PLA and Transformational Potential:
Reflections Through the Prism of Appreciative Inquiry
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In this essay, I want to pose some questions, hopefully not rhetorical, and reflect on the nature, process, outcomes and potential of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). In doing so, I rely mostly on my own experience and practice, although a review of the literature shows that questions and answers are not particularly idiosyncratic. To provide a framework for this consideration, and more importantly to highlight the potential of what is done in reviewing prior experience, I use a paradigm of inquiry that has been shown to be particularly useful in many areas of organizational development and organizational change: Appreciative Inquiry.

To structure this writing, I use the Appreciative Inquiry framework lightly but consciously. The following sections reflect its 4-D methodological sequence. A discovery section tries to capture a sense of what has been done and what I consider limiting in PLA. This is followed by a holistic appreciation of the potential and contributory value of the PLA process (what Appreciative Inquiry calls "the dream"). The design section presents possibilities for discussion and action to reposition and rescript the dynamic potential of PLA. The final section suggests initiatives that may allow PLA to be more widely appreciated and to foster innovation and creativity in its application (its "destiny"). The first section briefly reviews the essential elements of Appreciative Inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry: Rearticulating Capacity and Capability

Appreciative Inquiry was introduced into organizational renewal and development by David Cooperrider in the late 1980s. Its original use, however, was not as a theory of change but as a research methodology. As such, it assumed a quite different perspective from contemporary approaches, which focused on finding problems and prescribing solutions. Cooperrider moved from a deficit-perspective, which dwells on deficiencies and problems, to a positive-perspective, which recognizes and appreciates pre-existing generative potential and transformative possibilities (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Appreciative Inquiry brings together many disparate theories, borrowing eclectically from discourse and narrative theory, social constructivism and generative theory (Bushe, 2011). It requires that inquiries into an organization, or community of practice, should be undertaken with a positive attitude, an interest in applicability, and an aim to provoke transformative discourse. Appreciative Inquiry tries to create a space for collaborative reflection, open discussion and consideration of the future rather than to impose piecemeal solutions for what might be seen as the "problem."

Cooperrider was initially reluctant to develop his approach in book or manual form, fearing it would inhibit the creativity of organizational change practitioners and reduce core concepts to check-off boxes. In subsequent years, given the success and burgeoning use of Appreciative Inquiry, he and his colleagues have written extensively on its theory and practice (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yeager, 2001; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). While not without its critics, who point out that organizational participants are more willing to discuss positive rather than negative issues, Appreciative Inquiry has contributed significantly to transformative outcomes in many different social and organizational settings. Reviews

and meta-studies of its contributions have been compared favorably, sometimes very favorably, with other organization intervention approaches such as action research (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Egan & Lancaster, 2005).

In encouraging mindful engagement, Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) provide a set of five general principles:

- *Constructivism.* This underscores the use of a socially constructed ontology, derived from socio-rationalism (Gergen, 1994), in which the worlds that we live in are understood as the ongoing constructions of our experience, assumptions and cultures. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) advise that "the purpose of inquiry, which is viewed as totally inseparable and intertwined with action, is the creation of 'generative theory,' not so much mappings or explanations of yesterday's world but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow's possibilities" (p. 20).

- *Simultaneity.* The act of considering practice suggests future change. Present and future are not remote or causally separated; instead, they are seen as essentially and inevitably co-present. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) explain simultaneity by saying that "the seeds of change – that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire images of the future – are implicit in the very first questions we ask" (p. 20).

- *Poetic narration.* What is done and why it is done is an ever-changing narrative: constantly rehearsed, continuously rewritten and inevitably rescripted. Bushe and Kassam (2005) underscore this in these terms: "Organizational life is expressed in the stories people tell each other every day, and the story of the organization is constantly being coauthored. The words and topics that we choose to talk about have an impact far beyond just the words themselves. They invoke sentiments, understandings, worlds of meaning" (p. 166).

