

Prior Learning Assessment at Home and Abroad



Excerpts from Recent Articles in the CAEL Forum and News
November 2007



CAEL

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Prior Learning Assessment: Current Practice and Future Visions

CAEL is pleased to provide this publication to our members and other organizations and individuals interested in learning more about Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA. Most of the articles published here have been previously published in the Forum and News, an e-newsletter CAEL regularly shares with its members.

This publication includes a summary of the data gathered in CAEL's 2006 institutional survey on PLA, results of our research on state-wide PLA policies, an article on how PLA is being used with working adults, and articles on how PLA is being promoted and applied in other countries: South Africa, Canada, and the European Union.

More information on PLA can be found through a variety of CAEL resources:

- ♦ CAEL's annual conference each November (see <http://www.cael.org/events.htm>)
- ♦ CAEL's website at <http://www.cael.org/pla.htm>, which provides information on:

PLA Face-to-Face Workshops

PLA Online Certification

CAEL publications: *Earn College Credit for What You Know, Fourth Edition*

By Janet Colvin

*Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles & Procedures,
Second Edition*

By Morry Fiddler, Catherine Marienau, and Urban Whitaker

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Excerpt from an article in the Fall 2006 Forum and News

Prior Learning Assessment: Current Policy and Practice in the U.S.

By Rebecca Klein-Collins, CAEL

Over the past 30 years, hundreds of postsecondary education institutions have developed systems to award college credit for what people learn outside the classroom through corporate training, work experience, civic activity, and independent study. Through a process called Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), colleges and universities evaluate and award credit for this learning when they determine it to be similar in content, depth, and breadth to what they consider college-level learning.

Since 1974, CAEL has devoted time, effort, and funds to establishing and disseminating standards for the awarding of credit through assessment, training faculty evaluators, and implementing research on the outcomes of these efforts—with special emphasis on the portfolio method of assessment. As part of our PLA efforts, CAEL periodically scans the field to learn more about trends in PLA practice and in institutional policy, and we share our findings with the adult learning community to provide a better sense of what other institutions are doing and, in general, where the field is headed.

Institutional Practice: Lessons from CAEL's Survey of Registrars

In 2006, we requested information from colleges and universities nationwide on how they are administering PLA and what may have changed since we last surveyed the field in 1996 and 1991.

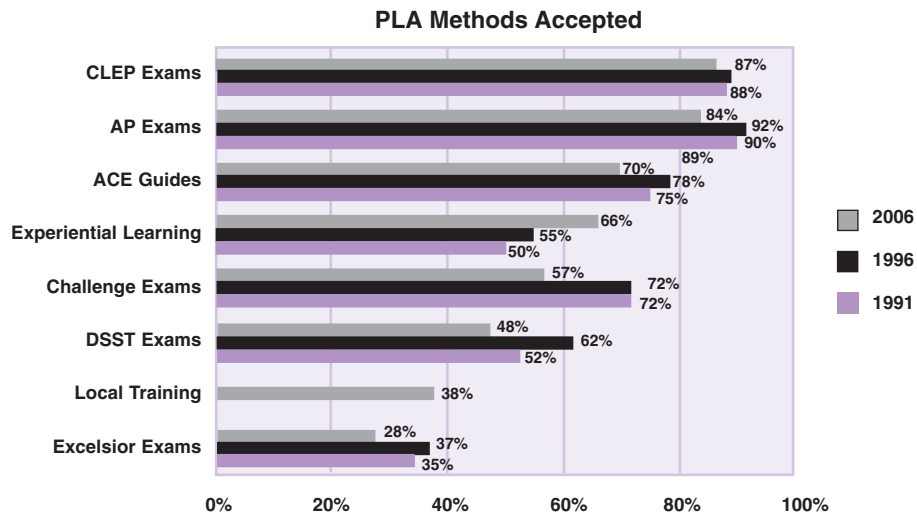
Defining PLA

Prior Learning Assessment is not just one method or tool. PLA includes methods such as:

- ♦ **Experiential Learning Assessments**, also known as individualized student portfolios or interviews
- ♦ **Evaluation of Local Training**, which includes program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs that award credit to those who achieve recognized proficiencies
- ♦ **ACE Guides**, published credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, both civilian employers and the military
- ♦ **Challenge Exams**, which are local tests developed by some colleges to verify learning achievement
- ♦ **AP Exams**, a series of tests developed by the College Board initially for AP High School courses – 34 exams in 19 subject areas
- ♦ **CLEP Exams**, tests of basic entry-level college material offered by the College Board through its College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- ♦ **Excelsior College Examination Program** (formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams), offered by Excelsior College, NY
- ♦ **DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) Program**, conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric – tests of basic entry-level college material through 37 exams

