions for learners. The unit reduces anxiety by setting expectations for the decision process, credit application (upon approval), and billing of the assessment fee. By this point, learners have already put a great deal of work into their petitions. Now they have the opportunity to make that work shine, or last-minute rushing can cause them to miss the mark. The key reminders make learners more likely to catch problems before the official evaluation.

Once learners have edited and proofread their petitions, they submit their petitions in the assignment drop box. The lab facilitator reviews the submissions. If a petition needs further development, the facilitator provides detailed feedback and asks the learner to resubmit. Once the learner and facilitator are comfortable with the submission, the facilitator sends it to the reviewer for an official evaluation. There may be many feedback cycles between the facilitator and learner at this stage, as the facilitator continues to work with the learner until both are satisfied with the petition before sending it on for an official evaluation.

## **Individualized Support**

The goal of enabling success, one of the criteria for creating a positive PLA experience, must often be balanced with efficiency in providing individualized support. The opportunity to ask questions, exchange ideas with peers, and receive feedback from the PLA facilitator reduces learners' anxiety in the petition process and improves confidence and satisfaction according to the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). To enable success, it is crucial for the facilitator to meet the learners where they are, and help them develop the ability to navigate the PLA process (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). Arscott et al. (2007) argue that it is important for learners to have access to facilitators knowledgeable about PLA requirements to guide them through the process. As a result of feedback from the lab facilitator, there are higher participation rates, fewer denials, and more satisfying experiences for learners. Feedback from the facilitator prevents poorly developed petitions from moving forward, reducing unnecessary appeal cycles, which meets the criterion of efficient use of time and resources.

The term "lab facilitator" was chosen carefully. As stated in the Learner Experience section of this article, the resources in the lab allow the facilitator to focus on assisting those in need, rather than teaching all of the learners each step of the process. Arscott et al. (2007) highlight the importance of facilitating rather than teaching in a laboratory format to encourage the learner to self-reflect instead of relying on the instructor to develop his or her learning statements. The design of the lab, including the facilitator role, allows for a self-paced environment so that

learners can use the lab for the particular information and resources they need, when they need them. Since the facilitators do not have teaching responsibilities, they can devote time to individual learners who need more assistance. Those learners who are more independent have the freedom to develop their petitions at their own pace.

Each facilitator is an expert in PLA and holds a Certificate of Mastery in Prior Learning Assessment through CAEL. Even though the facilitators are not subject matter experts in all petitionable areas, they understand the petition process and the resources available at Capella University. The facilitators use the trends they see in reviewer feedback to coach learners and promote best practices, translating academic expectations so learners can relate to them (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). PLA facilitators advocate for learners as well as for the academic rigor of the process.

While the lab provides resources and support to large groups of learners, it also allows the facilitator to provide individualized feedback and assistance when it is needed. At any point in the lab, a learner can contact the facilitator. For general questions, there is an open discussion board, allowing other learners to benefit from the facilitator's response. Sometimes these postings generate discussions about the best approach for a particular situation. For personal or sensitive questions, the courseroom offers an email function, so that the learner and facilitator can communicate privately.

Each unit has a discussion activity that is recommended, but not required. Learners who are nervous about asking a direct question to the facilitator will sometimes post concerns or challenges in the discussions. The facilitator can respond and provide suggestions or resources, while also encouraging the learners to follow up if more guidance is needed. The discussion questions have become a forum for peer-to-peer support, encouragement, and recognition. The discussions are important in helping many learners manage or address anxiety and they make the experience of petitioning less lonely, because learners are going through the processes with peers who might have the same questions and concerns. Learners can feel better about their situation because they know someone else is going through the same challenges. This addresses the satisfaction aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008).

The final element of individualized support is the review and feedback provided for each petition. Each petition is reviewed by a faculty reviewer with expertise in the area being evaluated, who scores the learning demonstrated and writes detailed, personalized feedback. The feedback is intended not only to explain the scores but also to help the learners develop in their fields, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). The PLA team has crafted standards and examples for faculty reviewers, so they understand the type of feedback learners and the PLA team are expecting from them.

All faculty reviewers are also teaching faculty, so they are skilled at giving feedback within the courseroom. The PLA team has discovered that setting expectations for the faculty reviewers and giving examples of best practices has improved the quality and quantity of feedback that learners receive. The team was initially concerned about the quality of feedback on low-scoring petitions,

as it is important for learners to understand why their scores were low. However, learners who do well on petitions often want to submit additional petitions. They also need constructive feedback to understand why they were successful, to help them decide if they are ready to petition additional courses.

The individualized support and feedback received from peers, the lab facilitator, and faculty reviewers helps learners to better understand what knowledge and learning they have accomplished. This can be self-actualizing for them (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), and the feedback can validate their accomplishments to build self-confidence for future petitions, coursework, and development in their fields, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). Learners often express gratitude for the resources and personalized interactions throughout the PLA process. Conrad (2008) states that even though learners are challenged by the PLA process, “their reactions reflect both satisfaction with and wonder at the nature and extent of the learning that they realize has occurred” (Conrad, 2008, p. 145).

## **Discussion**

Distance education is not just a traditional university without the campus. It requires a different approach to all facets of education (Conrad, 2008). Similarly, a PLA is not just a traditional test. It requires the institution as a whole to orient its approach to learning and assessment in a way that welcomes knowledge gained through multiple means. PLA as a field has a strong philosophical and theoretical standing, but seems to be still in the process of developing best practices for implementation and administration. To that end, this article has described the various tools the PLA team at Capella University has developed to create a positive PLA experience and to address the perceived barriers to PLA. This section will review the three criteria described in the introduction, that PLA be motivating, enable success, and be organized in an efficient manner.

### **PLA: A Motivating Process**

It is important for PLA practitioners to break down the perceived barriers that prevent qualified learners from pursuing PLA programs. Preparing a petition for assessment can be a very abstract process. Typically, learners who pursue PLA are better at applying their knowledge practically than they are at describing it academically. Learners can be apprehensive and anxious because of this. The resources discussed in this article empower learners to succeed in the PLA process, which reduces anxiety and enables learners to have a better experience.

More research is needed in the area of motivation and PLA. Which specific aspects of PLA are motivating and discouraging for learners? How can PLA programs enhance the motivating aspects and mitigate the discouraging aspects? Which aspects of PLA are motivating for different groups of learners? These questions are particularly important if PLA is to be offered on a larger scale to reach a wider base of learners. Currently, PLA attracts a relatively small group of learners who are willing and able to deal with the challenges in the PLA process. If PLA grows, learners who are not as comfortable with the process will want to attempt petitions and they will need



more support. For them, motivation will be a bigger issue. It is therefore necessary to break down the perceived barriers while adhering to the tenets of Keller's (2008) ARCS model to generate high levels of motivation.

Another aspect of PLA and motivation is the impact PLA has on motivating learners in the rest of their academic work (Brinke et al., 2009). PLA practitioners have anecdotal evidence that learners are motivated to enter (or reenter) degree programs because of PLA opportunities. Certainly, learners who have earned credit through PLA have higher graduation rates and complete more courses than learners who do not pursue PLA (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). This part of the PLA story is not always shared or understood by those outside of PLA, who believe that PLA keeps learners from taking courses and paying tuition. PLA as a field needs to tell this story better, to focus on PLA's value in recruitment and retention. While national studies are helpful, the most convincing research may be on the level of a single institution or program. Faculty and administrators will be more convinced of the value of PLA if they see the impact on their learner population.

## **PLA: A Process that Enables Success**

In PLA, there are two ways of looking at success. One is that learners are successful in their pursuit of credit. The other is that the assessment process accurately measures learners' competence with regard to the course requirements. There is tension between these goals. Having learners work through a PLA only to be denied is not desirable, yet maintaining the integrity of the assessment is crucial. Capella University has addressed this tension by working to give learners the tools and information to judge their own competence. Unfortunately, learners sometimes overestimate their competence and put a lot of work into petitions that are ultimately not successful. At the same time, other learners underestimate their chances of success and choose not to do PLA when they could have been successful. More resources for learners and staff are needed to help learners be realistic about their chances of success.

In discussing success within PLA, it is natural to focus on learners and forget about the staff and faculty reviewers who are part of the process. The CAEL standards require training as well as professional development for PLA personnel (Fiddler et al., 2006), but it is not clear what this training or professional development should include. Brinke et al. (2009) argue for more training, specifically in the areas of giving feedback, supporting portfolio creation, and understanding PLA. There are training sessions and conferences available for PLA staff, but one of the gaps in the field is the lack of training available for faculty reviewers. Currently, each institution must create its own training courses. Capella University has found that having standard training available to all faculty reviewers has helped maintain the quality of the review process, and has increased both the quality and quantity of feedback that reviewers provide.

As described in this article, learners get information about PLA from many different departments. By empowering these departments with resources and information, Capella University's PLA team is able to set consistent expectations and provide helpful guidance. Working with other departments is a continuing process, and has become a major effort for the PLA staff. The various

departments often hire new staff members, or reorganize, necessitating training for them “from scratch” on PLA. In addition, the PLA team tries to stay in touch with all AAs, ECs, and other relevant individuals to ensure ongoing communication and consistent messaging. Although it is time-consuming, there has been a significant payoff for the time invested. AAs in particular are more willing to ask questions and collaborate with the PLA team when they feel supported. This translates to increased support and better communication to learners.

## **PLA: Fostering Efficiency**

Focusing on efficiency in addition to the other two criteria helps to ensure that PLA can benefit a larger population of learners. PLA programs, like higher education in general, need to serve an increasing number of learners without additional resources. In addition, the concept of PLA is to improve the efficiency of certain learners’ degree programs, allowing them to earn credit for courses where they have already mastered the content, thereby focusing their energy on new material. Like many decisions about the structure of Capella University’s PLA program, there are trade-offs in efficiency. Intensive help for a few learners requires resources that might have been used to reach additional learners. There are no easy answers for efficiency, and it is not often addressed in the literature, yet it is part of every decision within PLA administration. This is an area where more discussion and research is needed.

## **Conclusion**

Morrissey et al. (2008) encouraged PLA practitioners to improve the capacity and impact of PLA by identifying common concerns and best practices, as well as exchanging knowledge. Toward those ends, and in particular to increase the level of knowledge-sharing across institutions, this article has presented some of Capella University’s best practices. CAEL has provided foundational standards upon which many institutions have built PLA programs. Now is the time to build on these standards and create best practices for fostering positive PLA experiences. As a field, PLA should continue efforts in this direction. In particular, it would be beneficial to see more discussion about and development of several aspects of PLA. First, there are many opportunities to further develop best practices in PLA, from practices related to the assessment process itself, to the methods for advising and guiding learners through the process. In addition, there are opportunities to communicate the successes of PLA to wider academic audiences. By sharing knowledge about the field and implementing best practices, the field of PLA can continue to improve the assessment experience for all learners and expand accessibility.

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## *Language of Evaluation: How PLA Evaluators Write about Student Learning*

**Nan L. Travers, Bernard Smith, Leslie Ellis, Tom Brady, Liza Feldman, Kameyla Hakim, Bhuwan Onta, Maria Panayotou, Laurie Seamans, and Amanda Treadwell**  
SUNY/Empire State College, USA

### **Abstract**

Very few studies (e.g., Arnold, 1998; Joosten-ten Brinke, et al., 2009) have examined the ways in which evaluators assess students' prior learning. This investigation explored the ways that evaluators described students' prior learning in final assessment reports at a single, multiple-location institution. Results found four themes; audience, voice, presentation of the learning, and evaluation language. Within each theme, further sub-themes are defined. These results are significant for training evaluators on how to discuss student learning and for institutions to consider in relationship to the purpose behind the evaluations. Further research and implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Prior learning assessment; assessing learning

## **Introduction**

Procedures for assessing prior learning vary across institutions, from reviews of the portfolio alone to interviews with the student or a combination of both, conducted by a single evaluator, a pair of evaluators, or a team (Hoffman, Travers, Evans, & Treadwell, 2009). Research (e.g., Klein-Collins, 2006, 2010; Travers, in press) has examined the ways programs are organized and the results of institutional and student outcomes from program participation. Very few studies (e.g., Arnold, 1998; Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, & Jochems, 2009) have examined evaluator practices.

In a recent study, Hoffman et al. (2009) examined prior learning assessment (PLA) program practices across 32 American and Canadian institutions. Among other results, the research found that few programs had formal evaluator training, similar to other research findings (e.g., Lee-Story, 2001). Of those who reported training programs in the Hoffman et al. study, very few reported that the programs discuss ways in which to write about or report on students' learning. Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2009) examined the perceptions of students, tutors (faculty), and assessors on PLA practices and had the assessors rate their skills for performing assessments. This study concluded that "there should be more training for tutors and assessors in the required knowledge and skills for assessment of prior learning (APL), such as supporting portfolio development, giving follow-up advice, writing motivational reports, and generally understanding the whole APL procedure" (p. 72). In addition, Joosten-ten Brinke et al. found that both tutors and assessors rated their skills on writing reports extremely low.

A review of the literature (Travers, in press) found no studies that examined the ways in which evaluators write their assessment reports. Although not all institutions require a written report (Hoffman et al., 2009), understanding how practiced evaluators describe student learning through written reports would give insight on how to help faculty and evaluators better understand the assessment process.

## **Background**

This study took place at the State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College. PLA is available to all students pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree. The college has seven regional locations within New York and a Center for Distance Learning, which includes International Programs, serving about 20,000 students nationally and internationally. Each undergraduate student engages in an individualized degree-planning process, which includes the ability to request advanced-standing credit through prior learning assessment. At any given time, over 2,000 students are engaged in the prior learning assessment process, with over 1,000 active evaluators available to assess students' learning.

The evaluation process includes the evaluator reviewing a learning portfolio (which includes a learning description and supporting materials) and conducting an interview with the student. At SUNY Empire State College, the interview is considered an integral part of the assessment process because it allows the evaluator to gain a better understanding of the depth and breadth of

the student's learning, which cannot be acquired through assessing the portfolio alone. The interview provides an opportunity to engage the student in a dialogue about his or her learning and to probe for information that cannot be gleaned from a written text. Over the 40 years of using portfolios and interviews, SUNY Empire State College has found that the interview significantly augments the evaluator's assessment of a given student's learning.

The evaluator is required to write an assessment report that includes a description of the student's learning and justification for the recommended credit amounts, level, and specific designations (e.g., general education, liberal arts, science). Guidelines based on policy are provided to evaluators to structure their written evaluations. This report becomes part of the student's degree-plan portfolio, which is reviewed and approved in a two-step process: first by a faculty committee (on behalf of the Center the student attends) and then by a centralized office (on behalf of the College). At this point, the credit is awarded to the student and is part of his or her official transcript.

## **The Study**

### **Methodology**

Blind to the research team, 70 evaluator reports were collected across the College through a stratified random selection process. The reports were gathered from officially approved degree programs, which meant that each had undergone the approval process. All identifiable information was removed from each report. The 10-member research team underwent a norming process prior to reviewing and coding the reports.

Initially, a rubric was developed based on the college's evaluator report policy to use as a framework to review the reports. However, after the first reading of the reports, the team found the rubric inadequate for capturing what was being said in the reports. The team devised a textual analysis approach to determine what the evaluators were saying about student learning. This investigation was not interested in judging the quality of the evaluator reports but focused on what could be learned about the language of evaluation.

Missing from the analysis are any in-depth interviews with or observations of evaluators to better understand their thinking process as they evaluated the students' learning. This analysis stayed focused on what could be learned about the different approaches, language constructions, and voices that evaluators chose in order to present their judgments of student learning.

### **Results**

Based on the team's textual analysis, four overarching themes were identified to classify how evaluators approached describing student learning: audience, voice, presentation of the learning, and evaluation language. The following sections elaborate on each of these themes.

## **Audience**

Audience is not a point usually discussed when writing about the ways in which to evaluate learning; however, there seemed to be different audiences to whom the evaluators wrote their reports. In fact, the perceived audience seemed to shape different evaluator writing styles. The ways in which the evaluators approached their writing seemed to focus on different audiences. Three different types of audiences were identified in the reports: students, peer reviewers (academic and professional), and administrators.

### **Students.**

Some evaluators seemed to direct their responses to the student in that they not only described the student's learning but also identified additional learning that could take place or gave a quick, pithy "lesson." Often, for this type of audience, the evaluator seemed to have something important to say about the topic overall and made some type of statement to sum up the critical elements of learning in this topic. For example, one evaluator states, "Data modeling is not just representing data in tables; it is the abstraction to data structures that promote data use in an application." Another evaluator writes, "He successfully demonstrated advanced-level knowledge of learning components that can be translated into the following motivational concepts, principles, and theories: motivators, extrinsic and intrinsic awards, 'demotivation' factors, two-factor theory, self-determination theory (specifically, competence feedback), and Hawthorne effect." Both of these examples "teach" the reader something about the topic, above and beyond describing the student's learning.

Some comments seemed to be written to help the student affirm his or her learning or where this learning could go next. For example, one evaluator states, "His explanation of how to handle these issues promptly, objectively, and professionally is important in avoiding harassment and discrimination litigation." This type of comment appears to have a lesson for the student built into the learning description; the evaluator, in the process of assessing prior learning, is nevertheless teaching the student something about the student's actions and the implications of his or her knowledge. Although not all reports in this category may have been directed specifically to the student being evaluated, the evaluator presented a lesson to an audience as though they needed to know more about the topic.

### **Peer reviewers.**

Some of the reports seemed to address peer reviewers, either those in the profession or other faculty. To understand some of the terminology or expressions used by the evaluator, the reader would need a level of sophistication and familiarity with the terminology or topic. Even if the reader did not know the topic, the style of these reports was such that the reader knew the evaluator was an expert in this field and could speak to the topic with familiarity. In many ways, this gave the reader security that the writer was a content expert and also understood what learning had taken place.



The style of writing, therefore, took on a voice of authority around both the topic and the learning that had taken place. For example, one evaluator states, “We discussed factors, such as order cost and lead time,” and another evaluator writes, “She also developed an awareness of some different types of poetry—that of self-expression, cathartic expression...” In these cases, topic-specific vocabulary or topics anchored the report in the culture of the field. In other cases, the ways in which the evaluator wrote embedded the learning within the culture of the field. For example, a statement such as, “She independently employed her knowledge in color and design...and the results spoke eloquently to the viewer,” would appear to have meaning within the art field but might not have the same meaning in another field of study.