- *Anticipatory reality.* Action is predicted in terms of future possibilities rather than a repetition or re-enactment of the past. Anticipatory Inquiry artfully tries to reshape an anticipated reality, rather than conserve a known past. Cooperrider and Whitney (2001) consider that "human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation (in their talk in the hallways, in the metaphors and language they use) that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent" (p. 21).

- *Positive affect.* Considerations of change must be provided with inspirational pathways that lead to restored hope, positive engagement and a sense of personal authenticity. Cooperrider & Whitney (2001) consistently stress that "the more positive the question we ask in our work the more long lasting and successful the change effort . . . The major thing we do that makes the difference is to craft and seed, in better and more catalytic ways, the unconditional positive question" (p. 22).

Discovery: The Limitations of Instrumentality

Over the last 40 years, prior learning assessment (PLA or APL), has emerged in different places, under different conditions, in response to varied social, institutional and learner contexts. While its process is remarkably similar, prior learning assessment has acquired many different names. In Australia and South Africa, prior learning is "recognized" by some institutions of higher learning (RPL). In the U.K., prior experiential learning is "assessed" (APEL), again for institutional purposes. Some Canadians underscore that prior learning undergoes both an "assessment" and a "recognition" (PLAR), while others co-join its "assessment" with its final "articulation" (PLAA).

The first question might be: Why are there so many names for a common process?

PLA, as a process, reconsiders what has been "done" as what has been "learned." As a process it recognizes, respects and affirms that learning is an internal capacity of the individual and that learning can be situated in different experiences that are neither confined to traditional places of learning nor exclusively defined by them. PLA acknowledges the intellectual capacity of the adult learner and offers a mechanism to bring her learning into formal educational settings. In doing so, the student is provided with the opportunity for inclusion and empowerment, while the educational institution is enriched by difference and diversity. Empowerment,

diversity and respectful inclusion are broad social issues and PLA has historically addressed those issues having "the potential to assist students to define themselves in empowering ways … [which] may be particularly relevant to individuals from colonized populations who have experienced disempowering histories" (Robertson, 2011, p. 105).

PLA recognizes that significant learning occurs through social interaction and collaborative efforts in the workplace, where novices have the opportunity for legitimate peripheral participation in an expanded community of practice (Wenger, 1998; 1999). Their engagement in the workplace, or community of practice, provides "a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). These interactions may, or may not, create new knowledge. Knowledge that is created may be essentially personal, informal and have little transferability. Knowledge created in these contexts, however, might also be equivalent to college-generated knowledge, although such transferability was inconsequential when the experience was gained and unconsidered until the student became involved with PLA.

PLA, as a process of engagement, provides the opportunity for the student to reflect on her experience. It allows her to sift and sort; to critically examine experience perhaps for the first time; to rearticulate experience in differing narratives of selfhood; and to consider connections, discontinuities, and reconnections between past and present. This can be a powerful, liberating and affirming new experience. However, the PLA process is embedded in an institutionally constructed matrix that has concern for educational equivalency, demonstrations of reliability, and objective validity (Stenlund, 2010). Changed understandings, new perspectives and acquired skills are usually only visible if they resemble the outcomes that might have been anticipated in formal institutional learning programs (Boud & Solomon, 2003; Solomon, Boud & Rooney, 2006).

While the PLA process is initially broad and student-centered, it is later restricted into prescribed channels that lead to the expectations of the particular institution. The process of PLA explores the student's personal experience. What it finds – the end-products that result from the process – are defined institutionally. PLA is usually initiated, guided and truncated by the understanding that "creditable college-level learning is both measurable and independent of its source" (Zucker, Johnson & Flint, 1999, p. 1). This can be understood as a definition: it can also be read as an outcome. That is, it is through the act of measurement that experience is independent of, or detached from, its source. Experience is only "creditable" in terms of fulfilling pre-determined, institutionally-selected criteria (credits), rather than in terms of intrinsic value (credible). Methodologically, we measure for what we anticipate finding, and the finding simply confirms the fact. Dredging the pool with a net that has a four-inch mesh will most likely produce a catch, but it tells us little about what lies below the water – what might be more interesting, more valuable or even more useful.