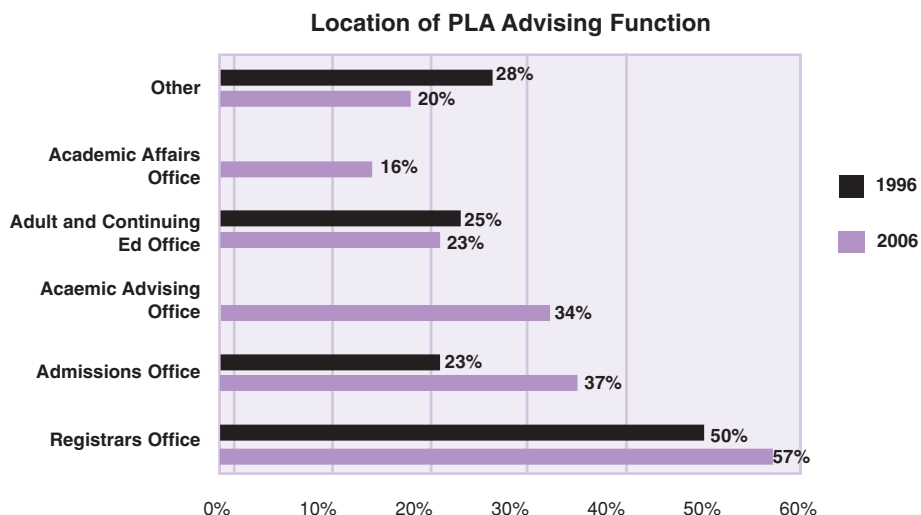
(FUND Consulting assisted CAEL with the administration of the survey and the analysis of the data.)

CAEL's 2006 survey elicited responses from 272 college and university administrators, primarily registrars. We asked these individuals about PLA at their institution – what kinds of PLA credit are accepted at their institution, how students learn about PLA, when credit can be requested, and whether there are fees for PLA credit.



Types of PLA Accepted

The 2006 responses show that most institutions accept PLA methods such as CLEP Exams (87%) and AP Exams (84%), similar to acceptance patterns from previous years. The least used methods were Excelsior Exams (28%) and Local Training (38%). Looking at data from 1996 and 1991, we see some evidence that acceptance of Experiential Learning Assessments is becoming slightly more common (66% in 2006 compared with 55% in 1996 and 50% in 1991) while acceptance of Challenge Exams may be becoming less common (56% in 2006, compared with 72% in previous years). The table above shows the trends from the data.



How Students Learn about PLA

In 2006, more institutions (compared with 1996 data) provided information on PLA options in their Admissions and Registrar's Offices than did in 1996. We are also seeing a slight decrease in the percentage of institutions housing the information with the Adult and Continuing Education office.

In addition to offering PLA information in the various offices on campus, 82% of respondent institutions provide information on PLA in the college catalogue, 45% have information on the website, and 28% have a dedicated PLA brochure or handout.

Restrictions on PLA

Just over one-third (35%) of institutions responding said that they have some restrictions on when students can participate in the PLA process. The most common restriction was requiring the student to wait until completing a specific number of semesters or credits. Credit was also

commonly restricted to a period prior to the student's final semester or year. One college, for example, said that the final 32 hours of credit must be earned in residence.

Respondents across the board indicated that PLA is most often applied to lower division courses and least often applied to graduate level courses (less than 5% of respondents indicated that any PLA credit was awarded at the graduate level during the 2003-2004 academic year).

The average maximum number of credits that could be earned ranged from 30 credits from Experiential Learning to 42 credits from ACE Guides.

Fees for PLA

Responding colleges and universities were more likely to charge submission/evaluation fees from students applying for credit through PLA methods like Challenge Exams (45% of those accepting Challenge Exams) and Experiential Learning (59% of those accepting Experiential Learning credits). They were less likely to charge students applying for credit through Excelsior Exams (7% of those accepting those exams), AP Exams (9%), and ACE Guides (11%).

Respondents were even less likely to charge tuition fees for those credits. Again, colleges and universities accepting credits from Challenge Exams and Experiential Learning were more likely to charge tuition fees for awarding those credits.

Use of Experiential Learning Assessments

Although sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents said that they accept credit from experiential learning assessments, only forty-two percent (42%) of the respondents reported that they conduct those assessments themselves.

The most common ways that institutions helped prepare students for experiential learning assessments was through individualized advising (83%), student handbook or guidebook (63%), and pre-screening qualification (54%). Less common were credit-based courses that include portfolio development (47%), seminars or workshops (31%), and non-credit courses (4%).

The majority of respondent institutions that conduct experiential learning assessments provide student advising online or via email (62%) and approximately half allow electronic submission of portfolios (50%).