Many evaluators listed the student’s knowledge in terms of course objectives. Although this aspect of the report varied in format (e.g., list, behavioral objectives), it provided the reader with an inventory that could be used to identify what was and was not present in the student’s learning. These approaches seemed to be equated with a pre-defined set of knowledge skills and competencies (a convergent approach to knowledge), and the report justified that the student’s learning matched this set.

### **Administrators.**

Other reports seemed to address administrators. These reports documented the learning as if to satisfy policy and provide evidence. The writing style tended to be more formal and direct to the requirements. For example, statements such as, “He has presented certificates from these seminars, prepared an intelligent, accurate, well-written, seven-page paper...” and “I reviewed [his] essay in detail and then conducted an in-depth phone interview with him to evaluate his level of learning. Then, I compared this learning to college-level courses and learning in Total Quality Management (TQM) and related topics,” satisfy the reader that a systematic process took place. Other statements, such as, “The learning is advanced and liberal as [she] was able to articulate often sophisticated and complex theoretical concepts,”<sup>1</sup> provided the reader with justifications for the credit recommendations using educational constructs.

### **Voice**

The style of voice with which the evaluators wrote can be divided into five subthemes: professional authority, evaluator as observer/reporter, evaluator as editor, student voice, and outside authority.

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<sup>1</sup>Note: We are not making any claim about the veracity of the accounts. We are presenting the evaluators’ accounts as presented to the institution.

## **Professional authority.**

The professional-authority voice often simply stated that the learning had taken place, and by virtue of the experience or expertise of the evaluator, the learning was confirmed. Reports with this voice tended to lack any description of the student's experiences and the learning that occurred. When the evaluator used his or her authority to justify the learning, the reader never learned much about the student's knowledge.

For example, comments such as, "It is my recommendation that [he] be granted four advanced-level credits—liberal arts—for 'Gangs in Society.' I base this recommendation on my previous experience and study"; "From my experience and expertise in the Spanish language and in foreign-language teaching, I have determined that [he] has demonstrated competency in the Spanish language"; and "I have come to realize that even with a PhD and years of experience [sic], the family court system is incredibly difficult to negotiate. Therefore, I believe [she] deserves to gain credit for her advocacy of this system" use the voice of authority to declare the learning.

All evaluators must use their professional authority to make judgments and recommendations for credit. Some evaluators, however, depended on an authoritative voice as justification for stating that the learning occurred. In subtle ways, most evaluators made statements that were based on their personal judgments. For example, comments such as, "it is my belief that she already possesses an expert knowledge" and "I believe [she] deserves to gain credit for her...learning experience" use an authoritative voice, but usually these evaluation reports included further explanation as to why the judgment was determined.

## **Evaluator as observer/reporter.**

Many reports were written from an observer's or reporter's perspective. This style of writing provided the sense that if the reader were present during the evaluation process, he or she would also observe the same phenomena and would reach the same conclusions. Often evaluators began with statements such as, "He knows how to use layers to organize his drawings, and knows how to combine objects into blocks"; "[She] gave examples of ..."; "[He] demonstrated an excellent knowledge of foundational concepts such as..."; and "[She] also pointed to law enforcement approaches."

Although some of these reports simply listed the student's knowledge, many described the learning in more detail. For example, one evaluator writes,

From her internship to assisting directors..., she learned the process of script analysis, developing a costume and plot, research, and provisions of wardrobe within a set budget. We discussed her sources for research, for which she developed a bibliography for me of numerous magazines, books, websites, and picture collections. We also discussed her viewing of

existing films for ideas of a specific period, especially within the last 30 years of film. She demonstrated a firm grasp of available sources, and has learned how to use them in her work as an assistant and as a designer...

The evaluator continues in this account to describe more of the interview and the documentation that the student provided. The detailing gives the reader a sense of what the student provided, of the interview that took place, and of the justification as to why the student has the knowledge.

### **Evaluator as editor.**

Many evaluators wrote what was observed and then provided an iterative perspective about the learning or the topic. These reports went beyond the actual student learning and either provided insight into the student's abilities or furthered the reader's understanding of the evaluator's knowledge. For example, statements such as (note: emphasis is added for illustrative purposes), "He ultimately knows *better* how to talk to the officials without disrespect, anger, and in a non-threatening manner *that only one sensitive to officiating would understand*"; "The student displayed *wonderful* listening and analytical reasoning skills, which would *serve her well* in any undergraduate or graduate college-level program"; "He is articulate and is able to convey his knowledge into action: *hence the sign of a good teacher*"; and "[She] is *dedicated and devoted* to continued learning and training" give the reader editorial comments on the student's learning beyond what the evaluator observed. In other words, the evaluator offers the reader his or her understanding of the meaning or significance of the student's learning and not simply an account of what the student apparently knows.

Some of the editorial comments addressed overall knowledge of the topic. For example, comments such as, "I would expect a person familiar with inventory concepts to have some familiarity with newer approaches, such as..." and "Typically, college instruction in this subject area infers [sic] that human service workers must be able to deliver basic service activities," provide a context of the field through the evaluator's perspective. In these cases, the context provided a comparison against which the student's learning was evaluated. In other cases, statements such as, "These concerns implicate religious and secular perspectives, as well as ethical and moral considerations about the power to put someone to death" were more editorial than contextual and did not directly address the student's learning.

### **Student voice.**

Some evaluators used the student's voice as a way to document learning. For example, statements such as, "[She] spoke of this as being an important part of what she learned and something she continued to use long after the workshop was over" and "[She] explains that transition services are paramount in human services delivery to ensure the long-term success..." put the student in the center of the statements. In each example, the student is the protagonist and is attributed with direct action (e.g., spoke, mentions, demonstrated). Through these accounts, the reader is offered a version of unmediated access to what the student knows.

In many ways, this voicing is similar to that of the evaluator as reporter: the reader has a sense that if she or he were present, the same things would be observed. The difference between these two themes, however, is that in the former, the evaluator uses his or her own observations as the subject; in the student voice evaluations, the student's own words are offered to the reader.

### **Outside authority.**

In some cases, evaluators used an outside authority on which to base their recommendations. Often, these evaluations would use established course curricula or outcomes. For example, statements such as "I also found [his] mastery of benefits administration very comparable to upper-level credits given at Cornell University's Industrial Labor Relations School certification program for HR Benefits Administrators"; "Typically, college instruction in this subject area..."; and "It is typically expected that upon completion of coursework in 'Human Services Delivery Systems' the student should be able to..." move the justification to an outside authority. The evaluators used what has already been established in academe as the voice of authority and, in many ways, relinquished their own authority for that of others.

### **Presentation of the Learning**

The learning itself seemed to influence the style in which evaluators described the learning. Three main themes emerged from examining the ways evaluators wrote about the learning: learning distinguished from experience, learning within different contexts, and learning within different fields.

#### **Learning distinguished from experience.**

A major premise of assessing prior learning is that credit is given for learning, not for experience per se (e.g., Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006). Experience in itself does not give rise to learning, but it is the ways in which one reflects upon the results of experience and applies these insights that provides the foundation for learning (Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002). Examination of the ways evaluators presented the student's learning as being distinctly separate from the student's experiences per se revealed that this concept is much more complex than simply addressing the learning without the experience.

In some cases, the learning was not well defined as being separate from the student's experience. For example, statements such as, "His vast managerial, teaching, and hands-on experiences make him an expert in the area of Management Information Systems and Project Management backed up by PMP Certification" rely on the experiences as a way to account for the learning. These types of evaluations, however, do not make a clear distinction between the experience and the knowledge gained, and the learning is implied within the experiences.

In other cases, however, the learning was fused within the experience, and it seems as though the learning cannot be described without the experience. Often, in these cases, the learning is more procedural in nature. For example, statements such as, “[She] demonstrated an excellent knowledge of foundational concepts such as value, composition, form, and line study” and “[She] has experimented with pacing and line length, varying this from poem to poem, in an attempt to strengthen the existing images and their impact on the reader” describe an experiential process that is integral to the learning. In other words, the learning and experience evolve together; one cannot be described without the other.

This raises the possibility that perhaps some types of learning are so interrelated with the experience that describing the learning cannot be done without also describing the experience. For example, in performing and studio arts areas, an experiential portfolio would be expected to demonstrate the learning. In language acquisition, the ability to demonstrate the use of the language would be expected as part of the evaluation process. In each of these examples, the language of evaluation uses experiential terminology (e.g., demonstrated, showed) that captures the relationship of the learning within the context of the experience.

Different knowledge domains (Keeton, Sheckley, & Griggs, 2002; Travers, in press) may provide different ways to describe the learning. For example, declarative knowledge would require an assessment of the vocabulary, theories, and principles of a topic (e.g., “she was able to identify and discuss the service activity”), while procedural knowledge would require a different type of assessment (e.g., “[she showed her] process of designing a technical manual”).

### **Learning within different contexts.**

The description of the learning was observed to have different styles based on the context of where or how the learning was acquired. Descriptions differed when learning was acquired through performance, on-the-job experiences, or personal experiences.

Performance-based learning descriptions used processes or methods to describe the learning. For example, statements such as, “[He] describes a process of learning the movements, themselves, individually and in increasingly complex combinations with others” and “His teaching style is modeled on... a thorough demonstration of the basic movements, which the students then show” describe the learning in terms used in performance. In the arts, phrases such as, “good-eye for layout”; “solid approach to writing across large audiences”; “her awareness of rhythm and pacing and how these are important to develop an ear for and use in a way that enhances the imagery and words of the poem”; and “[her] color choices spoke eloquently” are examples of how the writing style seemed specific to the performance-based field. In other words, the language and culture of the performance-based field shaped the ways in which the evaluators wrote about the students’ learning.

Written evaluations about the students’ learning gained from on-the-job experiences tended to focus on skill development. Often, evaluators would list the tasks that a student had done on the job and the skills that he or she had acquired. One example of this type of listing is as follows:

“[She] understands common processes followed in project planning, which includes the need for staff training, the need for providing support, planning schedules, assessing staff needs, preparing budgets, marketing and promotion, and facilities planning.” Others use the work environment to couch the learning; for example, “[He] accurately describes the importance of ensuring his company’s human assets are in the correct ‘fit’ (job) to maximize efficiency and profitability”; “Many of her experiences with [her company] dictated the process for evaluation”; and “The student’s job assignments provide opportunities for selecting and using instructional techniques.”

The third type of contextual style was related to when a student acquired the learning from personal experiences. In these evaluations, the human element came through in the evaluator’s account. For example, statements such as, “[She] helps women find meaning in their trauma and how it impacts their lives as a whole”; “[She] explains that transition services are paramount in human service delivery to ensure the long-term success for the student”; “He ultimately knows better how to talk to the officials without disrespect, anger, and in a non-threatening manner that only one sensitive to officiating would understand”; and “The student displayed wonderful listening and analytical reasoning skills... She possesses an expert knowledge of the sociological and historical backgrounds of traditional Italian family life and the role that the Italian family still plays in modern society” are again contextual to the type of learning acquired by the student.

The accounts appeared to be different based on the context within which the student acquired the learning. Learning based on performance, on-the-job experiences, and personal experiences all seemed to have their own narrative style based on the ways that the evaluators described how the student acquired the learning. Qualities such as vocabulary choice, types of detail, imagery, and other aspects of tone and texture shifted in the ways that the evaluators wrote, based on the context of the students’ learning. The reader of these reports could understand by the writing style the context of where and how the students’ learning was acquired.

### **Learning within different fields.**

In a similar manner, the evaluators’ writing styles changed based on the field within which the students’ learning belonged. Word choices were specific to the field, and the content within the learning and certain presentation styles gave credence to the learning belonging to the field. In other words, the style in which the evaluators wrote their recommendations matched the field in which the learning belonged.

For example, in the field of poetry, one would expect ideas such as, ““her awareness of rhythm and pacing... enhances the imagery and words of the poem.” In the legal field, one evaluator states, “[She] demonstrated an advanced and keen understanding of the tensions underlying many legal debates today. These tensions include...” This example continues by describing many different tensions that the student understood from varying perspectives and how “morality and ethics interrelate with legal perspective on various social issues.” Again, word choices and phrases are very much part of the field. These stylistic choices situate the learning within a particular community.

## **Evaluation Vocabulary**

The actual vocabulary and phraseology choices made by evaluators had different styles as well. Differences were observed in the ways that evaluators used glossing terminology. Many evaluators used terminology that has a greater meaning to a specific group but does not convey that meaning to a more general audience; these often were trade-specific words or generalizations understood within a limited audience. Naturally, in writing about learning, there are terminologies that work like code words or clichés or that provide shorthand for what is trying to be described. Some of the language used by evaluators was found to gloss the student learning to some degree. These types of glosses fell into four general areas: cultural, field-specific, educational, and institutional.

### **Cultural glossing.**

Some of the evaluators used words that emanated from their own culture or the culture of their field. These words have more meaning within the specific culture than in describing the student's unique learning. For example, statements such as, “[She] has learned how to make her poems more clear and precise” and “[She] is able to discuss the concept of intentionality and appropriately analyze a case situation in relation to the concept of intentionality” would seem to have meaning within a particular community of learners but may not have meaning across all communities. Glossing in these cases helps to provide context and culture to the learning without having to go into lengthy explanations.

If one knows poetry, not only would one understand what it means to make a poem “clear and precise,” one would also know the struggle and the practice that it takes. To further the culture of writing poetry, this evaluator also states, “In looking at her poems, I can see where she has applied some restraint in her use of metaphor... I can also see where she has experimented with pacing and line length.” One starts to read much more into what has gone on for the student by the way that the evaluator has used certain terminology, thus giving insight into the culture of poetry writing.

### **Field-specific glossing.**

Some evaluators used words that clearly have meaning specific to the field but that may not be widely understood or even known by anyone outside the field. For another reader from the field, these words would provide an indication of learning that is present without the need for much explanation. For example, statements and phrases such as, “[He] has acquired significant learning in the area of Systems Analysis”; “[his] mastery of the regulatory requirements...”; “[his] depth of learning in management concepts...”; “[she] is knowledgeable about the cycles of sexual assault”; and “[he] is very proficient in computer programs such as Photoshop, Illustrator, and Quark” are all dependent on field-specific words to carry the meaning behind what has been learned.

## **Educational glossing.**

Many evaluators used educational terms that set the evaluation in an educational culture. These words are common to the educational environment and are generally accepted as having meaning but are bound by the educational culture. For example, words such as “understands” and “adequately demonstrated knowledge” were frequently used to describe a student’s learning. These words gloss over what the student knows; what does “understand” mean? However, these words bring comfort to an educational audience and are generally accepted as a way to describe learning.

Glossing often occurred when evaluators summarized the learning. Examples such as “[he] prepared an intelligent, accurate, well-written seven-page paper” and “his grasp of ethics as related to training is satisfactory” provide a quick overall assessment but do not provide much information regarding the underlying learning. Within the culture of education, words such as “intelligent” or “satisfactory” are part of the vocabulary, so the gloss is successful by situating the description in terms comfortable to the community.

## **Institutional glossing.**

Some evaluators used glossing terms that were specific to the institution. As within any institution, particular language is used that would not make sense outside of that environment. For example, when an evaluator states that he “reviewed the student’s degree plan and found no redundancy,” the concepts are specific to SUNY Empire State College and have little or no meaning outside of the college perimeters.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study have several significant applications. Whether or not the institutional practice is to have an evaluator write a narrative evaluation, there are evaluator positions and styles that impact the way in which the evaluation is conducted. Even if no report is written in the system under study, there is a private narration by the evaluator as he or she tries to determine the learning that a student has acquired. In addition, there are frequently discussions between the staff responsible for the assessment of prior learning and the evaluators regarding the student’s learning that is being assessed. The evaluator will adopt positions and styles to make sense of what has been observed and to draw conclusions regarding the student learning. Being clear about these positions can make a difference in the outcome of the assessment.

The audience is important. Is the evaluator directing the assessment to the student, colleagues, or administration? In this study, evaluator writing styles were often directed to a single audience, but at times the audience was unclear or the evaluator mixed the audiences and shifted how particular parts of the report were written. In these cases, the evaluator seemed sometimes to be writing to the student, sometimes to colleagues, and sometimes to the administration. For example, when the outcome of the evaluation was directed toward the student as a reader, there tended to be a



developmental quality to the recommendation, teaching the reader about the topic. When it was directed to colleagues (within the field or academe), the evaluator provided justification appropriate to peers. Often, the justification was augmented with “evidence” of the learning. When the report was directed to an administrative audience, policy often structured the outcome. For example, policy requires that an interview takes place, so these reports indicated that the interview did take place. When evaluators wrote to more than one audience, there was a mix of styles in the report.

Ultimately, the purpose of the report, rather than the evaluator, should define the audience. If the report’s purpose is to be part of the student’s learning process then the student is the audience, and the report would be expected to read differently than if the purpose of the report is to justify the learning to colleagues or to satisfy policy. An institution needs to be clear on the purpose of the evaluation, how the evaluation is to be used, and thus, who the audience is. This type of clarity would help evaluators in the way they approach evaluating the learning.

The approach that evaluators used to voice recommendations gave insight into the evaluators’ viewpoints and influenced the reader’s understanding of the student’s learning. Voicing was more than a stylistic form of writing—it provided evaluators with a way to pose viewpoints and voice judgments. These positions ranged from an inner authority to an outer authority. The inner authority came in three forms: professional authority, evaluator as reporter, and evaluator as editor. The outer authority took the form of the voice of the student or the voice of academe. In some cases, evaluators blended these different forms, which made it difficult to differentiate among the student’s learning, the evaluator’s knowledge, and what was being reported on learning that is acceptable from the perspective of the field.

One significant difference in the way evaluators voiced the students’ learning was in the use of observational versus editorial voicing styles. In some reports, when the evaluator gave pure observations or used the student’s voice to justify the learning, there lacked overall statements about the learning. The observations or student statements were used as evidence of the learning and left to stand on their own. The reader did not really gain an understanding of the learning per se. On the other hand, some of these reports were extremely effective because the reader had a sense of the learning that took place, as though the reader was a firsthand witness alongside the evaluator.

