

Recognizing PLA: An Interview with Debbi Dagavarian

Viktorija Popova-Gonci, SUNY Empire State College

Debbi Dagavarian is assistant provost at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She has held other administrative and part-time faculty positions at Thomas Edison State College, SUNY Empire State College and Mercy College, and served as founding director of the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning. She earned a doctorate in education from Rutgers University; published two books on baseball and several articles on topics ranging from baseball to assessment, and has served as a consultant for accrediting associations, colleges and corporations. Dr. Dagavarian has been well acquainted with the field of prior learning assessment for over 30 years.

Victoria Popova-Gonci is assessment specialist at SUNY Empire State College's Long Island Center and a member of the PLA Inside Out board.

Viktorija Popova-Gonci (VP-G): How long have you worked in the prior learning assessment (PLA) field and in what capacity?

Debbi Dagavarian (DD): My first introduction to PLA was in 1976, when I got my first professional job at a medium-sized, traditional, private college. My position involved working with transfer students, so I had contact with most of the older, nontraditional students there. I was involved in the development of a new program at the college called "Life Achievement" (originally "Life Experience"), whereby students were granted credit for college-level learning. Our work was based on the efforts of Dr. Morris Keeton and others on the Commission on Nontraditional Study (also known as the Carnegie Commission), which was a project of the Educational Testing Service. This group of pioneers became the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL), whose acronym eventually came to stand for "The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning."

In 1976, when I was a young professional with a newly-minted master's degree, I was touting the benefits of the Life Achievement program to students in their 40s, 50s and beyond. The program required the student to submit a detailed essay that discussed his or her college-level learning experiences. Two or three faculty readers would evaluate the knowledge and grant up to 15 generic block credits to be used as non-liberal arts elective credit in the student's degree program. Even though I continued to work at that institution in different positions for 11 years, I still administered the Life Achievement program.

Armed with 11 years of PLA experience and a new doctorate in education, I was able to move to a truly non-traditional institution, Empire State College. Though I only spent one year at Empire State College, I always valued its approach to higher education. At that college, I learned how credit can be awarded in areas of discrete learning components in any appropriate part of a degree program. Wow! After one year, I left for another nontraditional institution, Thomas Edison State College.

At Thomas Edison, I started as director of prior learning assessment. I was also the founding director of the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning, and as such, began to meet and befriend the

true pioneers in PLA: Morris Keeton, Urban Whitaker, Harriet Cabell and others. My knowledge of PLA grew exponentially then, because I was learning from the experts directly--those people who were responsible for this revolution in higher education!

Throughout my career, I came to learn more and more about PLA. I also conducted research at Thomas Edison on PLA, served on evaluation teams as the “expert” on PLA and other nontraditional areas to many different institutions for accrediting associations, and wrote a few articles on different aspects of PLA. I learned more about PLA from the many participants in what became the annual National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning. My entire view of the field broadened because my network of colleagues grew. I also was asked to start a column in the *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* on PLA, which I named the “Prior Learning Assessment Corner.”

VP-G: What originally attracted you to this field?

DD: I fell into the PLA field, but I became *hooked* through my discussions with students! Nothing in my early professional life could compare to the enthusiasm and vitality of my exchanges with nontraditional students. I absolutely loved the idea that we could formally acknowledge a student who had read most of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry for pleasure, or learned about death and dying while she nursed her terminally-ill husband.

VP-G: PLA practices vary across PLA-practicing institutions. Is this a welcome development or not? What’s the tendency: more toward variation or toward standardization?

DD: One thing that troubled me throughout my career is that most practitioners of PLA were often low- or middle-level administrators who held numerous other responsibilities in their institutions. In the early years, when PLA was relatively new, the PLA administrator might hold responsibility for any of the programs the institution had in place for adult students: credit or noncredit continuing education courses; evening and weekend classes; accelerated programs; veteran’s affairs; etc. This usually translated into the “PLA expert” at an institution being too busy to emerge from a never-ending workload in order to conduct research and publish. That might not be the only reason for the dearth of literature on PLA, but I believe it contributed to it.