If you have any questions about the 2006 PLA policies and practices survey, please contact Diana Bamford-Rees, dbamford-rees@cael.org.

Statewide PLA Policy

By Kathleen Glancey, CAEL

From CAEL's work with states and the federal government, we have seen a growing interest from policy leaders in the concept of prior learning assessment (PLA). The implementation of a comprehensive statewide PLA system can have marked practical significance for adult learners in ways that can benefit their choice of institution, retention, academic performance and skill development. Once implemented on a statewide basis, PLA can increase the number of adults who possess industry-recognized credentials in high-wage, high-demand careers within targeted economic sectors.

From telephone interviews and Internet research conducted in 2006, CAEL learned that more than half of all states have at least one agency or entity that has instituted policies that support or encourage the adoption and use of prior learning assessment methods in higher education. The types of policies that we are seeing in the various states include the following:

- ♦ General support statements indicating that the student's experience outside the college classroom can be evaluated for college credit
- ♦ State postsecondary education agencies specifying which PLA methods are accepted and how many credits can be accepted through PLA methods
- ♦ Portfolio review policies and procedures
- ♦ Regular reporting of PLA credit awarded through the various methods
- ♦ The degree to which different campuses/institutions can establish their own PLA policies
- ♦ Joint articulation agreements between statewide community colleges and universities detailing PLA policies
- ♦ Reference to PLA policies developed by CAEL or the regional accrediting agency

Below are some examples of existing state level policies:

Case Study: Connecticut's Universities and Community Colleges

In Connecticut, both the Board of Governors for Higher Education and the Board of Trustees of Community-Technical Colleges have PLA policies requiring institutions proposing to award credit for prior experiential learning to develop written policies and procedures in accordance with their standards. The standards include the following methods of awarding credit for prior learning: standardized tests, nationally recognized evaluations for credit recommendations accepted by the Board, individualized written or oral tests designed and administered by qualified faculty, and portfolio review.

In addition, the Board of Trustees of Community-Technical Colleges has also supported and encouraged the use of a variety of mechanisms for awarding college credit for demonstrated competence gained through nontraditional learning experiences, including instructional programs offered by non-collegiate organizations (e.g., corporate training programs, public and private [proprietary] vocational programs, hospital-based nursing and allied health educational programs). The board believes that it is proper to assess non-collegiate instructional programs for the purpose of developing appropriate recommendations for the award of college credit to students who complete such programs successfully.

Case Study: Oregon University System's Compliance with CAEL Standards

The Oregon University System's Joint Boards Articulation Commission recommends that compliance with the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) and CAEL's Ten

Standards of Assessing Prior Learning related to proficiency-based assessment be required credits granted for prior experiential learning or other options. In addition, accurate information about the use and transferability of each of the options for gaining credit for proficiency-based assessment should be made available to students. These credits will be accepted for elective credit and may apply to specific requirements in a student's major.

Case Study: Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry

In 2006, Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell announced that the legislature endorsed his "Job Ready Pennsylvania" package, which represents unprecedented investment in Pennsylvania's workforce of \$91 million in new state funds. This strategic investment leverages approximately \$2 billion in the commonwealth's workforce and education systems to ensure that workers have the skills they need to compete in the global economy, increase options for students to receive post-secondary education and boost the skills of high school graduates.¹ One important strategy is the recognition that adult learners deserve credit for college-level learning no matter how or where it was acquired.

Case Study: Rhode Island's Joint Articulation Agreement

The Community College of Rhode Island, the University of Rhode Island, and Rhode Island College have a formal PLA agreement. Under this agreement, these institutions accept as transfer credits those credits awarded by the other institutions through the assessment of a student's military experience or through the assessment of other prior learning experiences as documented in a student's portfolio.

Case Study: Vermont State Colleges Assessment of Prior Learning

Vermont State Colleges Office of External Programs has a long standing Assessment of Prior Learning program offered at all twelve Community College of Vermont locations as well as Castleton State College, Johnson State College, and Lyndon State College. Since its inception in 1976, over 6,000 adults have gone through the program. Using CAEL's Ten Standards for Assessing Prior Learning, the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) Assessment of Prior Learning program starts with the belief that college-level learning can occur in many places other than a classroom. VSC reviews individual student portfolios and determines credits earned for experiential learning. They offer students a transcript, which they take to whatever school they choose.

Additional examples of system-wide policies in 2006 are listed in the table on pages 7-8.