In contrast, some evaluators had a tendency to comment about the learning, adding specific viewpoints or biases into the report. Some used comments about the student as a learner, while others provided contextual or content information to augment the learning being described. Sometimes the distinction between what was being said about the student’s learning and what the evaluator was providing about his or her own knowledge was hard to determine. The blending of what the student knew, what the evaluator knew, and/or what was expected in the field provided the reader with the least clarification on what the student knew. In some cases, however, the editorializing provided insight as to the point of view from which the evaluator was basing the evaluation, and, therefore, the reader understood how the evaluator had come to his or her decisions regarding the learning. The most effective reports seemed to occur when the evaluators

combined the observational and editorial styles, using observations and then making concluding comments about those observations and the student's learning, as determined by the observations.

When evaluators voiced their professional authority as justification of the students' learning (e.g., "from my years of experience, I determine..."), there often lacked any other justification beyond the evaluator's own professional credentials and experiences. In contrast, some reports were very effective because the reader knew that the evaluator had credentials and was a content expert. The reports that were effective usually had additional information about the student's learning to support the professional-authority justification.

The effect of using a voice from an outside authority (e.g., justifications from college courses) as the criterion by which to judge students' learning provided another type of professional authority. In these cases, the evaluator used "evidence" from the community of other faculty or field experts to add weight to the judgments being made. This was effective in cases where the learning was being equated to well-known or established criteria. It was also limiting for learning that did not fit nicely into a pre-defined scope, such as a course analogue.

The purpose of the evaluation, again, seems integral to the evaluators' styles of voicing. For example, if an institution's purpose behind the evaluation is only to have evaluators give credit recommendation, and if the audience is administrative, then justification from the professional-authority voice or the academic voice might be the most appropriate as there would be no need to go into any depth around the student's learning. However, if the purpose of the report is to describe and document the learning, then the ways in which an evaluator documents the learning and voices the justifications can play a critical role in bringing to the reader the kinds of learning and knowledge the student has acquired. In these cases, the role of documenting the evaluator's professional authority may only be beneficial to assure that a content expert conducted the evaluation. In other words, the institution's purpose behind the evaluation can shape the ways in which evaluators document and describe students' learning.

In addition, there may be different types of learning that require different approaches to describe them. For example, knowledge that has developed declarative structures may be very different from those that have developed procedural structures. If an evaluator expects to hear facts, theories, and other declarative outcomes, and the student describes procedures, it could either be interpreted as a lack of knowledge or more experiential in nature. Understanding how to describe the learning from its different forms and structures is critical to determine the learning that the student has. The field or the culture within which the learning is embedded also gives structures to the learning that may not normally be captured by using standard assessment perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

The language styles used by evaluators in the reports documenting students' learning played a critical role in translating student learning into institutional expectations. The style of writing (i.e., audience, voicing, and terminology glossing) that an evaluator used to document and describe students' learning encapsulated the learning into established discipline and institutional

mores and cultures. The styles in which the evaluators wrote the evaluation reports made a difference in terms of how the reader interpreted the students' learning that took place and its equivalency to college-level learning.

Dynamics of culture permeated all the themes. The culture of the field, the culture of the institution and academia, and the culture of the environment within which the student acquired the learning seemed to impact the styles of writing. Word choices for presenting the learning were often culturally based, and clear differences in word choices were observed across different topics or learning domains (e.g., strategic, procedural).

The act of discussing learning is difficult. In higher education, there is a tacit belief that tends to prevail that faculty know how to describe knowledge. The act of prior learning assessment is to make the learning that is within one individual explicit to another via an evaluator. This mediating translator function of the evaluator is a very unique role in that the evaluator has to assess learning that took place outside of the classroom and equate it to learning that could have taken place inside the institution. The evaluator's role is unlike that of a classroom-based faculty member who conducts assessment in that the classroom-based faculty member is able to witness students' learning within a structured context that has been designed by the same individual assessing the learning. Special attention needs to be paid to assisting prior learning assessment evaluators with recognizing students' learning and with articulating the translation of that learning into structures so that a third person can understand the student learning that took place.

This research study has raised more questions than answers. In what ways can a mediating agent explain learning embodied within one individual to another, without severely imposing bias, self, and cultural beliefs? What are some best practices in the ways used to voice the observations and describe the learning? How can language best be used to describe and document the learning in order to translate it into educational currency (e.g., credits)? What is actually meant by college-level learning against which students' learning is being assessed, and how does that translate to what an evaluator can observe through student portfolios and/or interviews?

Further research needs to be conducted to get a better understanding of the issues raised by this exploration. Two major directions planned for this work in the future are as follows: 1) to look at how, within SUNY Empire State College, we can use the results of this study to better guide evaluators in writing recommendations; and 2) to explore these themes further and validate them by exploring additional reports and interviewing evaluators. In addition, further research needs to be done to get a better understanding of the processes in which evaluators engage while evaluating students' prior learning.

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## An Application of PLAR in the Development of the Aboriginal Self: One College's Experience

**Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson**  
Northlands College, Canada

### Abstract

Some forms of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) invite self-reflection and the generation of new knowledge leading to self-growth in granting credit for past experiential learning. This paper examines the experience of a northern Canadian community college using PLAR portfolio development to assist in individual self-growth among people of aboriginal ancestry. The author reviews the theoretical underpinning behind the notion that PLAR may be used in identity construction and reviews some of the historical circumstances affecting the development of aboriginal selves. Divergent views of participants who had completed PLAR facilitator training on portfolio development are examined. Ethical concerns are raised, and guidelines are proposed for the use of PLAR in portfolio development and identity construction.

**Keywords:** Self; self-development; aboriginal identity; PLAR

A distinctive feature of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) has been its use of qualitative methods in assessing learning in adults (Amichand, Ireland, Orynik, Potter, & Van Kleef, 2007; Conrad, 2008; Van Kleef, 2007). While quantitative methods are also used, some experiential learning cannot be quantified. Demonstrations, testimonials, records, or other media may be combined with narratives to build portfolios outlining life experiences and the learning that resulted from those experiences. The process of reflecting such experiences may generate new understandings and hence new knowledge (Conrad, 2008). Such knowledge creation has implications for self-development.

In 2001 Northlands College, situated in northern Canada and serving a largely (80%) aboriginal population, began training staff in a form of PLAR that emphasizes aboriginal cultural content and personal self-growth. This was initially introduced to Northlands as "An aboriginal perspective on PLAR and portfolio development" (Hill, 2004), but subsequent

proposals to the college by prospective PLAR facilitators have titled the training *Holistic Portfolio PLAR*, in keeping with similar training offered elsewhere (Morrissey & Myers, 2008). The term *holistic* references the objective of identifying all major life experiences and not just those directly related to employment and educational objectives. The emphasis, in this approach, becomes one of self-understanding and self-development.

In 2008, some Northlands College PLAR trainees expressed concern that they did not have the professional training to deal with emotional catharsis resulting from student activity in preparing their holistic portfolios. Further, they felt they were expected to promote *native spirituality*, which some identified as a religion. Issues of emotional catharsis and religious conversion are not immediately identified with the assessment of prior learning, and such concerns invite investigation.

This paper examines the process of self-transformation, including support for the notion that such transformation may involve emotional catharsis. The author then examines an historical model for understanding how colonialism on the American continents impacted psychologically on its aboriginal inhabitants and how that model could be applied in the context of PLAR portfolio development. Also examined are the responses of people who received training in a form of aboriginal holistic portfolio PLAR over a four-year period for indicators that their perceived experience matches this self-transformative historic trauma model. Finally, there is a discussion of ethical and procedural issues informing the practice of using portfolio PLAR in an aboriginal context.

## Learning as Self-Transformation

Van Kleef (2007) noted that experience does not necessarily result in learning, and to learn from experience one must have the capacity to reflect on that experience. She quoted Knowles (1970) as stating that adults and their experiences are so intertwined that “an adult is what he has done.... When an adult is in a situation in which his experience is not being used, or its worth is minimized, it is not just his experience that is being rejected – he feels rejected as a person” (p. 44). From this understanding, she interpolated:

In the model proposed in this paper, the act of reflection is a fundamental component of PLAR and can be used by learners before, during, and following the assessment process to consider the nature of their prior learning in relation to themselves and educators' expected outcomes.  
(p. 7)

Van Kleef (2007) viewed assessment techniques such as reflective journaling, case studies, critical incident reflection, role playing, and self-reflective portfolio development as powerful techniques that give learners an opportunity to gain new meaning from their own experiences. Conrad (2008) agreed that learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences, and she said Athabasca University uses both challenge-for-credit and portfolio development methods of assessing prior experience. She explained that while under

the challenge-for-credit policy learners match their prior learning to the knowledge base and skill requirements of specific courses, portfolio development “gives rise to new knowledge—of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession” (p. 142). Thus, the process of new knowledge construction using portfolio development is part of the process of identity construction. Robertson (2010) supported the notion that although our selves evolve through time, we need a sense of self-stability to effectively relate to others and engage in forward planning. The sense that we remain the same person despite temporal change is felt at an emotional level and may lead to ideas of having a “true” or essential self. Bridges (2001) saw this stability of the self as a problem. He said people need to reflectively embrace cathartic experience to bring about self-change, and he advised people in transitional situations to let go of their subjective realities and identities so as to create more effective worldviews and selves. Transitions take longer than change, he said, because the former involves the development of “a replacement reality and a new self” (p. 3). Once we have said goodbye to our old self, we will be in a neutral zone, a condition similar to grieving, while the new self is being constructed. He cautioned, “The most significant transitions involve a time in hell” (Bridges, 1980, p. 156).

In summation, reflective individuals will gain new experiential learning soon after significant events. Further reflection will occur when such experiential learning is remembered, and this may lead to new interpretations. The emphasis of holistic portfolio PLAR is on cataloguing all major life experiences with concomitant learning. The portfolio PLAR facilitator acts as a guide and teacher, opening the student to new possible interpretations. If the new learning is of such magnitude and direction as to involve substantively discarding an old self and the assumption of a new self, emotional catharsis could result. There is a major difference between recognizing the possibility of emotional catharsis and actively seeking it in a group setting. A justification for such a practice applied to aboriginal people is found in a particular conceptualization of colonialism that we examine next.

### **Historic Trauma: The Need for Aboriginal Identity Reconstruction**

From an historic trauma perspective, the military, economic, and cultural conquest of people aboriginal to the American continents was a form of genocide, and their descendants continue to face the traumatic effects of that genocide in a manner similar to the intergenerational trauma faced by descendants of Holocaust victims (Brave Heart, 2003; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Brave Heart (2003) catalogued a constellation of resultant symptoms experienced by aboriginal people, including depression, self-destructive behaviour, suicidal thoughts and gestures, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions, and substance abuse.

Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) agreed that this historic trauma is passed on intergenerationally, continuously acted out and recreated in contemporary aboriginal culture. Brave Heart (2003) used Lakota prayer and purification ceremonies to treat historic trauma in traditional retreat-like settings in which historically traumatic memories were “awakened” by using audiovisual materials through which participants “relived” genocidal

massacres. She explained, "This is done in order to provide opportunities for cognitive integration of the trauma as well as the affective cathartic working-through necessary for healing" (p. 11).

The approach used by Brave Heart is based on an assumption that indigenous peoples have a common historical trauma and that cathartic experience is needed to stimulate identity construction. Other understandings are possible. The assumption of common historical trauma ignores differences in the relationships aboriginal peoples had with colonizers. For example, the Cree, as "middle men" for the Hudson Bay Company, had a different relationship with their colonizers than did the Blackfeet, who were given smallpox-infected blankets during wars with the US American military (Ewers, 1958). Further, the historic trauma approach ignores research indicating that aboriginal people may have lower rates of trauma than do non-aboriginal people despite being in circumstances that could be trauma-producing (Manson et al., 2002; Waldram, 2004).

An application of PLAR that assumes a need to remake the self-identities of aboriginal people is grounded in a historic trauma worldview. A suggestion that aboriginal people need to "reclaim their indigenous identity" implies a template outlining such an identity, resulting in a process whereby the effects of colonization on the aboriginal self must be dealt with by cathartic means, with a subsequent identity offered to participants. The assumption that all aboriginal people have a need to undergo this process is controversial.

### **Perceptions of Staff of Aboriginal or Holistic PLAR Workshops**

As we have seen, the historic trauma model allows for the construction of a paradigm wherein the identities or selves of aboriginal people are understood to have been damaged by colonialism and that a modified form of portfolio PLAR could be used to repair that damage. Users of such a model would be expected to invite emotional catharsis in an effort to identify aspects of identity requiring transformative change, and they would then suggest replacement identities as needed. Concerns voiced by Northlands College classroom instructors, student advisors, and administrative staff who completed aboriginal holistic portfolio PLAR training in 2008 are consistent with this model. Five such trainees said they felt inadequately prepared to handle emotional catharsis flowing from the recollection of past traumatic experiences, and they expressed dismay that the facilitator appeared to seek such catharsis in the group setting. One participant said he did not feel believed when he claimed to have no trauma to disclose. A second said he felt uncomfortable when a coworker disclosed potentially embarrassing sexual details amid tears and recriminations. He lamented, "She [the group facilitator] seemed more sinister when she singled out the weaker, more vulnerable members of our group and encouraged or caused them to cry – the harder and longer the better." Participants also questioned the course content, with one stating,

Our provincial Department of Higher Education and Manpower has no more business teaching Native Spirituality – with the intent of conversion – than it has



teaching Tibetan Buddhism.... Imagine what towering indignation would have been engendered had (the PLAR instructor) been a Catholic and she had asked us to burn incense, to partake in Holy Sacraments, to confess our sins, and tied problem-solving to the four points of the Cross. (Interview, November 3, 2008)

The suggestion of an alternate identity or belief system could be perceived as an attempt at conversion. In a submission to Northlands College (summer 2007), the facilitator-trainer to this class explained:

Holistic portfolio development is a powerful process to help people identify and document the learning that they have acquired through life/work experiences.... Through holistic portfolio development, learners can begin to identify how ethnostress has impacted them and begin a process to reclaim their indigenous identity.

According to this facilitator-trainer, the recollection of painful experiences is necessary “because that is where our greatest learning comes from,” and “emotional stuff keeps them (aboriginal people) from reclaiming spirit” (personal interview, January 9, 2009). This view was supported by Hill (2004):

The learners are helped to unburden themselves of the painful memories and life experience that they carry. These sessions are particularly important as painful memories carry very intense feelings that cloud the learner's mind and prevent the learner from accurately assessing what she or he has learned. We believe that some of the most profound learning is contained within painful learning experiences. (p. 26)

Using a telephone interview format, I compared the perceptions of aboriginal holistic portfolio PLAR college trainees prior to 2008 with those of the 2008 group. Fifty-four individuals, including both Northlands College and non-college staff, completed six days of workshops from March 2004 to February 2007. An additional 11 staff received three days of training in 2008. An attempt was made to survey all of these participants in January and February 2009 using telephone contact information on file. Thirty-seven participants were contacted, and 30 agreed to be interviewed, including 16 college staff (8 from the 2008 group and 8 trained prior to 2007), and 14 non-college staff.

In answer to the open-ended question “What was the main idea behind the PLAR training you completed?” all of the Northlands College respondents who received their training prior to 2008 ( $n = 8$ ) replied that it was one of assessment, developing self-knowledge, or giving credit for informal learning. Three of eight 2008 trainees but none of the earlier

cohort said the main idea of PLAR was to teach “the aboriginal holistic model.” A majority of the 2008 trainees (5) and those trained prior to 2008 (14) said their training included a focus on the learning needs of aboriginal students. Two of the 2008 trainees drew a distinction between teaching “the aboriginal holistic model” and including a focus on aboriginal learning needs.

Participants were asked, “Did the training you took include consideration of past events that may have been traumatic to the individual?” All eight 2008 trainees said their program included the exploration of such past traumatic events. Only eight of 22 respondents who took their training prior to 2008 said their training dealt with the issue of past trauma. A majority (5) of the 2008 college trainees but none of the earlier trainees (college and non-college subsamples) said they would invite students to disclose past trauma in the group setting. Respondents were asked what they would do if a student became emotionally distraught while recalling past trauma, irrespective of whether disclosure was invited or not. Almost half of the college staff (7) said they would attempt to counsel such a student, roughly equally divided between 2008 and pre-2008 subsamples.

While this brief survey cannot be considered representative of training in aboriginal or holistic portfolio PLAR outside the specific region studied, it does illustrate a spectrum of understandings by trainees. In its emphasis on inviting disclosure of past trauma in a group setting, and in its subsequent teaching of “the aboriginal holistic model” as part of identity construction, the approach learned by the 2008 class most closely resembled the historic trauma model. While the possibility of traumatic memories surfacing was part of earlier versions of this training, none of those trainees would invite students to disclose such memories.

Educational institutions have always been in the business of identity construction, with students interpreting themselves, in part, on the basis of academic success or failure. PLAR affords an opportunity for a holistic self-examination and reinterpretation combining the awarding of credit for verified past learning with a process of self-development. This includes consideration of reinterpretive possibilities that would enhance career development, broadly defined to include meaningful work, learning, and community and leisure activities. It is well within the mandate of educators and counsellors to assist students in the development of their personal portfolios for the purpose of increasing self-understanding, and such understanding will reflect the cultures with which the person self-identifies. When dealing with self-change, however, the boundaries between the mandates of institutions and the expertise of professionals within those institutions may become blurred.

Educators in the classroom setting necessarily generalize when teaching historical or cultural concepts, but such generalizations may lead to inappropriate assumptions when dealing with individual identity. The code of ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association states, “Each person should be treated primarily as a person or an end in him/herself, not as an object or a means to an end” (2000, p. 8). The notion of a template for identity development based on cultural generalizations may be in conflict with this principle. The suggestion that those trained in a particular approach to PLAR portfolio development who are

not psychologists and who have not received training in dealing with post-traumatic stress might invite traumatic disclosure in a group setting is of further concern.