This is why I was delighted to learn about *PLAIO*. Finally, an entire journal dedicated to the field I love!

Another concern about PLA is assurance that it is conducted with rigor and equity. No matter what the process, I strongly believe that the CAEL principles (initially from CAEL’s research in the early 1970s and published in Urban Whitaker’s *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Practices*, and now in Fiddler et al.’s 2006 iteration of that great work) must be followed.

Many years ago, I saw a few PLA programs at different institutions that were very poorly conceived. They did not use rigorous methods for assessment, nor did they apply the same standards to all students. I don’t think this situation exists much anymore, primarily because of the Internet and the influence of the regional accrediting associations and professional organizations that serve adult-focused educators. Institutions, even those in more remote areas, now have electronic access to information that in the ‘70s could only be accessed by faculty and staff participation in meetings and workshops. This augers well for the field.

In 2003, when my entry on prior learning assessment for the *Encyclopedia of Distributed Learning* came out, I characterized two major types of PLA: portfolio assessment, which is usually based on a course-matching model, and credit by evaluation, or individualized assessment, which does not depend on a course-match. I still find that any PLA program can be classified into one of these methods, though the overwhelmingly popular one is portfolio assessment.

I believe that the PLA evaluation process has become more standardized in terms of its rigor. This is decidedly a good thing! As long as the CAEL principles are followed, the PLA will be valid. Validity may be consistent, but reliability can vary from one program to another, even when the principles are followed. I know of some PLA folks who have conducted reliability studies at their institutions, and I did, too. These studies were eye openers. I learned then that it is imperative to offer good training and faculty development opportunities for evaluators--always!

V P-G: Would you like to forecast any future developments in PLA?

DD: The future of PLA, as I see it, is twofold: in its use for employability and as an acknowledged form of new learning. First for employability: documented learning, whether it is prior or current, demonstrates to a potential employer that an individual has knowledge in certain areas. A PLA portfolio can be adapted from that which was used to earn credit for a degree, to that which is used to sell oneself to a potential employer. The knowledge itself is discussed, as is how, when, where and why it was acquired. Both a strong PLA portfolio *and* an individualized assessment ground the discussion of knowledge with the background of the individual. It frames the discussion so that the faculty reader knows for certain that the knowledge being discussed is authentic.

PLA can also be a learning experience in itself. The process of exploring one's areas of knowledge through experiences, searching for documentation of this knowledge, and most importantly, discussing the parameters of the knowledge, can serve to bring greater understanding to the individual. This kind of reflection enhances one's understanding and knowledge of oneself. Also, when writing a prior learning essay, most students will round out the "rough edges" or "holes" in their experientially-acquired knowledge. Good PLA can be a strong and valid learning experience in itself.

V P-G: Do you see PLA as a divider between traditional and nontraditional education or as a bridge between the two?

DD: This is an interesting question, and I don't really have a good answer; I'm not sure it's either a divider or a bridge. As PLA represents the knowledge that is acquired by adult students through their experiences, it is qualitatively different from the knowledge that they gain in their course work (and the knowledge that younger students gain in their studies). In a sense, it is similar to the granting of credit for field experience or internships for younger students. In some cases, internships may be less concerned with the demonstration of knowledge; rather, some just require the student to complete the terms of the internship. A prior learning assessment *relies on* the demonstration of knowledge to justify the granting of credit.

I would not like to think of PLA as a divider between traditional and nontraditional education because I don't see it as divisive in any way. I see PLA as an equalizer for adult students: to give them recognition for their life's learning to use in the academic milieu. The "recognition" (thus prior learning *and* recognition, PLAR, as it is known in Canada) is important to give value to what the adults already know.

Younger students come to college fresh from high school; most come ready (or somewhat ready) for college. Nontraditional students often come to college from the world of work, after an absence from formal education. They come at a slight disadvantage compared to traditional-age students who have more recent school experiences. In that sense, PLA can be the avenue that gives the nontraditional student greater equality in the academic setting.

I believe that traditional and nontraditional educations are interconnected, though I'm not sure PLA is the thing that bridges them. They enhance one another, just as young students can learn from adults and, of course, vice versa.