1. Pennsylvania Office of the Budget, "Governor Rendell's Job Ready PA is an Unprecedented Investment in Pennsylvania's Workforce," (July 7, 2005), www.budget.state.pa.us/budget/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=201785&pp=12&n=1

State Higher Education Agency	Examples of System-wide PLA Policies – August 2006								
			Methods of Awarding Credit						
	General Policy Statement Encouraging PLA	Reference to CAEL or Accrediting Agency's PLA Standards	Standardized Tests	Institution Challenge Exams	Published Guides	Portfolio Review	Other	Includes Standards for Awarding Credit	PLA Policy Exists, but Institutions Develop Their Own Programs
Alabama									
Department of Postsecondary Education			X	X	X			X	
Alaska									
University of Alaska Board of Regents	X								
Arkansas									
Arkansas Department of Higher Education	X								X
California									
Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education	X							X	
Assn. of Independent California Colleges and Universities			X						
Colorado									
Colorado Community College System			X	X	X	X		X	
Connecticut									
Board of Governors for Higher Education			X	X	X	X		X	
Board of Trustees of Community-Technical Colleges			X	X		X		X	
Delaware									
Delaware Technical and Community College			X			X			
Florida									
Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students			X					X	
Florida State Board of Education - Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Education			X	X					
Idaho									
Idaho Board of Education	X	X							
Illinois									
Illinois Community College Board			X						
Iowa									
Iowa Bureau of Community Colleges and Technical Education			X						X
Kansas									
Kansas Board of Regents			X						
Kentucky									
Kentucky Community & Technical College System	X								
Maryland									
Maryland Higher Education Commission	X		X					X	
Minnesota									
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities			X	X		X			
Missouri									
Coordinating Board for Higher Education			X	X	X	X			X
Nevada									
Nevada System of Higher Education			X	X				X	

	Examples of System-wide PLA Policies – August 2007								
	Methods of Awarding Credit								PLA Policy Exists, but Institutions Develop Their Own Programs
	General Policy Statement Encouraging PLA	Reference to CAEL or Accrediting Agency's PLA Standards	Standardized Tests	Institution Challenge Exams	Published Guides	Portfolio Review	Other	Includes Standards for Awarding Credit	
State Higher Education Agency									
New Jersey									
Thomas Edison State College		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
New York									
Empire State College		X				X			
State University of New York			X	X		X			
North Dakota									
North Dakota University System		X							X
Oklahoma									
Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education			X	X	X				
Oregon									
Oregon State Board of Higher Education		X							
Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Policy		X							
Dept of Community Colleges and Workforce Development		X							
Pennsylvania									
Pennsylvania State Board of Education		X							
Rhode Island									
Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education			X	X					
Community College of Rhode Island			X	X	X	X			
South Carolina									
South Carolina Commission on Higher Education	X								
South Dakota									
South Dakota Board of Regents	X		X	X	X	X			X
Texas									
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board			X	X					
Utah									
Utah State Board of Regents			X	X				X	X
Vermont									
Vermont State Colleges Office of External Programs		X				X			
Virginia									
Virginia Community College System			X	X	X	X		X	
Washington									
WA State Board for Community and Technical Colleges			X	X	X	X		X	X
Higher Education Coordinating Board	X								X
Wisconsin									
Wisconsin Technical College System			X	X		X	X	X	X
University of Wisconsin System									
Wyoming									
University of Wyoming		X	X	X	X	X	X		

Excerpt from an article in the Fall 2006 Forum and News

PLA and Today's Workplace

By Theresa Hoffmann, PLA Consultant,
Former Director of Prior Learning
at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC)

Introduction

The theory and practice of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) are most often focused on the roles of higher education institutions and how PLA can benefit adult learners. But there is also an important role in the workplace for PLA. The workplace is, after all, where so many adults gain college-level knowledge outside of the classroom, and the workplace is usually where those same adults return after earning their degrees or higher level credentials.

In my fifteen years of experience as Director and faculty member of Prior Learning at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), the connection between PLA and the workplace grew increasingly apparent, with our own PLA movement fueled in large part by the needs of local employers and their employees.

Employer Interest in Prior Learning at UMUC

PLA at UMUC was much more than just a boutique offering for experienced adult workers – it also became a tool to serve the local business community. The reason is that so many of our local employers competed regularly for government contracts that require highly skilled and knowledgeable workers with college backgrounds or degrees. Employers wanting to qualify for these contracts – and also to fulfill their requirements once granted – knocked on the doors of higher education to expedite the degree process for their workers and/or help their workers earn credits quickly in specific academic areas.

When given information about the range of PLA options, employers and individuals alike would often want to know the answer to one main question: What kind of experiences and occupations yield a knowledge base worthy of college credit?

Scenarios Demonstrating the Variety in Adult Learning Experiences Considered for College Level Credit

Below I provide profiles of three students that I worked with who typify the kind of student that we assessed (some of the details have been modified to preserve confidentiality and privacy).