As we have seen, the practice of inviting individuals to share personal trauma was not common to all groups of college trainees in our sample. While a majority of the 2008 trainees said they would invite traumatic disclosure from college students while assisting them to develop their portfolios, none of the earlier cohort would do so. Concomitantly, trainees from both cohorts considered themselves ill-prepared to deal with possible instances of resultant emotional catharsis. The expectation that PLAR portfolio facilitators who are not trained in therapeutic methods to reduce unresolved psychological trauma should nonetheless invite such disclosure carries an assumption that the expression of trauma is in itself therapeutic. While health benefits have been noted in individual, often written, disclosure of traumatic events (Greenberg & Stone, 1992; Pantchenko, Lawson, & Joyce, 2003), the participants in such studies are primarily healthy individuals. A study of 74 women with a history of sexual assault victimization (Kearns, Edwards, Calhoun, & Bidycz, 2010) found improvement in mood immediately after written disclosure, but no change as compared to a group of controls who did not disclose after a one-month follow-up. A study of 61 women who had been sexually abused as children and were interviewed biweekly for a 12-week period revealed no psychological or physical health benefits associated with written disclosure and deterioration in the health of those who disclosed solely in visual art form (Baten, Follette, Hall, & Palm, 2002). The potential danger of inviting such disclosure by untrained individuals without adequate therapeutic support was illustrated by Robertson (2006), who reported the case of an aboriginal client whose symptoms of Residential School Syndrome appeared full-blown after he was encouraged by his lawyer to recount the details of sexual and physical abuse, and these newly expressed symptoms were followed by the loss of employment and family. Residential School Syndrome has been defined as exhibiting similar symptoms to those attributed to historic trauma, but the condition is thought to be triggered by conditions frequently found in Indian residential schools (Brasfield, 2001; Robertson, 2006). In this case, the client had been encouraged to recount his trauma in written form, thereby replicating the method commonly used in those studies demonstrating a benefit to disclosure, but he experienced additional pressure by virtue of his decision to proceed with legal action.

There is much research supporting the view that disclosure as part of a recognized psychological intervention is effective (Deville & Spence, 1999; Gerrity & Solomon, 2002; Wilson, Becker, & Tinker, 1995). In one study, 670 women were screened for sexual victimization, with 65 meeting the twin criteria of reported sexual coercion or rape victimization and high current psychological distress (Anderson, Guarardo, Luthra, & Edwards, 2010). Twenty-eight selected randomly were divided into two groups: One group participated in four emotion-focused therapeutic sessions, while the "controls" reported four times for an assessment of their psychological functioning. Initially, no differences were observed between the two groups of disclosers; however, a three month follow-up revealed the treatment group as having significant reductions in interpersonal stress, including hostility, dependency, and avoidance symptoms.

In summation, individuals with essentially intact or healthy selves may recount painful memories and experience group validation effects; however, disclosure of unresolved trauma outside a therapeutic setting may be harmful. Any attempt to move PLAR from an instrument of assessment with concomitant self-growth to an instrument of therapy puts the psychological health of some individuals at risk. Recognized psychological interventions outside the PLAR setting could be available for those who need to disclose unresolved trauma.

In a second ethical challenge, some of the 2008 trainees objected that they were either proselytized or expected to proselytize others into a religion or quasi-religion called native spirituality. Many aboriginal writers have claimed that native spirituality is not a religion (McCormick, 1996; Mehl-Madrona, 2003; Mussel, 2005); however, the distinction between what constitutes a religion and what might constitute spirituality without religion is not always clear. As used by the 2008 trainees, the term religion appears to refer to a codified belief set that is held to be absolutely true, coupled with associated practices or ceremonies. It is instructive that none of the 2004–2007 trainees raised this ethical concern, and their training was entitled “An Aboriginal Perspective on PLAR.” Had their training been called “*The Aboriginal Perspective on PLAR*,” people of aboriginal ancestry who did not share this perspective in some respects might have objected. The largest number of trainees within the 2008 cohort (but none of the earlier trainees) said the main idea of this application of portfolio PLAR was to learn “The Aboriginal Holistic Model.” The existence of such a singular model might appear axiomatic to someone who carries a template of what constitutes a healthy aboriginal identity, but as Berry (2002) has pointed out, the universe of functional and satisfied aboriginal people encompasses a spectrum of possible identities and worldviews.

The appearance of delivering what might appear to be a revealed or absolutist truth would be avoided by generating alternatives and inviting individuals to develop their own truths encompassing their own prior learning. The notion that beliefs are relativistic, varying according to context, and that individualized personal knowledge with different circumstances demands different responses, is found in both aboriginal and western cultures (Korhonen, 2002). The Northlands College trainee quoted earlier perceived the medicine wheel to be a religious symbol of native spirituality; however, it is also possible to view it as a concept that may be applied relative to the prior learning of the individual.

All societies need a mechanism for combining disparate information into a “big picture” or “whole,” and in aboriginal cultures this is often presented in the form of a medicine wheel or circle. A medicine wheel restricted to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions may be constraining for some individuals. Roberts, Harper, Bull, and Heideman-Provost (1998) acknowledged a wide variety of medicine wheels within aboriginal cultures, with none having a claim to being the authentic or primal one. In an undergraduate class on aboriginal health, students construct their own medicine wheels containing those elements considered by the individual as necessary and sufficient to represent their personal idea of holism.

Other themes within a non-religious native spirituality may be referenced without reifying a particular set of practices and beliefs. Berry (1999) found that having a relationship with the land that included hunting, trapping, fishing, and berry picking was generally important to the spirits of Inuit, Indian, and Métis peoples. This can be a useful concept without prescribing a particular way of interacting spiritually with the land. In my own private practice in counselling psychology, I have sometimes suggested that clients consider spending time on a trap line, but what they do on the trap line is individualized—they must find their own best way of reflecting and communing with nature.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has given voice to aboriginal holistic portfolio PLAR trainees who objected to certain aspects of their training on ethical grounds. While our historical scan of Northlands College PLAR trainees from previous years suggested that the experience of the 2008 group may have been anomalous in some ways, their perspective reminds us of the importance of addressing ethical issues as a guide to future practice. We have seen how a historic trauma perspective coupled with notions of an essentialist aboriginal self may lead to an expectation that all aboriginal people suffer unresolved trauma that must be disclosed so as to permit the implementation of replacement identities. While I do not suggest that this represents the thrust of all or even a majority of holistic portfolio PLAR training, the existence of this view emanating from even one class demonstrates the need for ethical principles to guide us in implementing this self-development process.

First, the right of individuals to develop their own personal cultures should be respected. While the process of reflecting on prior experience may lead to the construction of new knowledge with new concomitant understandings of one's self, those understandings should be individualized without pressure to conform to pre-existent models. Suggestions that a person is more or less aboriginal, dependent on the choices made with respect to his or her personal culture, should be avoided.

Limits to professional competency need acknowledgement. The facilitator trainees in this study included classroom instructors who could incorporate aspects of PLAR portfolio development into existent curricula. Such classroom instructors trained in portfolio PLAR may be quite competent in teaching students how to construct portfolios, and classroom discussion identifying skills and knowledge evidenced from student experience can be valuable. Classroom instructors should not be expected to counsel students with respect to individual identity construction, nor should they invite disclosure of unresolved trauma. Students who exhibit difficulty interpreting experiences, whose experiences include private or confidential matters, or who appear to be in personal crisis should be referred to a counsellor.

Counsellor expertise will vary, and each has a professional duty to recognize his or her personal limit of competence, re-referring clients whose needs are beyond the counsellor's level of training. Counselling staff with skills in vocational counselling, supportive counselling,

and crisis intervention can extend the work of instructors using aspects of PLAR portfolio development in the classroom, but they may not be competent in dealing with psychological distress. Counsellors should not attempt to deal with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, personality, or self-reconstruction, except on a crisis intervention basis, unless they have professional training in these areas. Internal and external professional resources that may be required by students need to be identified.

In summation, PLAR portfolio development has the potential to assist students to define themselves in empowering ways. This potential may be particularly relevant to individuals from colonized populations who have experienced disempowering histories. Educational institutions engaging in this form of portfolio development would be advised to develop protocols ensuring a team approach with defined levels of competency and adequate referral mechanisms.

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Athabasca University 



# The Role of Language in Portfolio Learning

Dianne Conrad  
Athabasca University, Canada

## Abstract

Within the practice of recognizing prior learning (RPL), language issues – writing, the act of capturing language – are critically important facets of portfolio development. Using data drawn from a study of several postsecondary institutions in three countries, this paper examines the role and impact of language in portfolio development processes. Specifically, it considers the dynamics that contribute to learners' *finding* appropriate language and their response to that journey, noting that learners pass through several stages of language growth, beginning with learning the language of academic life and recognizing the importance of that “new” language. The paper also discusses the impact of assessors' use of language and considers the notion of learners' transformation as they pass through the portfolio learning process.

**Keywords:** Prior Learning Assessment; RPL

We are aware in university RPL<sup>1</sup> practice of issues of power, pedagogy and protocols in portfolio preparation and assessment processes. Even the well-intentioned action of mentoring learners through their preparation process holds the potential of bias or some type of power differential at play between student and coach (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Harris, 2000; Peters, 2006). Perhaps not so obviously, issues of language – especially writing, the act of capturing language – are also critically important facets of portfolio development. This paper examines the role and impact of language in portfolio development processes. Specifically, it will consider the dynamics that contribute to learners' finding appropriate language and their response to that journey. The paper combines preliminary data from an ongoing study and from the literature.

Some initial assumptions must be made clear. This discussion assumes that no language barrier of ethnic origin or basis exists between learners and institutions. Of course that

will not always be the case, but the argument put forth here does not rest on or arise from the presence of a basic language barrier. Research data did not reveal any such language barriers among the study's participants. The discussion also assumes a portfolio process that requires learners to construct written material, often extensive, that is designed to demonstrate their knowledge of or proficiency in certain areas of expertise. Such a detailed process both encourages and permits learners to learn about their own learning and about themselves in addition to developing new skills in areas of thinking and organizing. For this reason, the term portfolio learning is used here. The paper will describe such a process following a description of the research study.<sup>2</sup>

## The Research Study

The study that gave rise to this language discussion investigated how learners approached and experienced their own learning while engaged in university-level RPL processes and how those who assisted learners with their RPL processes perceived the effects of their respective approaches in terms of cognition, affect, and outcomes. In other words, this study examined several RPL processes and the learning-centred experiences of individuals within those processes.

The study's objectives were informed by the central research question: To what extent and in what ways do RPL processes contribute to or encourage learners' ability to build knowledge? From the exploration of that central question, data that addressed language issues relative to learners' building knowledge emerged. Those data contribute to this paper. Other findings from the study will be addressed separately as the study concludes.

The study's qualitative research design included RPL learners, mentors, advisors, faculty, and administrators from four Canadian institutions, four American institutions, and two Scottish institutions. Scotland was chosen as an international location because of its system's position within a national qualifications framework (SNQF). Participants included learners who were currently engaged in a prior learning process, learners who had completed RPL within the last year, and administrative and faculty participants who were currently working with RPL learners or who had a history of RPL association.

The researcher sought to cast a wide net to explore RPL participants' experiences in knowledge creation and learning in institutions that practiced systems that encouraged learning through the use of reflection and other learning activities. The institutions in this study follow institution-wide policy-enshrined practice and operate from centralized offices that have both dedicated RPL staff and linkages across the institution. Institutions represented in this study support portfolio learning, which results in the production of rigorous portfolio compilations that exhibit and document learners' claims of prior learning as described earlier in this paper.

Institutions represented in this study also reflected a number of different delivery formats. Two institutions are open and distance institutions, plying their RPL practice entirely at a distance; several institutions operate over a distributed network of campuses, often em-

bracing substantial geographical distances; only two institutions employ an entirely face-to-face delivery mode. While a comparative element was not included in the study, that is comparing ODL data with face-to-face data, it became obvious that there was no difference in the scope and nature of participants' responses as regards the challenge of language and their use of language. In light of current educational trends toward widening access and reducing barriers to learning worldwide and of the recent celebration of open educational resources (OERs) as a future support for and contributor to post secondary learning, these findings are encouraging and positive and should help to ease both ODL and traditional institutions toward RPL consideration.

The study comprised several data-gathering stages. Initial questionnaires containing open and closed questions were distributed to identified respondents. These data provided background information and established participants' broad perceptions of their experiences with the RPL process and placed them within the normal demographic of RPL learners – generally middle-aged working adults who are engaged in part-time postsecondary study. Specifically, questionnaires asked learners about their understanding of knowledge-building activities in their respective systems. RPL practitioners responded to similar but adapted questionnaires. Ethical protocols were strictly observed.

Following the initial data collection, followup interviews and focus groups were conducted with selected participants who had indicated a willingness to engage further. Additionally, many participants engaged as a first step with the primary researcher in one-on-one interviews and focus groups of various sizes, conducted both face-to-face and by teleconference.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1, below, details the breakdown of participants.

Table 1

*Breakdown of Study Participants*

	<b>Participant role in RPL process</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
1	Faculty advisor/coach/mentor	10
2	Non-faculty advisor/coach/mentor	9
3	Administrator (non advising)	3
4	Director	7
5	Ongoing learners	18
6	Completed learners	5

In the qualitative tradition, questions were used as starting-points and participants were able to explore the meanings of questions with the researcher (Creswell, 2003). From the subsequent compilation of data and analysis of participants' experiences with RPL, researchers codified, categorized, and thematized data (Creswell, 2003). The study was lim-

ited by the following conditions pertaining to RPL: only portfolio learning was under study (not prior learning by challenge exam, for example); learners who had withdrawn from an RPL process were not surveyed.

## Portfolio Learning in RPL: A Knowledge-Building Process

Within the broad spectrum of university recognizing prior learning processes, the systems in question have adopted various combinations of rigorous, intensive, text-based processes and oral interviews. Practitioners' descriptions of RPL processes as portfolio learning generally reflect embedded emphases on cognition and knowledge-building. Portfolio learning itself is described as a

rigorous, systematic and comprehensive process of identifying, articulating, and documenting one's own learning, including the skills and knowledge acquired through experiential means (in the workplace, community, and in the family) as well as through structured and formal education and training. (Personal correspondence with D. Myers, 2007)

Portfolio learning is acknowledged to contribute to many positive and desirable outcomes, among them increased self-knowledge, greater appreciation of informal learning, improved communication and organization skills, and greater appreciation of the role of reflection (Brown, 2003).

Portfolio learning comprises two types of learning. At the first and most obvious level, learners are called upon to bring forth their prior and experiential learning and present it to assessors in structures and at levels that are acceptable to the institution. In itself, the backward-looking and self-reflective engagement that is necessary for these processes to occur is cognitively rewarding but arduous (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Peters, 2006). Research has shown that learners engaged in this process benefit from a sustained connection with a coach or a mentor (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010).

The opportunity for a second type of learning is created when learners build on the actions of surfacing and articulating university-level and relevant knowledge: in this way, learners are able to reflect on and gain insight into their own learning process, both processually and historically. The longitudinal aspect of examining one's own knowledge acquisition over many years combined with the in-depth aspect of deep and sustained self-reflection can, theoretically, bring learners face-to-face with an enhanced understanding of their own ability to respond to information, ingest it, and create from the intersection of those actions a new sense of personal awareness. It is a heady process for learners – at the same time empowering and frightening. In one learner's words,

[RPL] was a great experience! I learned so much about myself. It was really empowering to realize how much

experience and knowledge I had gained throughout my work and life. ....It worked out very well for me; it has been an amazing and life-changing experience. ...It is a lot of hard work, but definitely worth it, and the results are so rewarding!

## Historically Relevant Views Pertaining to Portfolio Learning

Freire (1970) popularized the term *banking* for educational processes that positioned learners as empty, or at least receptive, vessels, in which teachers deposited information to a desired state of “fullness” and then expected learners to repeat that knowledge back to them. Freire rejected this stance and moved educators toward Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of dialogic teaching which places teachers and learners and the knowledge they exchange in a relationship of co-teaching and co-learning, “cultivating the development of an authentic community of learners, characterized by sharing and support, along with cognitive challenge” (Vella, 2000).

In the same vein, Vygotsky (1978) drew a distinction between learning by *patterning* and learning by *puzzling*. Patterning, where we learn by comparing to and building on similar experiences, has been the more traditional process in Western educational systems. Puzzling, where new situations give learners no reference point, does not depend on reaching back to existing generalizations and, as such, requires more social support than learning by patterning. Portfolio learning that asks learners to construct shape and form from their prior experiential learning draws on the puzzling methodology rather than patterning. Or, as Pokorny (2009) suggests, “any [RPL] process which aims to recognize and value learning from different contexts would have to *engage with the heterogeneity* of the knowledge distribution process rather than seeking familiarity.”

Given the complexities of portfolio learning tasks, it is not surprising that language figures prominently and critically into the learner’s process. Fluency and adeptness in language use, always important in university study, takes on even greater importance in systems where the learner’s presentation to assessors is dependent upon a written document without the possibility of an oral interview.<sup>4</sup>

## Language and Writing within University Contexts

A discussion of the importance of language and writing within portfolio learning – the topic of this paper – must be framed within the broader discussion of students’ writing and language use within academic programs of study. Lillis (2001) highlighted “the centrality of writer identity in student writing” (p. 33) by drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1981), who described the complexity of the student voice – “the utterance” – as being “entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and access” (p. 276). Bakhtin’s work on utterance and the related concept of addressivity (1986) challenged the notion of language-as-conduit. In this view, which is analogous to the interactive engagement of constructivism as opposed to the positivist transmission model of learning (Pratt, 1998), utterances are alive and fluid; words are understood to create meaning rather than

simply convey meaning (Lillis, 2001). Lillis also cites Clark, in Clark and Ivanic (1997), in posing three questions that underpin and inform student writing: “Who can you be [while writing]”? What can you say? And, ultimately, “How can you say it?” Portfolio learners are likewise subject to the breadth of these language concerns.

### Distinguishing the Roles of Language and Writing in Portfolio Learning

This discussion proposes that there are three areas of language and writing importance in portfolio learning, and that they occur somewhat sequentially. Initially, learners enter the RPL process, generally, by engaging in some sort of initial advising process with personnel who are trained in this area. The term *advisor* is used by some institutions; seemingly clear, this term contains a certain amount of ambiguity as it serves, in some institutions, to describe subsequent mentoring or coaching functions as well as initial set-up-oriented, direction-finding functions. Secondly, learners spend time – sometimes the majority of their time – working closely on mastering the articulation and expression of their prior learning. Good language skills, specifically the ability to nuance closely-related terms, are critical to this part of portfolio preparation. Lastly, arising and resulting from the engagement that learners experience with their own learning and with mentors who coach them in understanding their learning dynamics, learners appear to often be able to grow into thinking metaphorically about themselves as learners and, in so doing, develop some fluency in the language of metaphor. This final and third type of language skill is not always sequential in that it may develop together with other language skills over time; often, though, because of the level of difficulty or oddity associated with metaphorical thinking and speaking, this skill comes – if it does – near the end of the portfolio learning process. A more detailed description of these language roles follows.

### How it Begins: Language Basics at the Advising and Initiation Stages of RPL Learning

Research indicates that language is one of the largest issues for learners during portfolio preparation (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010; Pokorny, 2006). The importance of language manifests as soon as learners begin their process. Because learners encounter different types of help from RPL personnel with varying job titles and functions, this discussion addresses three ways in which RPL learners engage with or confront language issues.

#### **RPL learners receiving advising help from academic or administrative staff.**

On a very technical level, learners must first learn the language of RPL as it distinguishes from other administrative university languages, for example the language of transfer credit. The “high-level stakes” (Barrett & Carney, 2005) importance of the learning determines the base-level need for learners to be exact and precise when referring to university processes, emphasizing the fact that there are many diverse processes that will affect or contribute to their success within the institution. Understanding the complexity of university processes and taking care to reflect those processes in accurate language should mark the beginning

learners' journeys into an academic world that, while set in its ways, holds the promise of open doors. An easy lesson? Perhaps, but still potentially daunting. Those in early contact with new portfolio learners report high levels of anxiety and stupefaction among them as they experience this first learning curve. Learners require and appreciate patience, care, and support at this stage.

### **Learners learning the language of academia itself.**

This lesson, related to the first, thrusts learners into the knowledge that there is a realm of “university-speak” that is different from what exists outside the academy. This is not an isolated RPL lesson; in fact, it is an extension of the larger, elevated-language plane that hallmarks university life, rightly or wrongly. Learners are often quite taken aback by this knowledge; mastering the curve of university-speak throws them into initial shock (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010). Several processes must occur in tandem with each other as learners move into and through this stage of language-adaptation. They must come to know that the university use of and emphasis on certain words is not affectation, that in fact the nuanced distinction that separates *comprehending*, for example, from *applying* is indeed indicative of a different kind of knowledge function.

### **RPL learners' understanding that indeed they have entered a “new place” in their learning lives.**

This is the most influential and difficult of the trio of initial lessons, the “high-level” lesson that should ultimately set the foundation for portfolio learners to bridge from their past understandings of *doing* something, or performing in a stipulated manner, to creating new territory, as in Vygotsky's *puzzling* methodology. Through exposure to and acceptance of the academic lexicon and development of the skills to work within that language, learners become able to think of their own achievements within the new and expanded framework of learned experience. That is, learners begin to see that knowing how to write the report that they produced actually entails many other definable levels of knowledge acquisition and that they indeed have that knowledge. What may have begun, for learners, with a statement that denoted “I wrote a report” will end in their ability to describe myriad activities and steps contained within the report-writing function and to understand the knowledge-base that underpins those actions. For example, some of those steps may include researching and setting the parameters of the report, ascertaining readership or audience for the report, sketching out an outline that follows the cognitive development of the report, and so forth.

## **Second-Stage Language Issues: The Use of Bloom's Taxonomy as a Learning Tool**

Learners' initial introduction to RPL's language vagaries and complexities opens the door to a second level of critical language use which helps learners understand how to articulate their learning. Several RPL processes under study relied on Bloom's (1956) taxonomy as a foundational structure for this work. (Bloom's work was updated in 2001. Krathwohl and Anderson's elaborations are acknowledged while the original taxonomy is still respected.) While Bloom's work does not necessarily provide the only basis for work in this area, it does



accommodate RPL satisfactorily and worked well within several processes as the primary tool.

Bloom's taxonomy distinguishes between six levels of "knowingness." From most basic to most advanced, Bloom describes his categories as knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Krathwohl and Anderson's (2001) revision essentially supplanted evaluation with creativity.

The distinctions between various levels of knowing represent a second arena of insightful – and generally novel – thinking for learners, the first being the critical separation of "knowing" from "doing," as prescribed by RPL standards. In assisting RPL learners, mentors/coaches approach this distinction as the first step on the road to helping learners carefully deconstruct their prior learning. This is often a difficult hurdle for learners, as they are confronted, often for the first time, with surfacing the tacit knowledge that underpins their explicit ability to perform tasks or produce deliverables. Working through this process involved repeated asking of learners, "How? Why? In what way? To what effect? For what reason? The often-painstaking process, termed *externalization* by Nonaka (1994), has been described by mentors as "yanking and pulling" (Conrad, 2010) and represents a cornerstone in Vygotsky's (1978) *puzzling* methodology, whereby learners learn by exception and surprise, rather than by rote patterning.

Once learners have clearly separated the fact of their "doing" from the store of knowledge that they have accumulated from having "done" something (for instance, having delivered a series of training workshops), their language skills are put to the test as they move forward into the process of determining the levels of each type of learning achievement. Do they simply describe how to deliver a stand-up workshop presentation? Can they analyze the tasks and steps buried within complex pre-development and development processes? Can they evaluate the relative worth of the session, of its outcomes, and of its component evolving processes?

The intricate cognition involved in thinking about the fine differences between knowing and doing, and between the various levels of knowing, requires learners to perceive of themselves as proactive agents – as "doers" rather than receivers; to perceive of themselves as owners and managers of the academic language within which they are asked to work; and to negotiate with a vocabulary that permits both actions to successfully occur.

Learners report on the sense of power they experience in coming to this level of comfort with language. The steps involved in this learning, not always sequential or hierarchical, are many and varied and can be quite seemingly small, for instance, introducing learners to active rather than passive voice construction. Helping learners to understand the nuanced differences in describing their participation in a team effort can serve as a large contributing factor to the building of self-esteem and to their appreciation of themselves as vital organizational stalwarts. As an example, "assessed team needs" and "provided planning and direction to team activities" speak of larger and more leadership-oriented team roles than do "assisted team members with product development" or "attended weekly team meet-

ings.” With mentoring and coaching, learners are helped to grow into a process where they are able to discern that their “team assistance” was in fact a planning process that instigated the team’s moving forward.

### A Third and Final Stage? RPL Learners and Metaphor

As with any learning, the RPL process involves circularity, repetition, and movement from the known to the unknown. Generally, from initial levels of unfamiliarity with RPL, learners become acquainted with the *idea* of RPL through acquisition of new language tools and new vocabulary; with the *process* of RPL through an expansion of cognitive skills that is accompanied by new language; and with expressions of themselves as active agents, again accompanied by a new dexterity with the language. These types of proficiency with language permit learners to carefully and articulately demonstrate, in writing, their understanding of their own learning process. A type of labeling process results; “*that’s* what I have been doing all these years” is how one learner described her process of coming to that knowledge and finding the language for it. In one of the systems under discussion, this kind of scrupulous written detailing of prior experiential learning was essential as there is no opportunity for a personal interview or for direct exchange with those who are conducting the assessment of the learning portfolio.

Beyond the functionality of the portfolio, as discussed above, and its rewarding high-stakes outcome in the form of awarded credit toward a university credential, learners’ acquired language use can potentially move them forward into a new sphere of self-understanding that approaches the level of metaphor. In adult education-based or -oriented courses, it is not unusual for learners to either study the use of metaphors or to stumble across writing or resources that use metaphor in their argument. Intense RPL engagement opens similar avenues for learners’ exploration of new ways to envision themselves as learners, professionals, and individuals. “I am a voyageur,” declared a learner. “I am a bridge, spanning past to future,” said another, having found the language to denote both his growth and his work within his organization.” In his work on RPL and metaphor, Starr-Glass (2002) alluded to the strength of “seeing the relationship between the candidate’s experience and the academic norm” (p. 228) while cautioning that “exact replicas” of candidates’ learning will not be located in the academic world.

### The Assessment Process: Another Powerful Lens on Culture and Identity

University study, overall, is fraught with issues of power, authority, and control (Foucault, 1979; Peters, 2006). Reflecting this long-established academic concern, accordingly, recent trends in university education – for example distance education, online learning, and the new worlds of social-networked learning and virtual learning environments (VLEs) – have also opened up discussions around the distribution of power and control (Dron, 2007; Garrison, 2000; Poster, 1996). Learners seeking assessment within RPL processes are equally susceptible to and affected by power dynamics inherent in culture, identity, and language concepts (Harris, 2000; Peters, 2006; Pokorny, 2009). At the root of the issue is the intrinsic difficulty of epistemology, the study of knowledge, and the tendency of higher education

institutions to protect and exalt the parameters of that study. From the learners' perspective, they were sensitive to the need to learn the "ways of the institution," to learn "how to write academic," the initial results of which included learners' self-chastising feelings of "I am not good enough," "I am out of my depth," and "I am uneducated."

New research has shed light on assessors' perspectives of RPL processes. In their study on the language of assessment, Travers and colleagues (2011) determined the presence of cultural dynamics at every turn. As learners struggle to find and assert their voices and find language that they hope will be appropriate and acceptable to university culture, assessors – usually well entrenched in university culture – are making judgments in a variety of voices, using a range of language that is dependent upon each assessor's particular stance (Travers et al, 2011). Some assessors simply assert their power, "depend[ing] on an authoritative voice as justification for stating that the learning occurred" (Travers et al, 2011). "For example, comments such as, "it is my belief that she already possesses an expert knowledge" and "I believe [she] deserves to gain credit for her ... learning experience" use an authoritative voice," but the authors point out that, in the interests of good assessment, more explanation and justification is usually provided in order to substantiate the assessment decision.

Assessors' language is also determined by the culture of their area of study or the culture of their field (Travers et al, 2011). In the same way, learners' language is dependent upon *their* culture or the culture of their background areas of interest, but learners' language is not privileged by a "power stance" in the way that assessors' language is. For example, learners with a strong computing or science background will write in strong, technical language as befits their training, while assessors' measures of evaluation of that writing are grounded in university-level, academic and critical thinking rather than in attention to scientific detail.

### And Ultimately...Transformation?

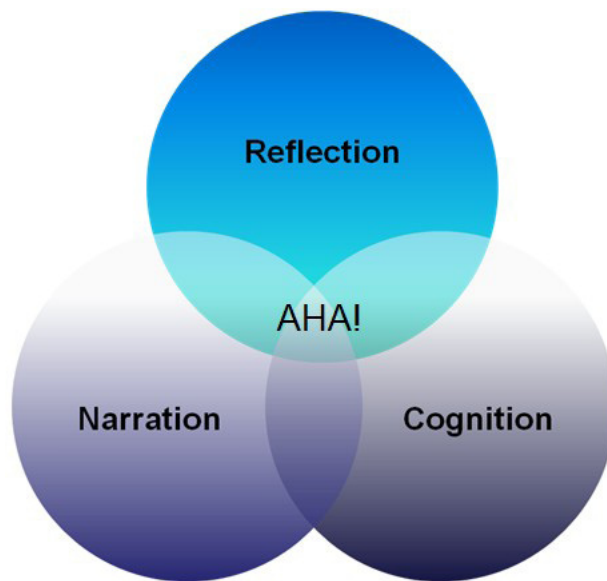
Learners often speak of the transformative power of RPL engagement. Through the processes of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1987), learners uncover new and deeper meaning in both their past achievements and their current undertakings. New ways of thinking unfold in front of them; their interior lives become richer places in which to dwell. The "increased self knowledge" outcome, documented in research (Brown, 2003; Conrad & Wardrop, 2010) translates further into a new sense of self-discovery and increased empowerment. Have these RPL learners been transformed?

Mezirow (1990) differentiated reflective learning from transformation, defining reflective learning as involving "assessment or reassessment of assumptions" (p. 6). Of transformative learning, defined as "when assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid" (p. 6), he stated:

Transformative learning results in new or transformed meaning schemes, or, when reflection focuses on premises, transformed meaning perspectives. To the extent that adult education strives to foster reflective

learning, its goal becomes one of either confirmation or transformation of ways of interpreting experience. (1990, p. 6)

The Venn diagram (below, Figure 1) captures the writer's view of the tripartite learning process inherent in institutional portfolio learning, as described in this study. Does the "aha" intersection contain transformative learning? It's possible: learners speak anecdotally of RPL learning as life-changing, as did the learner who described it as "an amazing and life-changing experience." Similarly, learner Darlene declared that "the self-reflection I have had to engage in during this long and often difficult PLAR assignment has been very helpful to me," and Karen reiterated that her "portfolio, detailing my entire learning history, has again afforded an opportunity for self-reflection, self-acknowledgement and a sense of accomplishment."



*Figure 1.* Venn diagram of the tripartite learning process inherent in institutional portfolio learning.

Whittaker, Whittaker, and Cleary (2006) suggest that, to facilitate transformation, learners "should be encouraged to perceive themselves as taking control of their own learning, which is both empowering and motivating, rather than as simply responding to the demands of academic validation, which, though necessary, is highly de-motivating" (p. 314). Both this suggestion and Whittaker et al.'s (2006) further suggestions of biographical writing and mentorship are all good ones and represent practices followed by the institutions in this study. Whatever the process of transitioning to new abilities, new knowledge, or new identities, or whatever the level of transformation achieved, access to new language is clearly essential to facilitate the journey.

## Concluding Thoughts

Not all RPL portfolio learners need to – or will – achieve the levels of fluency of thought and language described here in order to succeed in the prior learning process. The earning of university-level credit through RPL may be achieved successfully without noticeable growth and insight, or transformation. Practitioners are generally confident, however, that all learners will have gained value to some level. Similarly, not all learners will term the RPL portfolio experience “the best time of my life” as one learner did. But many will echo this learner’s concluding assessment: “Completing the [RPL] portfolio challenged me to the level that I could ‘feel’ new pathways opening in my brain! It was terrific and terrifying at the same time!” It seems apparent that some of those “new pathways” opening in this learner’s brain resulted from the exploration and expansion of learners and their language, a critically important step in the portfolio process.

It is clear from this limited look at language use in portfolio learning within a smallish study that there is room for a great deal of further research in this area. The discussions contained herein broach on several well-established theoretical areas of investigation around issues of language and origin of language within speakers, identity and the relationship of identity to language, learning cultures, effective academic writing across *all* institutional study, cognition, and philosophical approaches to learning, specifically transformative learning. The twin notions of power and politics within institutional learning, alone, underpinned by echoes of Freire and Foucault, could drown smaller discussions regarding learners’ performance. Respecting the understanding that research is built on the “shoulders of giants,” the writer is grateful to Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the opportunity to contemplate some of these questions and acknowledges the vast terrain open to future research in these areas of study.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>The writer uses the more-universal term *RPL*, Recognition of Prior Learning, instead of the Canadian *PLAR*.

<sup>2</sup>Data cited were, and are being, gathered for a SSHRC-funded research project.

<sup>3</sup>Timing and geographical location created occasions whereby the researcher interviewed or conducted focus groups with willing participants who had not completed the initial questionnaire. In these cases, a detailed description of the research question and intent was provided to participants by the researcher. Questions for discussion were extrapolated from the preliminary analysis of questionnaire responses.

<sup>4</sup>There are many reasons, often pedagogical, for not including an oral interview as a part of RPL assessment processes. The logistics of distance is only one reason.

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Athabasca University 







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## ***A Dynamic Community of Discovery: Planning, Learning, and Change***

**Michelle Gordon, Martha Ireland, and Mina Wong**  
Ryerson University, Canada

### **Abstract**

Ryerson University's Prior Learning and Competency Evaluation and Documentation (PLACED) program is funded by the Government of Ontario to engage internationally educated professionals (IEPs), employers, and regulatory/occupational bodies in the use of competency-based practices. In 2008, the authors created a self-assessment tool for IEPs that would build a portfolio reflecting an individual's knowledge and skills while introducing him or her to aspects of the Canadian workplace and labour market. The authors felt that this tool would be useful to assist IEPs in considering their career options and wanted to create an online workshop that would provide flexibility to users whose priorities were most likely work and family obligations. This short project description will capture a) why the self-assessment tool was developed; (b) how we fostered participants' self-efficacy; c) how we used Blackboard; (d) what the participants gained from the workshop; and (e) how the workshop has evolved based on facilitators' observations, participants' feedback, and an external organization's request for customizing the workshop. In working together to design the online workshop, *IEPs' Self-Assessment and Planning*, we focused on two main concepts: self-assessment and career planning. With that in mind, we set out in the workshop to bolster self-discovery, self-efficacy, individualized research skills, action planning, and ongoing professional development. The learning platform was Blackboard, which is used across Ryerson University in both classroom and online learning.

**Keywords:** Online learning; internationally educated professionals; adult education

## **Development of the Learning Tool**

Since the workshop was designed to enhance the career success of IEPs new to Canada, the need for flexible delivery and access to using online learning was as important as the participants' demonstration of competencies in online research skills and navigating virtual environments. These two skills are becoming integral to success in the Canadian workplace, so we incorporated them as an added benefit of learning.

Our first workshop was offered in 2009 over 10 weeks and had 21 participants. A 10-week workshop proved to be too long. The content was extensively reworked by Gordon and Wong and thereafter offered in a six-week format, one module per week. Each module included an ongoing storyline with two immigrant professionals exploring their options in Canada, reflecting some of the experiences of our workshop's target audience. The six-week workshop is offered every term (three times a year) in an online format.

## **Design Background and Core Learning Benefits**

In this collaborative workshop, IEPs were invited to rediscover and transform themselves through confronting change, increasing self-direction, building self-efficacy, and achieving self-empowerment. The adult education principles that supported this journey include lifelong learning (Livingstone 2002), motivation (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg 2003; Wlodkowski 2008), social learning (Bandura 1994), Dale's experiential learning (Lemke 2008; Pastore 2003), transformation (Mezirow 1994), Erikson's adult development (Hoare 2005), and adult multiple intelligence (Gardner & Moran 2006). Using a narrative method of inquiry (Bruner 1991) for adult learners to share individual and collective stories, we wove their discoveries and experiences into the learning space.

Offering the workshop online has many benefits for students; for instance, they have access to the resources whenever they choose without incurring the costs of travel to the campus. Beard and Harper (2004) conclude that despite students' concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and fellow students, they were quite supportive of and receptive to online instruction.

Within a safe community of nurturing facilitation and peer collaboration, the participants connected with each other and identified potential barriers. They also discovered intrinsic values of lifelong learning that could unfold opportunities in life, work, and further education. Moreover, IEPs made individual action plans and built portfolios to highlight their prior learning, marketable knowledge, and transferrable skills, such as teamwork.