Student 1: Learning through Management and Volunteering

Joan is a working single mother with 3 children. She has worked for over 10 years as a human resource manager for a large corporation and is responsible for the supervision of 20 staff members. Her duties include personnel training, budget management, EEO regulations, employee payroll and leave paperwork, personnel counseling and hiring and firing. In addition, she has served as the Election Campaign Manager for her local congressperson and would like to earn credits for her knowledge of how to run a campaign and the political process. Her other hobbies include the Garden Club, serving as the Secretary of the PTA and volunteering for her church's efforts on behalf of youth groups. Joan is working toward her degree in Human

Resources Management and has 45 credits to date. Her minor is not declared and she has 1 in her electives. Through PLA, she earned credits in Human Resources courses, Management and Government and Politics.

Student 2: Learning by Doing

Robert's background in computers began when he was young. He enjoyed taking them apart and rebuilding them to see if it all worked. Robert gained most of his training from the Army overseas, working with computer programming and designing systems. Presently he works for a government agency as a Systems Analyst. His tasks include project management from beginning to end, troubleshooting and analysis, and designing hardware and software systems. In addition to his computer expertise, he has written technical manuals for military use and designed web-based systems using web applications such as JavaScript, HTML, and Lotus Notes. Robert has earned 60 credits and his A.A. in Computer Applications through his local community college. Robert's goal is to earn a degree in Information Systems Management. He was able to apply his computer knowledge to upper level credits in courses such as Systems Analysis and Design, Project Management and Technical Writing.

Student 3: Learning by Serving the Community

Working on the city police force for nine years, John has been exposed to intense training and experiences that provided him with the opportunity to learn about issues in criminal justice. His knowledge includes an understanding of the criminal justice system, juvenile delinquency, drug use and abuse, victimization, teamwork, the cycle of violence, the prison system, and survival procedures. John's friend had a rough time in his youth and he wanted to help others to avoid the pitfalls. As a result, he volunteered for the Big Brother Program that allows him to spend time with a needy child or teen. John is working toward a degree in Criminal Justice and has accumulated 55 credits toward his degree. As a result of PLA, he earned credits in Juvenile Delinquency, Drugs and Crime, Psychology of Criminal Behavior, and Criminal Courts.

Summary

When students want to know what learning from experiences can earn college credit, it is very common for them to be unaware of the extent of their learning. Most people have not had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences – those gained in the workplace and elsewhere – and to discover their knowledge base. The PLA process provides a venue for students to see themselves as experiential learners, and gives them the academic confidence they need to continue with their studies. It further helps them move more quickly to achieving the degrees and credentials that will benefit their careers and their employers.

Excerpt from an article in the Fall 2006 Forum and News

Strengthening Education for All of South Africa through RPL

By Aneesha Mayet, RPL Project Manager, JET Education Services

During the early 1990s, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the largest labour movement in South Africa at the time, promoted the concept of recognition of prior learning (RPL) as the principle to redress the inequities of Apartheid. The intentions of RPL were to create career pathways and access routes for the historically disadvantaged groups who received inferior education during the Apartheid era.

Despite several challenges, there have been some advances in RPL that have been driven by a few non-governmental organizations, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), higher education institutions and a few government departments.

Background

The development of RPL in higher education in South Africa was largely funded and supported by the Ford and W. K. Kellogg Foundations. An initiative known as the Workers' Higher Education Project (WHEP) was established in 1995 as a project within the Joint Education Trust to assist in the promotion and implementation of RPL in universities and technikons (technikons are degree-granting technical schools that have since been merged with the university system). At the Ford Foundation's recommendation, CAEL was asked to provide the initial expertise for this endeavour.

Models and Purposes of RPL in South Africa

Currently, various RPL models are used in South Africa. An RPL Centre has been set up in the Free State Province which provides services to three education institutions in the province. Further, a 3-Day Portfolio Development Course, based on the model developed by Prof. Elana Michelson of the Empire State University of New York, for the Sapekoe Tea Plantation, was successfully used when upgrading 4500 Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioner skills from NQF level 1 (General Education Certificate level) to level 4 (Matriculant or Further Education and Training level). The tools in this model supported the development of portfolios of evidence which demonstrate competency against learning outcomes. Other models include challenge exams, demonstrations, and performance assessments.

The intended outcomes of these processes vary across the spectrum of awarding credits for learning, creating access to formal learning, identifying gaps in learning, and developing an individual learning plan. RPL is closely linked to the notion of lifelong learning and one of the expectations of a successful RPL assessment is the placing of learners on a learning pathway that will aid in the learner's career development as well.