## **Facilitator Findings**

Workshop co-facilitators for the first two offerings, Michelle Gordon and Mina Wong, recognized that the portfolio helped individuals to see an accumulation of their work that provided comparative contexts from which to identify gaps in professional and academic prior

learning, which often aided individuals in determining whether they needed to upgrade their skills. Considered a worthwhile process for documenting performance, the process of portfolio development also fostered professional growth and facilitated reflective thinking. The self-reflection inherent in the portfolio process encouraged individuals to frame their skills in fuller terms, to further identify the transferable skills they already possessed, and to become aware of other competencies needed for building career goals (Michelson 2004). This finding supports Dietz (1995), who considered the portfolio “an envelope of the mind,” comprised of ongoing assessments with purposeful collections that examine achievement, effort, improvement, and processes such as selection, comparing, sharing, self-evaluation, and goal setting.

The workshop was piloted at no cost to students. When subsequent offerings of the workshop had a tuition fee of CDN\$50.00, Gordon and Ireland noted that the fee posed a barrier to enrollment. In the large city of Toronto, where there are many agencies and other educational bodies funded to offer programming that is similar, although generally shorter in length with varying content and not online, it appears that potential students are unsure about the advantages of enrolling in our workshop.

PLACED is struggling with how to reach out to the general IEP population. We foresee that offering our workshop in partnership with employers may be one way to attract IEPs.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, we observed how the online learning space of a collaborative workshop can ignite discovery and transformation for IEPs. Rather than trying to navigate their way through the maze of different employment options, workplace participants could now develop strategies to enhance their career search. The workshop enabled them to assess their skills, to learn the importance of networking, and to develop action plans. The online forum allowed them to share their stories and to motivate each other. Based on the professional portfolio created through the workshop’s activities, it was clear that learners gained Canadian experience in career research and career planning.

Our experience with the health sector has made it possible for us to enter into discussions with a large health care facility in Toronto and to offer a version of this workshop to its internationally educated employees as professional development. Customizing this workshop to feature the inter-professional and client-care focus of this particular organization is our next step. We will also pursue offering further workshops that are adapted to reflect the unique cultural environments of other sectors.

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# *The Development of an Online Instrument for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition of Internationally Educated Nurses: A Pilot Study*

**Elaine Elizabeth Santa Mina, Carol Eifert, Martha Ireland, Carol Fine, Vaska Micevski, Ruth Wojtiuk, and Martha Valderrama**  
Ryerson University, Canada

**Gail Wilson**  
St. Michael's Hospital, Canada

## **Abstract**

A fully online prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) tool for internationally educated nurses (IENs) was developed and tested by an inter-professional team at Ryerson University. The tool consisted of two stages: a self-assessment component followed by a multiple-choice examination and narrative (vignette) evaluation. The purposes of the study were to describe the demographic profile of the IEN registered nurse (RN), to develop the benchmark responses that demonstrate competency at the entry-to-practice level of the typical IEN RN, and to describe the experience of completing an online PLAR tool. A mixed-method approach was used. Findings demonstrated that IEN RNs who immigrate to Ontario, Canada are of various ages and come from a wide spectrum of countries. The PLAR process holds promise for an objective assessment of IEN's eligibility to write the Canadian Registered Nurses Examination (CRNE) and to meet a global need. Further testing of the tool across a broader sample is required.

**Keywords:** PLAR; internationally educated nurses; online assessment

## **Background and Context**

In 2005, successful nursing degree completion became a regulatory requirement with the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) for eligibility to write the Canadian Registered Nurses Examination (CRNE), to attain registration, and to practice as a registered nurse (RN) in Ontario. Additionally, in lieu of a BScN, an equivalent degree from another jurisdiction or an equivalent combination of basic nursing education plus additional education and/or experience may be deemed degree-equivalent by the CNO (2006).

This new requirement poses a challenge to internationally educated nurses (IENs) who seek immigration and registration as RNs in Ontario. IENs must provide evidence to the CNO that their international nursing diploma or degree education and experience meets equivalence to an Ontario baccalaureate nursing degree at the entry-to-practice level. In 2009, there were 3,611 new RN members of the CNO and 9.3% of them were IENs, mainly from the United States, the Philippines, and India (CNO, 2009). According to Blythe and Baumann (2009, p. 192), “the number of IENs resident in Canada is unknown.” IENs are not necessarily coming to Canada to practice, and if they come as family members or through the Live-In Caregiver Program, their nursing qualifications may not be declared.

To assist IENs in demonstrating evidence of degree equivalence, an inter-professional team of researchers from the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing and the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University developed and tested a fully online prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) tool for IENs. This work responds to the need for objective and transparent assessments to determine equivalence to baccalaureate nursing education in Canada, as per the CNO’s 2006 *PLAR Report and Recommendations: A PLAR Model for Nursing Baccalaureate Equivalency*.

In 2008, funding from the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Ontario supported the team’s development and testing of an online, web-based tool, modeled upon the competencies for entry-level registered nurse practice (CNO, 2007). The team chose to create an online tool in order to meet the need for accessibility to a PLAR process for IENs who may not be geographically located in Toronto, Ontario.

This PLAR tool consists of two stages, which inform IENs of the practice competencies in Ontario and of their status vis-à-vis achievement of degree equivalence. The first stage guides them through a self-assessment of degree equivalence and helps them to ascertain documents that may constitute evidence of degree equivalence. The second stage provides a multiple-choice examination and narrative (vignette) evaluations to objectively assess competency level. The first stage can be completed off-shore, during the immigration process and prior to arrival in Canada, which avoids expensive travel typically associated with prior learning assessments. All elements in the PLAR tool are linked to the national competencies by nursing subject matter experts so that a comprehensive report of competencies and evidences to support learning can be produced. The IEN can submit his/her PLAR report to the CNO for consideration of eligibility to write the CRNE. This tool also helps IENs identify any areas where additional education or work

experience might be required by highlighting competencies that had not been met by prior learning.

To ensure that this instrument provides fair, objective assessments of degree equivalence for IENs, the team conducted a study to test its reliability and validity. This study had three purposes: 1) to describe the demographic profile of the IEN RN in Ontario; 2) to develop the benchmark responses that demonstrate competency at the entry-to-practice level of the typical IEN RN; and 3) to describe the experience of completing an online PLAR tool.

## **Method**

The design was a mixed-method, initiation methodology which met the requirement for broad range phenomena and multiple theoretical frameworks to disclose paradoxes (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches facilitated the exposure of congruent, contradictory, and omitted responses considered salient to demonstrate competency at the degree equivalence level.

Three instruments were used: (a) a demographic survey; (b) the PLAR tool, which included the self-assessment inventory of evidences organized by the 104 competency statements and self-ranking from novice to expert (Benner, 1984), a 60-question multiple-choice examination, randomly released from a bank of 172 questions, and eight narrative clinical vignettes and one research vignette; and (c) a post-PLAR satisfaction survey with categorical questions to assess level of difficulty, ease of use, and technical problems with the online instrument. The analyses compare individual and aggregate participant PLAR self-assessment responses to responses expected of an RN at the baccalaureate entry-to-practice level.

The online PLAR tool was created using the entry-to-practice competencies that are organized according to the standards of nursing practice identified by the College of Nurses of Ontario (2007). Prior to the study, the clinical and academic nurse experts on the team mapped each item from the self-assessment inventory, the multiple-choice examination, and the clinical and research vignettes to the 104 competency statements via consensus method.

With input and feedback from faculty experts, the nurse-investigators created a test bank of 172 multiple-choice questions and corresponding answers for the competencies. Each of the questions and corresponding answers were also mapped to respective competencies by the principal investigator. Inter-rater reliability across the investigator team was conducted during data analysis.

For each of the eight clinical vignettes and the research vignette, key competency concepts were identified. Each concept was mapped to the corresponding competency statement. Then the nurse-investigators created the competency-based vignette questions and respective responses to reflect the baccalaureate, entry-to-practice level. Consensus method was used for this entire process.

The following is a sample of one of the clinical vignettes:

You are working the night shift after being hired a month ago as an RN on a busy medical/surgical unit. One of your clients is an 80-year-old man, two days post-operative from a heart valve replacement. You assess his vital signs and observe that he is short of breath with labored respirations. He has had no urine output since your shift began. He appears more confused than when you cared for him previously. You have some 'give as necessary' orders from the physician, including giving oxygen and inserting a Foley catheter if necessary.

Here is a sample question for this vignette:

What other assessment findings would be helpful in your decision to initiate oxygen therapy?

The study was conducted between 2008 and 2009. After ethics approval was received from the university, participants were recruited from the CNO mailing list of IEN RNs who had successfully written the CRNE within the previous two years and had consented to be contacted for research purposes. This sample was chosen as a representative of entry-to-practice IEN RNs in order to develop benchmark, degree-equivalent responses for the 104 competencies.

A convenience sampling design was used in this study. The possible sample size was 198. Sixteen did not meet study criteria, therefore  $N$  was 182 (Table 1). Study participants received CDN\$250.00 upon completion of the entire tool or a CDN\$10.00 certificate for a popular coffee shop for partial completion. Only nine of the 51 participants completed the entire PLAR tool. The main reason for attrition rates was the length of time needed for completion as the tool was available for intermittent access over a three-month period.



Table 1

*Response Rates for Each Component of the PLAR*

<b>Recruited N</b>	<b>Actual N</b>	<b>Response rate</b>
198	182	91% eligible to participate
Participants enrolled in study	51	28% (51/182)
Participants completed the self-assessment tool	32	63% (32/51)
Participants completed the multiple-choice examination	22	43% (22/51)
Participants completed clinical vignettes	15	29% (15/51)
Participants completed research vignette	10	20% (10/51)
Participants completed entire PLAR process	9	18% (9/51)

## **Data Analysis**

The investigators mapped the quantitative and qualitative data to all 104 competencies pre- and post-study. At the individual level of analysis ( $n = 9$ ), data were triangulated for each competency and demonstrated convergence, divergence, and omission of evidence for degree equivalence. The sample size of participants who completed the entire PLAR was inadequate ( $n = 9$ ) for determining benchmarks for 104 competency statements. Therefore, data analysis emphasis was at the aggregate level. Aggregate frequency counts were calculated for the self-assessed proficiency levels and types of evidences per competency. For the multiple-choice examination, investigators compiled descriptive statistics as well as psychometric testing. Then, by consensus, they conducted thematic analysis of each of the vignette responses. Codes were analyzed against the predetermined key words per competency per vignette for congruence, divergence, and omission of evidence. For the post-PLAR satisfaction survey, frequency counts were calculated per question.

## **Outcomes**

The demographic findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Demographic Findings*

	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Statistics</b>	<b>Notes</b>
1	Gender	M 12% F 88%	
2	Age range	20–30 19% 31–45 67% 46–65 14%	
3	Participants' country of origin	Philippines 17 India 10 USA 6 Iran 3 Romania 3 Pakistan 2 Colombia 2 China 2 Nigeria 2 Jamaica 1 Korea 1 Russia 1 Switzerland 1	
4	Years of nursing experience	0–5 years 47% 6–10 years 22% 11–25 years 31%	
5	No. of times CRNE written	Once 76% Twice 12% Three times 6% Six times 2% No answer 4%	Eight percent of participants had taken additional courses prior to writing the CRNE, while 29% had none, 49% did not respond, and 14% answered as not applicable. Thirty-five percent of participants indicated that they had participated in and received support from the Centre for Internationally Educated Nurses: Creating Access to Regulated Employment (CARE), while 65% did not.

In the self-assessment the overwhelming majority of participants self-rated as competent or proficient on 104 competencies across the five standards (Figure 1). The most frequent evidence types cited across all competencies were diploma/degree and performance appraisal.

The complex process of descriptive analysis, psychometric testing of the multiple-choice examination, thematic coding of narrative responses, and remapping of all measures to the 104 competencies revealed strengths and gaps in instrument capacity to measure degree equivalence for each competency statement.

The aggregate results of the multiple-choice examination indicated results that were comparable to a university passing grade ( $M = 64.15$ ,  $SD = 8.47$ ). Psychometric testing revealed that questions with an item difficulty of less than 0.3 may require rewording. Investigator inter-rater reliability on mapping examination questions to competency statements ranged from .1 to 1.0. A score of less than 0.6 is inadequate and questions are flagged for rewording in future studies. Coding analysis revealed some convergence, divergence, and omission at the individual level of analysis; however, data saturation was not reached. The consensus method demonstrated confirmability; however, findings were inconclusive due to a small sample size and variation in questions per vignette.

Most participants found the experience challenging, and yet rewarding (Figure 2). They generally found the examination and learning experience enjoyable (Figure 3). The majority found it easy to use (Figure 4) and had no technical difficulties (Figure 5).

## **Conclusion**

IEN RNs who immigrate to Ontario cross the spectrum of countries and ages. This PLAR process holds promise for an objective assessment of IEN's eligibility to write the CRNE and thereby meet a global need for the assessment and recognition of international professional credentialing in nursing. Implications for future research include an increase in indicators by which to measure all 104 competencies. This complex methodology to map triangulated quantitative and qualitative data to 104 competency statements requires large sample sizes. Subsequent methodological refinement is required to triangulate data findings, per competency, and thereby develop reliable and valid benchmarks for each. Replication studies with sample demographics that reflect the Canadian mosaic of IENs are required to create generalizable benchmarks for degree equivalence for ultimate assessment and recognition of credentials for registration purposes.

Technology may help bridge the geographic and professional chasms before professionals plan emigration as online tools are quite accessible and easy to use, as demonstrated by this study. Off-shore and pre-migration access may inform international professionals of Canadian credentialing requirements for entering the Ontario workforce. An online instrument can guide candidates through the creation of a portfolio with evidence to support their self-appraisal and thereby provide a more realistic picture of expectations. An IEN online PLAR process may be expanded

to include other disciplines and professions so that they too may benefit from its accessibility and financial affordability.

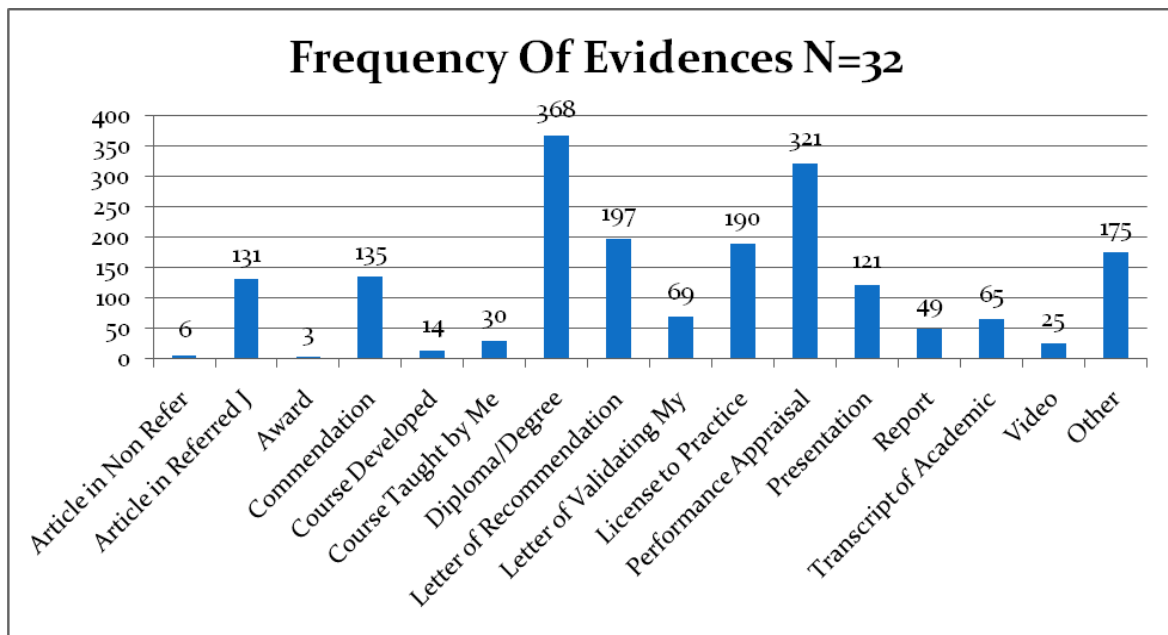


Figure 1. Frequency of evidences to support degree equivalence across 104 competency statements.

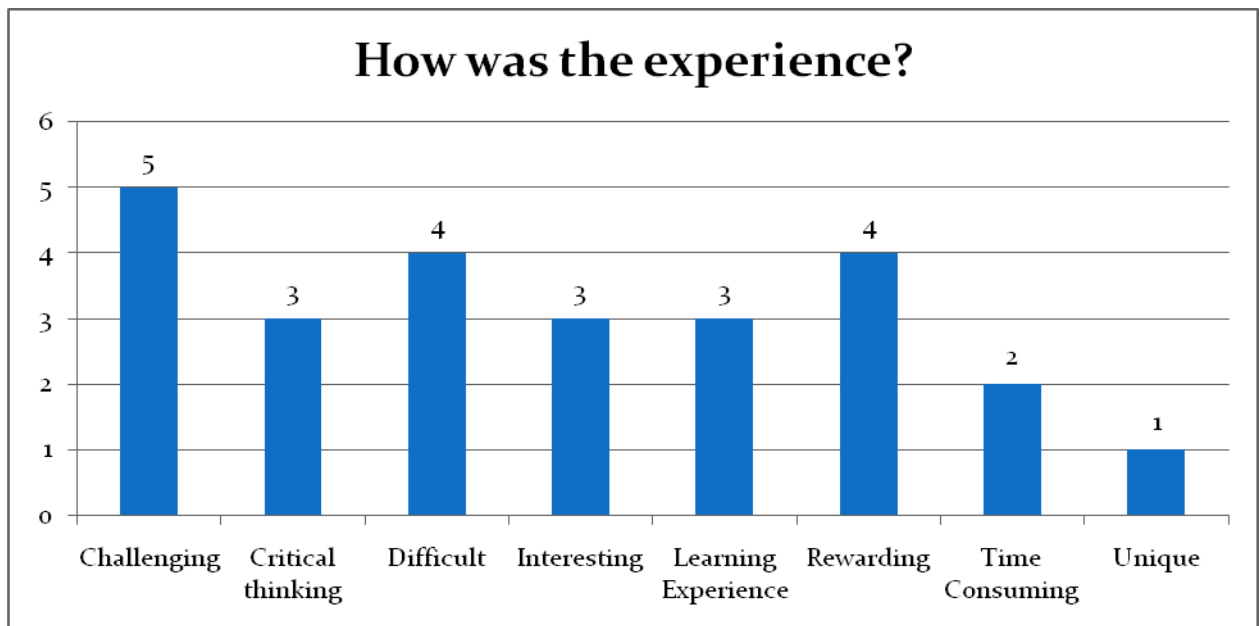


Figure 2. Experience of IEN RNS in completion of PLAR.

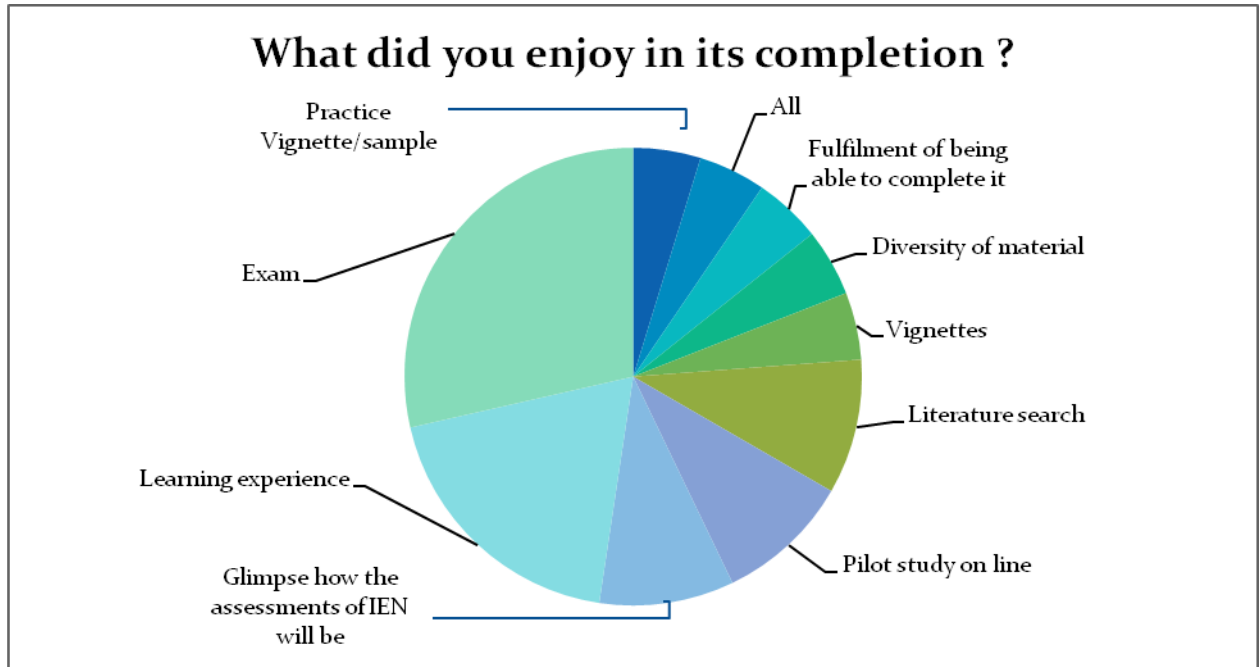


Figure 3. IEN RN enjoyment of PLAR process.

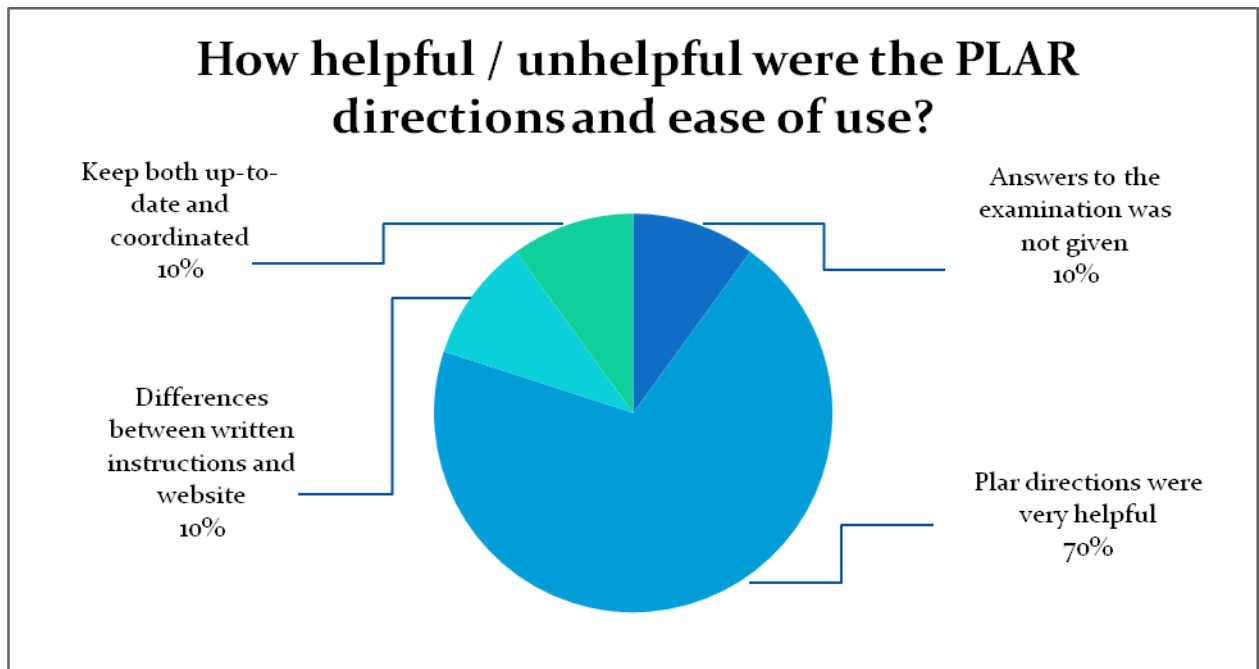


Figure 4. Ease of use of PLAR online tool.

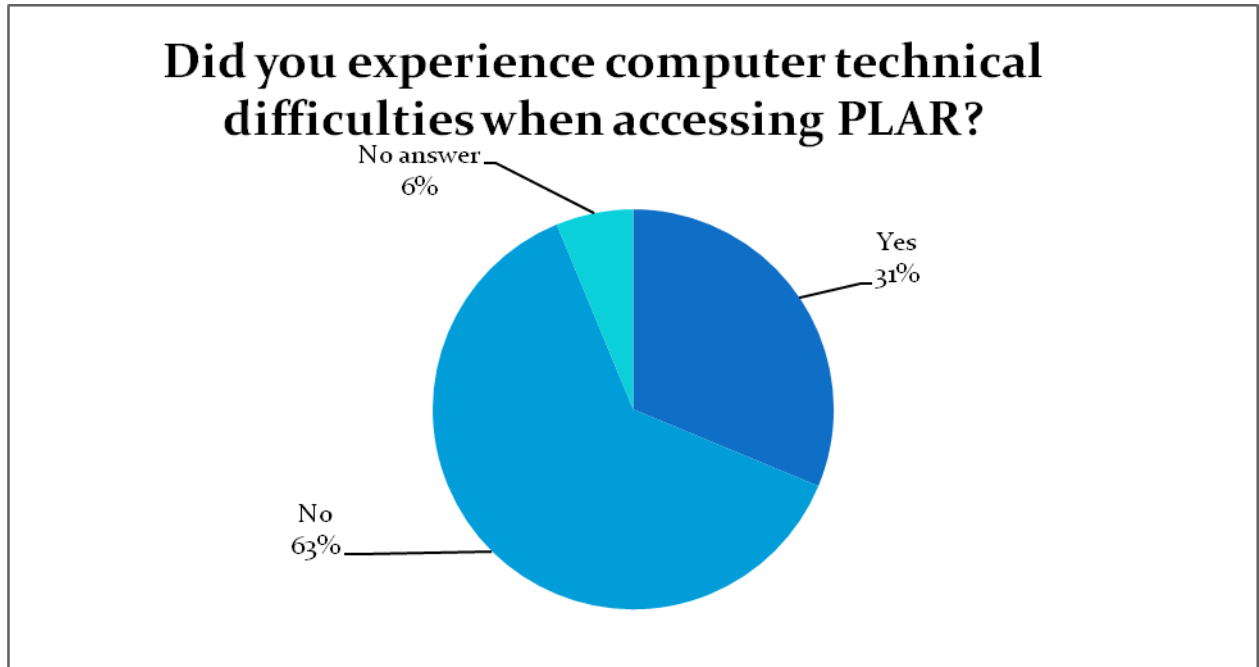


Figure 5. Helpfulness of PLAR user directions.

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## *Going Online to Make Learning Count*

**Cathy Brigham** and **Rebecca Klein-Collins**  
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, USA

### **Abstract**

Adult students often come to higher education with college-level learning that they have acquired outside of the classroom – from the workplace, military service, self-study, or hobbies. For decades, many forward-thinking colleges and universities have been offering services to evaluate that learning and award it college credit that counts towards a degree. However, for a range of reasons, not every institution can offer prior learning assessment (PLA) in every discipline or for every student. With funding from several U.S. philanthropic organizations, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is launching Learning Counts, a national online service that will offer students a range of opportunities to have their learning evaluated for college credit. This online service will expand the capacity of institutions offering PLA to students and provide an efficient and scalable delivery mechanism for the awarding of credit through PLA.

**Note:** The term *prior learning assessment* or PLA is the preferred term in the U.S. for the recognition of prior learning. It may be more familiar to readers as *assessment of prior learning* (APL), *prior learning assessment and recognition* (PLAR), or *recognition of prior learning* (RPL).

**Keywords:** Online learning; PLAR



## **History and Role of PLA**

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a process used by colleges and universities in the United States, Canada, and many other countries to evaluate learning acquired outside the classroom. Assessments are conducted for the purpose of assigning academic credit. Many adults welcome this opportunity. It helps them accelerate their progress toward a degree or certificate and can hold down their costs. Common ways individuals have acquired college-level learning include

- corporate or military training,
- work experience,
- civic activity,
- independent study.

In the U.S., methods to assess prior learning encompass multiple formats, including standardized exams, such as those delivered by the College Board, the Excelsior College Examination Program, or the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests Program; American Council on Education (ACE) Guides to credit recommendations for civilian and military training programs; evaluations of local training programs by local colleges; campus challenge exams; and portfolio assessments of experiential learning.

PLA advocates have long argued that by helping individuals earn credits faster and at a lower cost, PLA can significantly contribute to ongoing progress towards a degree or certificate. Lumina Foundation for Education funded a recent study conducted by CAEL which indicated that PLA students had better outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students:

- Fifty-six percent of PLA students earned a post-secondary degree within seven years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so.
- Of those students who had not earned a degree within seven years, more than half of the PLA students had earned 80% or more of the credits needed for graduation versus only 22% of non-PLA students.
- Compared to non-PLA students, PLA students earning bachelor's degrees saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months in earning their degrees, and those earning an associate's degree saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months in earning their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010).

These findings that PLA students had better academic outcomes than non-PLA students support claims that PLA is a strategy that will help adults earn degrees and progress more quickly toward their goals.

The challenge for students, however, is that PLA is not universally available. Many colleges and universities lack the capacity to provide a comprehensive set of PLA services. Portfolio assessment, in particular, can have significant administrative and faculty costs, and it can be

difficult for a single institution to have enough trained faculty to assess portfolios in a range of subject areas.

## **The Learning Counts Solution**

Because not every institution has the capacity to offer portfolio assessments across a range of disciplines or to large numbers of students, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is launching a national online PLA service called *Learning Counts*. This service will conduct assessments of prior learning for consideration of college-level equivalency in liberal arts and professional areas and will also assess occupational and technical learning accomplished through on-the-job experiences.

CAEL is developing Learning Counts in partnership with the American Council on Education (which evaluates military, corporate, and other non-institutional training for credit) and the College Board (which offers the standardized CLEP exams). Through an online web portal for Learning Counts, CAEL will offer portfolio courses and faculty evaluations of student portfolios. The site will refer students to the College Board for standardized exam services and to ACE to determine whether the student's military or corporate training has been evaluated for college credit. Similarly, ACE and the College Board will refer their clients to Learning Counts for individualized portfolio evaluation services, as appropriate. ACE will provide transcripts for all PLA credits earned through Learning Counts and send them to the students' choice of post-secondary institutions.

During a pilot stage, Learning Counts will work with a group of up to 100 post-secondary institutions, to serve students on a referral basis. The vision is for Learning Counts to eventually serve thousands of students per year, including students not yet affiliated with a specific institution.

Specifically, the Learning Counts Center will offer the following services:

- an online course in prior learning assessment, helping students to understand the full range of PLA options available to them and assisting them in assembling a portfolio that reflects their prior and experiential learning;
- academic advising to students, especially in the area of PLA;
- matching submitted portfolios to qualified faculty assessors who will review the portfolio for college-level learning;
- access to trained faculty who will assess the portfolios, according to CAEL's quality standards;
- links to ACE and the College Board, providing transparent access to a full suite of PLA opportunities for individuals and agencies;
- transcripts of students' complete history of prior learning through ACE.

## Who Will Benefit from this Service

The target population for Learning Counts is almost incomprehensibly large. Certainly, those who have not yet completed postsecondary credentials are a primary target audience envisioned by CAEL. Learning Counts will serve as a resource for these individuals, some already enrolled, some considering enrollment, some who are only now considering their college options, and some who have just completed their high school degree or its equivalency, by offering evaluation of their experiential learning for undergraduate credit. These individuals may already be matriculated at an institution of higher learning or may be unaffiliated with any institution. Either way, they can approach Learning Counts independently and request a review of their prior learning for college credit. Applying for and receiving college credit through such a PLA process will help many students overcome the barriers of accessibility, affordability, and low aspirations.

Other individuals who may use the Center include workers in transition, with a special focus on low-income workers who wish to document skills mastered in previous work environments or other contexts. While it may not be the final goal of all low-income adults to complete an undergraduate degree, these individuals may be interested in postsecondary certification and may also find value in compiling their skills and having them evaluated against a consistent system of assessment so they can be better prepared to present and document their skills when considering future job transitions.

The Learning Counts Center will also be a resource for returning veterans and other service men and women. While members of the military have access to formal assessment of *some* of their training via ACE, not all of the learning opportunities from a military career can be captured through this system. Learning Counts, by offering the portfolio course and assessment, will provide a flexible and easily accessible way for both veterans and active-duty military to have their learning assessed for college credit, thereby accelerating their progress toward a postsecondary credential or degree that will help them transition into a civilian career.

Similarly, institutions of higher learning can use Learning Counts as a support for their ever-strained resources. Hundreds of colleges and universities across America are clamoring for assistance in the area of prior learning assessment. They recognize the need for developing a new, or enhancing their current, model in order to better meet the needs of their current and prospective students, as well as their communities and local economies. Yet even though these institutions find themselves eager to improve in this area, they are unable to do so because of a combination of a lack of resources (both personnel and financial) and a lack of expertise in prior learning assessment. Colleges and universities could choose to use Learning Counts as a resource, either as their primary way to evaluate portfolio submissions from students or as a way to augment their existing programs.

By no means do we suggest that Learning Counts would become something universally adopted by colleges across the country. There are many exemplary programs at individual colleges and universities that function well, are robustly staffed and funded, and serve their students best by being offered locally. Many other schools, however, want a PLA program but do not have the

resources to launch one that can adequately support their students. Learning Counts would be a resource to those institutions suffering a lack of staff support, financial resources, or experience and expertise in the area of prior learning assessment.

One final group that will utilize Learning Counts is the business community. Employers actively promoting the development of their workforce will be grateful for an opportunity to have their employees, as well as their corporate professional training sessions (both formal and informal), evaluated for college-level credit. Evaluations would be done either on a person-by-person basis through the Center or as part of the training-program evaluations performed by the American Council on Education. These evaluations will serve as yet another way to demonstrate an organization's commitment to workplace learning and professional development. In addition, employees who earn prior-learning credit will advance more quickly and economically towards acquiring the post-secondary credential that will benefit both them and their employer.

## **Getting There from Here**

In the fall of 2010, CAEL selected a diverse group of institutions (numbering approximately 100), representing all categories of higher-education institutions, as well as industry and workforce boards, to participate in the pilot phase of Learning Counts. In order to ensure broad representation, our pilot institutions will include representation from the military, organizations within high-need or emerging industries, groups providing direct services to in-transition workers (such as workforce investment boards or WIBs), and postsecondary institutions. Our outreach to the educational community has included community colleges and four-year universities, public and private institutions, online and face-to-face programs, programs serving traditional and non-traditional students, and both not-for-profit and for-profit institutions.

CAEL expects the first cohort of Learning Counts participants to begin submitting portfolios for evaluation in early 2011.

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## *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Emergence of a Canadian Community of Scholars*

**Christine Wihak**  
Thompson Rivers University, Canada

### **Abstract**

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is the practice of reviewing, evaluating, and acknowledging the information, skills, and understanding that adult learners have gained through experiential or self-directed (informal) learning rather than through formal education (Thomas, 2000). As our current economy and workplaces experience rapid and continuing change, PLAR offers a vital contribution to supporting lifelong and life-wide learning (Evans, 2000). Beyond significant benefits to individual adult learners in terms of confidence-building and enhanced reflective capacity, PLAR's process translates personal and workplace learning into a portable format, a common coin suitable for public recognition in many different venues. PLAR has hence become an integral feature of lifelong learning policies around the globe and is closely linked with the implementation of national and transnational qualification frameworks (Morrissey et al., 2008).

PLAR scholars have a vital role in ensuring that policy and practice in this important field is informed by innovative research. This brief report describes a workshop on scholarly PLAR research, held in Ottawa, Canada on November 6 and 7, 2010 with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

**Keywords:** Prior learning assessment and recognition; PLAR; research; lifelong learning; self-directed learning; experiential learning; national and transnational qualifications; Canada

## Background

In Canada, federal and provincial governments have recognized the importance of PLAR in a globalized knowledge economy (Morrissey et al., 2008). Policy makers appreciate its potential to contribute to economic and social development by re-skilling workers from dying industries, enhancing labour mobility, and integrating immigrant workers into the Canadian labour force. Both levels of government have sponsored demonstration projects on PLAR implementation in a range of industry sectors (e.g. nursing, tourism) and applied research projects on various aspects of PLAR. Recognizing potential benefits from PLAR for adult learners, provincial governments provide financial support for PLAR services for students in community colleges and in many provinces, in universities.