Some Challenges of RPL in South Africa

The education and training system overhaul in South Africa since 1994 has helped to streamline the previously disparate education system. There is now one education and training system for all racial and ethnic groups, and all institutions are required to align their qualifications and

learning programs to the new system. The main thrust of the transformed education system is Outcome Based Education and Assessments. Qualifications are offered in a manner that will ensure that exit level outcomes are achieved by graduating learners. In addition, some qualifications are unit standard-based. Unit standards are smaller learning units which specify specific outcomes against which learners are assessed. Adhering to rules of combination as established by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the unit standards are combined to make up whole qualifications. Unit standards are credit based and learners can achieve a number of credits in order to achieve the whole qualification.

One challenge for RPL is that recognized learning must be aligned with the SAQA registered unit standards or qualifications. This means that informal learning is assessed only against outcomes that are specified in the unit standards or qualifications. Learning that falls outside of the specific outcomes is not assessed, or is set aside to be assessed at another stage. If candidates wish to gain credits for all of their learning, then they have to demonstrate competency in every specific outcome of every relevant unit standard. This process unfortunately identifies gaps in learning and places RPL candidates on a wider spectrum of learning pathways, making the achievement of recognized credits or qualifications an arduous task for the learner who may have had very little exposure to formal learning previously. In addition, there is no formal procedure available for recognizing and formalizing indigenous knowledge or learning.

Also challenging has been the lack of impetus from the government to drive the implementation of RPL. Government funding earmarked for skills development may include RPL, but few practitioners are trained to implement it. In addition, many higher education institutions are not readily embracing the principle of RPL, and are therefore not making the necessary adjustments to accommodate such students. Widespread adoption of RPL within the higher education sector will likely not occur without greater leadership from the government.

RPL as a National Priority

Since late 2005, however, a number of organizations and institutions have begun to reconsider the value of RPL. The Department of Education, Department of Labour and other national initiatives such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) and the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills (JIPSA) are now focusing on the skills development of the young and unemployed. Greater emphasis is placed on recognizing prior learning and developing a skilled nation. These initiatives have created an enabling environment for the development of centres of excellence and Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges that will become more responsive to the current education needs. There is an impetus by the National Business Initiative (NBI) to begin assisting with the capacity development of these centres and colleges.

Conclusion

In essence, South Africa is undergoing a renewed drive to develop a skilled nation in a more focused way than in the past. The lessons learned from our experiences in the recent past have assisted in ensuring that RPL is conducted in a more focused way, together with the identification of real development pathways and real employment benefits. While RPL still needs a national champion to ensure the sustainability of this promising redress practice, there is a general re-thinking among major stakeholders that RPL is here to stay.

Excerpt from an article in the Fall 2006 Forum and News

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Canada: Thoughts for Today – Hopes for Tomorrow

**By Bonnie Kennedy, Executive Director,
Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)**
Prior learning assessment and recognition

(PLAR) initiatives in Canada can be traced back thirty years when pioneering practitioners were seeking ways to assist experienced workers to get credit for their informal learning. Since that time, PLAR processes have been refined and PLAR growth can be seen in many provinces and territories. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is the national voice for PLAR in Canada, advocating for formal recognition of learning accomplishments on behalf of its members.

The History of CAPLA

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is an incorporated, non-profit organization that has been in operation since 1994. CAPLA has yearly workshops and has been instrumental in bringing the fields of PLA and formal credential recognition (qualification recognition, or QR) together, in order to support the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a holistic enterprise. Readers may be interested in CAPLA's *Developing Benchmarks for PLAR – Practitioner Perspectives and Guidelines* which can be found on the website (www.capla.ca). CAPLA also maintains the Canada's Portfolio site, which showcases some of Canada's learning accomplishments, along with contact information from across Canada (www.canadasportfolio.ca).

One of the most exciting additions to CAPLA has been its online community of practice and national repository for PLAR resources and research (www.recognitionforlearning.ca). The website provides a platform for national and international dialogue amongst PLAR and QR practitioners.

PLAR in Canada Today: New Uses in the Workplace

At one time, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) was seen almost exclusively as an educational process associated with colleges and universities assessing adult experiential learning for academic credit. Today, its use extends beyond the postsecondary system into the workplace. Skill shortages within the labor market are driving the use of prior learning assessment tools to evaluate competencies in regulated and non-regulated occupations. A number of sector councils in Canada (see the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council and others at www.councils.org) are looking at competency-based assessment against industry standards to evaluate experienced workers and immigrants to Canada.

National organizations such as the Canadian Career Development Foundation are interested in PLAR as a useful process for employment counselors in their work with adults. Many human resources professionals, who are interested in retention, recruitment and succession planning, also find that PLAR tools are helpful in employee development, skills recognition, and competency assessment. There are PLAR connections being established by Canadian adult educators and distance educators, as many adult learners who have completed portfolios

report on its transformational qualities. Likewise, distance education and training programs that are adult learner-centered are well positioned to offer PLAR first, followed by whatever distance courses are required later, to fill any learning “gaps.”