Given the high level of interest in PLAR amongst policy makers, a clear need exists for enabling and encouraging scholars to become critically engaged in this area. Two recent SSHRC awards, to Belisle and her colleagues (2008) and Conrad (2009), attest to the scholarly merit of PLAR research. Nevertheless, Canadian scholarly research on PLAR is scant. Van Kleef (personal communication) recently collected and analyzed Canadian PLAR research reports dating from 1995 to 2009. Although she identified over 80 qualitative and/or quantitative studies, only seven appeared in peer-reviewed journals (Austin, Galli, & Diamantouros, 2003; Belanger & Mount, 1998; Lordly, 2007; Peruniak & Welch, 2000; Peruniak & Welch, 2007; Van Kleef, 2006; Wihak, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. Eight of the 80 studies were masters or doctoral theses. These findings indicate that the large majority of PLAR research is taking place on the periphery of or completely outside of the scholarly community, without the benefit of the stimulation and critical review of the peer review process.

PLAR researchers recognize the importance of stimulating the growth of PLAR scholarship. One of the dilemmas facing PLAR researchers is that they represent many different disciplinary affiliations. Although adult education could be considered the discipline originally associated with PLAR (Thomas, 2000), researchers currently active in the field also come from other areas of education (higher education, vocational education, early childhood education), economics, management studies, medical disciplines (notably nursing), psychology, labour studies, and women's studies. PLAR scholars are thus challenged to keep abreast of advances in PLAR research that occur in so many different disciplines. This diversity also makes it difficult for PLAR scholars to convene in any regular way at discipline-focused scholarly events.

Recognizing the obstacles to cross-disciplinary scholarly discourse on PLAR, Thompson Rivers University has created the *Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC)* (see <http://www.tru.ca/distance/plirc.html>). At PLIRC's inaugural meeting in July 2009, internationally known scholars presented papers on research activities in their geographic areas (Australia, Canada, EU, South Africa, UK, USA, and OECD member countries). Judy Harris, co-

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<sup>1</sup> Because it was focused on Canadian research, Van Kleef's review did not include theoretical articles or review articles published in peer-reviewed journals (cf Conrad, 2008a, b) or international research co-authored by Canadian researchers (cf Andersson & Guo, 2009).

editor of the critically received book *Rethorising the Recognition of Prior Learning* (Andersson & Harris, 2006), has edited the resultant collected papers with co-editors Dr. Mignonne Breier and Dr. Christine Wihak. Entitled *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning*, the book will be published in 2011 by NIACE (National Institute for Adult Continuing Education). The papers provide a current international snapshot of PLAR research activities and findings. The endnote presents a synthesis of themes that emerged from the review of international research and suggests an international research agenda.

PLIRC provides updates on development in PLAR scholarship from around the world and hosts a members-only discussion forum. Special interest groups have begun to emerge within the PLIRC discussions (e.g., e-portfolio research).

## **PLAR Research in Canada**

The fragmentation of the international PLAR field is mirrored in Canadian research. While a critical mass of PLAR scholars potentially exists, disciplinary differences impede the creation of an active community of scholarship. Not only do Canadian PLAR researchers lack the stimulation of an active community, the lack of community makes it challenging to find peer reviewers for grant applications and/or papers submitted to journals. Another serious issue is the difficulty of convening supervisory committees for graduate students, and this problem is becoming critical as PLAR scholars retire.

One venue where PLAR scholars do cross paths with some regularity is the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment's (CAPLA) annual conference, although this is a practitioners' rather than a scholars' conference. That is, it is primarily an opportunity for public dissemination of policy developments and project findings, not an opportunity to engage in scholarly debate at a high level. Presentations at the CAPLA conference are not peer reviewed and hence have contributed little to the development of scholarly careers in Canada.

Because of the cross-disciplinary attraction of CAPLA and the opportunity to communicate research findings directly to practitioners, however, there is some advantage in maintaining a connection to the conference. Nevertheless, based on the understanding that PLAR scholars could benefit from a focused forum that could engage a community of scholars in the kind of discussion that would advance scholarly knowledge within the PLAR field, the research workshop "Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Emergence of a Canadian Community of Scholars" was held prior to the 2010 CAPLA conference. Intended to bring Canadian PLAR scholars together to build a PLAR research community and a Canadian PLAR research agenda, the workshop specified the following objectives:

- to map the territory of PLAR research currently being undertaken in Canada, including research by graduate students;
- to identify future directions for Canadian PLAR research and the contribution this research might make to the international research agenda developed by the PLIRC scholars;

- to identify possible interprovincial and/or cross-disciplinary and/or international research projects that Canadian PLAR scholars could undertake.

A workshop format, rather than a conference, was chosen because given the current lack of an existing PLAR research community in Canada, a conference with this focus would be unlikely to attract significant numbers of scholars. Invited participants included Canadian scholars who had published on PLAR in the past five years, graduate students conducting research in this field, and two international PLAR scholars, Dr. Judy Harris from the UK and South Africa, and Dr. Nan Travers from the United States. The workshop format allowed the informal discussion and dialogue needed to develop a Canadian PLAR research agenda.

## **Workshop Presentations<sup>2</sup>**

The workshop commenced with a keynote presentation from Dr. David Livingstone of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). His presentation offered information from a series of national surveys conducted from 1998 to 2010 on Work and Lifelong Learning. This data provided useful background on the Canadian public's interest in having their learning recognized through PLAR.

Ms. Joy Van Kleef, CEO of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning and also a doctoral student, shared the results of her effort to identify and categorize Canadian English-language PLAR research. Dr. Rachel Belisle followed with a complementary presentation of Canadian Francophone research in the field, including her own. These two presentations gave grounds for cautious optimism that PLAR research is emerging as a distinctive field of study in Canada.

After these overview presentations, a number of scholars each shared his or her research. While several of the presenters shared a common background in adult education, their research interests with regard to PLAR were diverse. Dr. Angelina Wong presented on the relationship between research on service learning and PLAR in the university context. Dr. Shibao Guo framed his research on PLAR for immigrants in terms of recognitive justice. Dr. Dianne Conrad discussed the critical role of writing and language in the development of PLAR portfolios. Barbara Read shared the preliminary findings from her master's research on the role of informal and non-formal learning in higher education. Dr. Leah Moss reported on her doctoral work on PLAR in a military college setting.

Two presenters came from the health field. Elaine Santa Mina reported on work regarding development of an online instrument to use in determining degree equivalency of internationally educated nurses. Daphne Lordly provided a synthesis of several research studies she has conducted with regard to the use of PLAR in professional education for dietitians.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the attending scholars gave permission to have their presentations posted on the PLIRC website: <http://www.tru.ca/distance/plirc.html>.



In the discussions that followed each presentation, various synergies among research interests emerged. For example, Guo's work with immigrants resonated with Santa Mina's work with internationally educated nurses. Belisle's work parallels Conrad's work in exploring the role of language in PLAR work. The two researchers from the health field realized they share common concerns and questions with regard to PLAR, even though they work in different health disciplines.

Harris' presentation of themes emerging from the upcoming PLIRC book on international PLAR research allowed the attending scholars to see how the state of PLAR research in Canada mirrors that of the international scene. This message was reinforced by Travers' presentation of PLAR research in the United States. In brief, to advance PLAR research in Canada and internationally, researchers in the field need to do the following:

1. consolidate the fragments in favour of cumulative research;
2. extend types of qualitative and quantitative research and the way we do mixed-method research;
3. bring more and different theoretical lenses to PLAR research;
4. bring social science and economic research into dialogue;
5. strengthen links between policy (research) and scholarly research;
6. undertake more *nuanced* research – particular role-players, particular issues, bringing specialist and generalist research together;
7. train and mentor new researchers and form research partnerships (Harris, 2010).

Follow-up communication from workshop participants has indicated that the workshop succeeded in mapping the territory of Canadian scholarly research in PLAR, making the participants more aware of what research has been done or is in progress. Participants anticipate engaging in dialogue with each other individually about specific research interests and questions through membership in PLIRC. Several of the scholars have indicated a resolve to submit their work to peer-reviewed journals or books. Finally, the participants expressed an interest in congregating again in the future, possibly in conjunction with the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, a major scholarly meeting held annually in Canada. A Canadian community of PLAR scholars has indeed begun to emerge.

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## *Evaluating Prior Learning Assessment Programs: A Suggested Framework*

**Nan L. Travers and Marnie T. Evans**  
SUNY/Empire State College, USA

### **Abstract**

Over the past two decades, American institutions have been expected to include systematic program reviews to meet accrediting standards, either by independent or governmental review agencies. Program evaluation is critical for several reasons: it provides systematic ways to assess what needs improvement or what needs changing and it provides ways to validate practices, whether to internal or external audiences (Mishra, 2007). Most program evaluative models are focused on academic programs, which don't fit the uniqueness of prior learning assessment programs. This paper proposes an evaluative framework for prior learning assessment programs, which takes into account the type of work within prior learning assessment programs and uses program portfolios, similar to how students are asked to document their work.

### **Introduction**

Quality assurance in higher education (Lenn, 1992) remains a top priority as resources continue to diminish and demands for excellence increase. Over the past two decades, American institutions have been expected to include systematic program reviews to meet accrediting standards, either by independent (e.g., Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges) or governmental review agencies (e.g., Council for Higher Education in Israel, Education Ministry of Russia). Program evaluation is critical for several reasons: It provides systematic ways to assess what needs improvement or what needs changing and it provides ways to validate practices, whether to internal or external audiences (Mishra, 2007).

Much has been written on quality assurance (e.g., Mishra, 2007), but little has focused on appropriate frameworks for evaluating prior learning assessment programs (Van Kleef, et al., 2007; Van Kleef, forthcoming 2011). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has published ten standards for prior learning assessment programs (Fiddler & Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006; Whitaker, 1989), which address established practices in prior learning assessment programs (see Appendix A, Table 1). In addition, over the last decade, CAEL (e.g., Flint & Associates, 1999; Glancey, 2007; Hart & Hickerson, 2008; Klein-Collins, 2006, 2010) has studied institutional practices, validating the ten standards. These standards articulate principles that guide program practices but do not address ways in which programs can evaluate their own effectiveness. Freed (2006) analyzed prior learning assessment processes in Texas public universities using the ten standards as a framework and concluded that although there were similarities across the programs studied, many of the institutions could benefit from an evaluation of their current policies, procedures, and practices in terms of overall quality.

Hoffman, Travers, Evans, and Treadwell (2009) studied 34 prior learning assessment programs across higher education institutions in the United States and Canada and determined five critical factors impacting program structures. These critical factors are 1) institutional philosophy statements and policies supporting prior learning assessment practices; 2) institutional support, including financial, administrative and faculty buy-in; 3) prior learning assessment program parameters that set the structures for how credit is assessed and applied; 4) faculty evaluator and content expert professional development; and 5) program feedback and evaluation processes. The results from this research indicated a strong correlation among the factors and PLA program practices (correlations range:  $r = .84, p < .01$  to  $r = .42, p < .05$ ), implying that best practices tend to be more prevalent when these five factors are in place. However, only 23% of the institutions in the study had any formal evaluation process of their program.

Programs in this study that did report more formal evaluative processes tended to rely on input from those involved in the PLA process (e.g., students, faculty). In addition, some reported that they collected student outcome results (e.g., completion and persistence rates). None of the programs indicated that they had a systematic framework through which they evaluated their program.

Accreditation processes (e.g., Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges) provide institutions with some type of overarching framework and critical questions from which the institution can conduct a self-study to assess their institution and programs. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2005) states that each of its standards examines a dimension of institutional quality and that by examining the ways in which an institution meets these standards “the Commission assesses and makes a determination about the effectiveness of the institution as a whole (p. 1).” Through specific guiding statements within each standard, the institution documents the ways in which it “has clearly defined purposes appropriate to an institution of higher learning; has assembled and organized those resources necessary to achieve its purposes; is achieving its purposes; and has the ability to continue to achieve its purposes (p. 1).”

The self-study process allows wide-based participation to examine current practice and areas for improvement. Areas identified for improvement provide the backbone from which a program can concentrate its plans for next steps. This type of process can be an effective way to explore different aspects of a program, not just institutions as a whole. To conduct a self-study of a specific program, an appropriate framework with standards needs to be developed that matches the nuances of that program type.

The prior learning assessment program has unique qualities compared to other academic programs. For example, program review practices, such as curriculum committees, are not in place and often institutions do not institute a periodic program review as typically would be required for an academic department program. Rather, without some of the common practices in academic program development, the set of standards for prior learning assessment programs differs and requires its own set of protocols for program evaluation. The history of prior learning assessment programs has countless examples of programs trying to prove their worth and effectiveness under the scrutiny of more traditionally bound critiques. Prior learning assessment programs need to find ways to demonstrate how they are effective and academically rigorous. By using similar types of evaluative structures, the effectiveness of the programs can be equated to other program evaluation processes.

### **The Ten-by-Five Framework**

The ten-by-five framework is a matrix designed to provide a systematic exploration of the ways in which a prior learning program is successful and to identify ways in which the program might need improvement. Based on the CAEL ten standards and the Hoffman, Travers, Evans, and Treadwell (2009) five critical factors, the ten-by-five matrix provides a structure from which a program can conduct a self-study. The CAEL ten standards are used in this framework because most institutions use these standards to form their prior learning assessment programs and these standards are widely accepted by many accreditation agencies. The five critical factors (Hoffman, Travers, Evans, & Treadwell, 2009) provide specific areas in which to focus each standard within the self-study.

As a qualitative evaluative tool, the matrix is designed to provide a comprehensive framework from which to explore an institution's policies and practices in more detail and determine areas for improvement. The matrix is structured with the CAEL ten standards on the vertical axis and the five critical factors across the top, horizontally, giving 50 areas to address in the study. Within the matrix, each cell was divided to provide opportunity to report current practice, assess the outcome of this practice, and make suggestions for improvement (see Appendix A, Table 1).

For example, the CAEL standard one reads: "*Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.*" For each standard, the self-study would explore how this standard is implemented through the five critical factors: institutional mission and commitment; 2) institutional support (financial, administrative, and faculty); 3) PLA program parameters; 4) PLA evaluator development; and 5) program feedback and evaluation. To assess the first standard, an institution would look at its mission, philosophy, and policies. Are these institutional

tenets supporting that credit is awarded for learning and not just for experience? How is this standard supported through financial structures, the administrative mindset, and faculty buy-in? What types of structures are in place within the PLA program to support the standard? How are the evaluators trained to determine the differences between experience and learning? In what ways are the outcomes being assessed?

Although completing all ten standards against the five critical factors is a daunting task, the analysis can reveal some very important areas through which a program could focus future planning. For example, at SUNY/Empire State College, the evaluator training does address the differences between experience and learning. However, at a deeper look, the materials used in this training could provide even more support for evaluators to understand effective ways to assess learning and make distinctions between learning and experience. To assess that credit is awarded for learning and not for experience per se, the college uses a faculty committee to review the evaluator's evaluation of the student's learning and credit recommendations and make final credit award decisions. In addition, administrative staff members review the final credit awards and evaluator recommendation. The tiered review system provides checks and balances to the decisions.

The matrix prompts for a description of practice, an assessment of that practice and suggested next steps. For the example above, the institution could begin to explore ways in which to define and assess the effectiveness of these practices. These deeper explorations into the questions about a program allow, through the self-study process, a way to highlight possible areas for improvement and program planning.

## **Conclusion**

Quality assurance is critical for any type of program to understand how it succeeds and how it must improve. The assessment process must be comprehensive enough to endure multiple questions and critiques and any scrutiny. Prior learning assessment programs need to find methods to use to assess their policies, practices, and outcomes in ways that align to other academic programming and the institutional processes. The more others within an institution can understand the program and its integrity, the greater the program will be accepted and accessed across the institution.

The ten-by-five matrix self-study framework is proposed as an approach that an institution could use to delve into a comprehensive exploration of its policies, practices and outcomes. The self-study nature of this framework provides a qualitative approach that structures itself around the CAEL principles, which are well established, and the recent Hoffman, Travers, Evans and Treadwell study on five critical factors for PLA programs. These ten standards and five critical factors provide lenses through which an institution can ask tough questions about its program and determine ways to improve and plan for future directions.

Although the ten-by-five matrix is designed as a comprehensive framework for prior learning assessment programs, the framework itself has not been assessed. To date, the framework has

received initial anecdotal application (e.g., SUNY/Empire State College); however, it needs to be tested more systematically in an institutional setting to determine whether 1) the ten-by-five matrix self-study framework is effective to evaluate a prior learning assessment program, and 2) what an institution might learn about its program from using a self-study framework, such as this one. Future research is planned to study the effectiveness of the framework on assessing programs and improving practices, and currently institutions are being sought to participate in this study.

**Note:** The authors will be conducting a study on the ten-by-five matrix self-study framework. For more information on how your institution can participate in this study, please contact Nan Travers ([nan.travers@esc.edu](mailto:nan.travers@esc.edu)) or Marnie Evans ([marnie.evans@esc.edu](mailto:marnie.evans@esc.edu)) at SUNY/Empire State College.



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## Appendix A

<b>Table 1: Ten-by-Five Matrix Framework for Prior Learning Assessment Programs</b>						
<b>FIVE CRITICAL FACTORS FOR PLA PROGRAMS</b>						
	<b>Institutional Mission and Commitment</b>	<b>Institutional Support</b>	<b>PLA Program Parameters</b>	<b>PLA Evaluator Development</b>	<b>Program Feedback and Evaluation</b>	
<b>THE TEN CAEL STANDARDS</b>	I. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for <i>learning</i> , and not for <i>experience</i> .	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
		<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
	II. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
		<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
	III. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
		<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>

IV. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
V. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
VI. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
VII. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>

available to all parties involved in the assessment process.					
VIII. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
IX. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>
X. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changed in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>	<b>Current Practice:</b>
	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>	<b>Assessment:</b>

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