Public Policy and Institutional Leadership in PLAR

In some jurisdictions, policy makers see the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as an integral part of lifelong learning, labor force development, qualification systems, immigration, and access to postsecondary education. For example, provinces such as Manitoba have been integrating it into several departments over the past five years. In June, Alberta hosted a large province-wide PLAR consultation called *Alberta Recognizes Learning*, which succeeded in raising the profile of PLAR to new heights, by demonstrating its use in a variety of sectors locally and nationally.

Since 1996 the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia has had great success with portfolio development in a variety of settings, from adults in transition to university-bound professionals. Hundreds of individuals have received PLAR practitioner training through the Centre (www.placentre.ca). The Nova Scotia Community College refers to itself as the “Portfolio College” in recognition of the importance it places on the portfolio learning process. Red River College in Manitoba has also distinguished itself through its PLAR courses and summer institutes, from beginners to advanced levels, both face-to-face and online. First Nations Technical Institute in Ontario is currently undertaking a Human Resources and Social Development Canada funded national research study aimed at testing the ALFI principles of best practice in serving adult learners in a variety of settings.

Canadian Research

A new government-funded organization called the Canadian Council on Learning is looking at PLAR through a number of its five knowledge centers. A State of the Field Review outlined most of the PLAR activities taking place in the provinces and territories and concluded that more research would be needed to fully understand the value of PLAR to Canada and its citizens (www.ccl-cca.ca).

Some interesting research on the unmet demand for PLAR amongst Canadians was revealed in a 2004 study carried out by the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Statistics from the 2004 National Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning showed that more than half of all Canadian adults and 60 percent of those employed would be more interested in enrolling in further education if their prior informal learning and work experiences were recognized (www.wallnetwork.ca).

The Conference Board of Canada’s 2001 study entitled *Brain Gain* also points to the major learning recognition gap, stating that if it were eliminated, Canadians would benefit from an additional \$4.1 billion - \$5.9 billion in income annually (www.conferenceboard.ca).

In 2003, CAPLA undertook a study for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to provide a snapshot of PLAR activities, policies and practices in Canada’s public postsecondary institutions. Details on this study can be found at (www.cmec.ca/postsec/capla-plar2003.en.pdf).

Looking Forward

The iceberg metaphor, often used to describe the amount of hidden learning all of us possess and about which we are unaware, effectively depicts our challenge in discovering what lies beneath the surface. We continue to struggle to find ways of uncovering it, as individuals, organizations, communities and countries. Because classroom learning is still seen as the only learning that really counts, individuals with uncredentialed knowledge, skills and abilities face huge attitudinal, structural and financial barriers. And while PLAR continues to be about equity, access and social inclusion, it may be economics and our current skills shortage that provide the catalyst to jettison PLAR into the mainstream of Canadian life.

Excerpt from an article in the Spring 2007 Forum and News

Book Review

Recognising Experiential Learning: Practices in European Universities

Edited by Consuelo Corradi, Norman Evans and Aune Valk

A review by David O. Justice

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is experiencing a strong new growth in the United States. After years in which PLA was viewed as an experimental approach for "nontraditional" students, states such as Pennsylvania, Georgia and Oklahoma, among others, are embracing PLA as a means to increase access to higher education, raise levels of academic attainment in the population as a whole, and promote economic growth. Companies seeking to promote learning and higher levels of competence among their workforce have looked to PLA as a cost-effective means for certifying skill levels. And colleges and universities seeking to increase their enrollments of working adults are turning to PLA as a way to attract students who are concerned about time and costs.

But we are not alone. In this intriguing book, Consuelo Corradi, Norman Evans, and Aune Valk chronicle a wide variety of initiatives in higher education and training in the European Union (EU, the primary sponsor of this publication), that build on various uses of PLA, or, as they would call it, APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning). From France to Estonia, Italy, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland, we learn about the variety of ways in which PLA is being adapted and adopted by countries in the European Union. In France, we discover that granting credit or rather degrees for learning obtained outside the University has been officially sanctioned since 1935 and more recently has been expanded throughout France through national legislation. Estonia is more cautiously exploring how APL (granting credit for academic learning acquired at other institutions) and APEL (granting credit for non-institution-based experiential learning) can be integrated into its most prestigious university. And in Italy a private Catholic institution is pioneering the best practices of APEL based on guidelines from the EU. In the Netherlands, a university is using APEL techniques to screen and assist immigrants seeking to transfer their degrees from their countries of origin to the Netherlands. And there are other interesting and innovative practices described in the book.

The book is organized into three parts. For the North American reader, it is probably most helpful to begin with Part III, particularly the first chapter in which are described the EU's various initiatives to encourage and stimulate the practice of APEL among member nations. Pat Davies in her chapter, "Norms and Regulations for the Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning in European Universities: An Overview" describes the actions of the EU going back to 1957 that have laid the ground for current developments. Of particular relevance is the widely known Bologna Declaration which committed the signatories to "encouraging a common frame of reference, aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability" (p.182). The Bologna Declaration subsequently became the Bologna Process with a plan to "harmonize the architecture of European higher education" by 2010. Within the process were several suggestions for enhancing admissions and transfer practices including the use of APEL. The chapter also sketches the ways a number of countries have adapted the guidelines of the Bologna process within their own higher education systems.

The American reader might then proceed to Part I where an attempt is made to place APEL within the broad context of changes in higher education, primarily in Europe, but with some

passing references to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. More relevant to the specific cases described in Part II, the second chapter of Part I describes how the various EU initiatives impact APEL and, by extension, Lifelong Learning. Although at times confusing to the uninitiated, Part I does set the stage for understanding the early initiatives in APEL that are then described in Part II.

Moving from Part I to Part II we get glimpses of a wide variety of implementation practices. There are several common threads that run across most of the initiatives described. First, there is a consistent emphasis on tutoring and counseling as an essential component of any successful APEL program. Clearly this is a new element for most of the institutions, and their various approaches suggest some creative solutions. Another continuing issue of debate among the institutions and countries is the terminology. Some use APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) others use APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning, presumably eliminating non-formal learning) and others create additional terms and phrases to more accurately describe their programs. And, of course, language also plays a role in differing definitions. Still, the debate over terms also illuminates the ongoing arguments about how learning outside traditional institutions and patterns ought to be treated. Some of these debates will be familiar to American readers, like the fear that recognition of learning outside of formal institutions will lower standards. Others open new views on the use of PLA like the use of APEL to accommodate learning immigrants or refugees bring from their home countries. And one of the most interesting threads is the repeated point that recognition of the validity of the theories underlying APEL requires a rethinking of the way people learn and therefore a reexamination of the fundamentals of curriculum, teaching and learning practices.

Of course, there are also the usual debates about using PLA for admission to advanced programs or actually granting credit or even complete certificates or degrees. For the most part there seems to be a variety of limits on the amount of credit (from 25% to 50% of a full degree) in those institutions granting credit for prior learning. On the other hand there seems to be more acceptance of APEL as a means of opening access (admission) without going through the more traditional paths.

For those of us who have been advocates for PLA here in the United States for years, this book is encouraging on the one hand and disappointing on the other. It is encouraging in that it illustrates the growing acceptance and adoption of PLA in some very traditional cultures. And it demonstrates that PLA can be used in new and creative ways. It is instructive, as I have tried to illustrate, in the adaptations that are being developed. And it is even inspirational as several of the 18 authors express their passion about PLA as a liberating movement in European higher education. But the book is disappointing in its lack of data on the amount and extent of the practice of PLA. I was struck, for example, by the virtual lack of mention of Germany, a country whose universities were international models for higher education at the turn of the 20th century and strongly influenced American higher education. Is there no APEL in Germany? And if not, why not? While there is considerable discussion of policy and guidelines, there is little information other than anecdotal about the actual range and scope of PLA in Europe and little information about where it will be in the future. One is tempted from the tone of some authors to conclude that PLA will not find much traction in Europe despite the policy being promulgated by the EU meetings. Indeed, more than one of the authors asserted that the Bologna process would not achieve its 2010 goals on time.

As Norman Evans mentioned in a Fall 2006 *Forum and News* article, consistency in terminology among the authors was difficult to achieve due to the ways in which terms are used in the various countries. This can be challenging for the reader at times. In the end, however, the book is a valuable read. Although I believe it could use a better organized structure which would eliminate duplication and redundancy, it does provide the reader with an inside view of PLA practices in contemporary Europe.

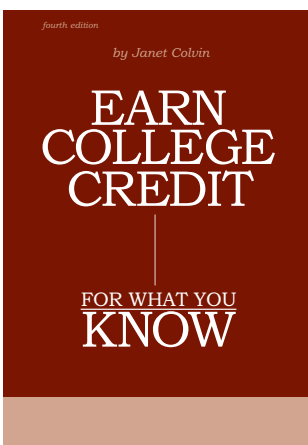
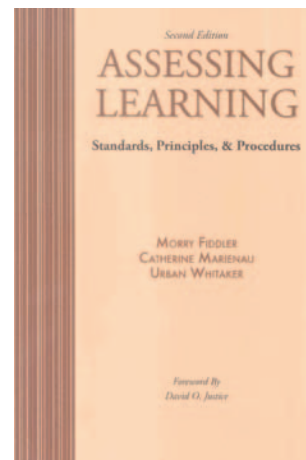
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