Most students undertaking PLA assessment are aware of the end-products. They, often with minimal guidance, selectively assemble and edit their narratives to conform to what is expected. In the workplace, for example, there is usually a richness of transferable skills, formalized knowledge and comparable competencies. These can be selectively assembled in the PLA portfolio by the student, or dredged up by the evaluator. The pre-selected catch will hopefully be rich in college-learning equivalents, institutional expectations, and demonstrations of validity and reliability. However, it is important to recognize that such a process necessarily reduces the scope and time of PLA, thus curtailing the process, and allowing it to focus on measurable and well-defined products (Reeves & Gallacher, 2005; Reeves, Gallacher & Ingram, 2007). It also fails to account for, or utilize, the richness that slips through the mesh of the assessment net.

The proliferation of PLA designations suggests that the crucial issue is the end-product: each bears an operational description of the way in which the underlying process will be used. Broad, expansive and person-centered learning – the "PL" – is modified by specific instrumental purposes of assessment, recognition and articulation. While the underlying *process* might be similar, the *product* of that process is institutionally

specific and limits, or circumscribes, the process. In considering experiential learning, Tara Fenwick (2010) warns that "the critical problem lies in mistaking learning as a single object when in fact it is enacted as multiple objects, as very different things in different logics of study and practice" (p. 80). The PLA designations are themselves the products of an overarching logic of single-object, institutional product-requirement.

A product-logic has rational appeal, even if the consequences are problematic. Looking at experience and learning, Fejes and Andersson (2009) recognize the point that "the discussion about RPL needs to include an understanding about what the recognizing/assessment process in itself produces. Not only does it produce a documentation/grade or a ticking off of a course, but it also gives the opportunity for new learning" (p. 51). Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) find that "many of the activities students undertake [in the classroom] are simply not the activities of practitioners and would not make sense or be endorsed by the cultures to which they are attributed" (p. 34). Different learning cultures accept and accentuate different models of learning and different systems of logic. Some of these will be recognized in a product-driven PLA process shaped by an institutional logic; others will remain invisible – unwanted by the institution, unrecognized by the evaluator and unappreciated by the learner.

Reeves and Gallacher (1999) suggest that individual experience "taken as the starting point for learning has the potential at least to erode traditional boundaries between knowledge and skills, vocational and academic learning, and between disciplines" (p. 127). The erosion of old boundaries provides an opportunity to negotiate new ones; however, this does not happen when the old institutional boundaries remain the defining ones. Sometimes, indeed, new boundaries can be created institutionally and societally in ways that perpetuate divides or actually create new partitions. For example, in Sweden, the introduction of PLA in vocational sectors was intended to provide opportunities for the migration of new knowledge and the mobility of immigrants; however, it has often been "used as an instrument for sorting, classifying and including or excluding immigrants in/from vocational communities in the Swedish labour market" (Andersson & Fejes, 2010, p. 212). From a Foucauldian point of view, they argue that the predetermination of acceptable knowledge has been used in "governing adult learners and fabricating subjects" (Andersson & Fejes, 2005, p. 595) and that "informal and non-formal competence/knowledge should be transformed into formal knowledge. Consequently, this knowledge will also be the foundation of governing and control" (p. 610).

Instrumental use of PLA means that the process of assessing prior experiential learning is channeled in ways that provide advantage for the educational institution and many of its stakeholders, especially those who legitimately demand assurances of reliability and validity in outcomes. PLA product-orientation is not a problem per se, but a preoccupation with college-equivalent learning products diverts the fuller, richer flow of value associated with the very process of exploring the student's prior experience. To the extent that PLA is circumscribed by product-results and outcome-requirements, its potential to engage and transform learners is diminished. The broader process of PLA requires that the student is liberated, empowered, encouraged and included in her search for new meaning and significance in what she has done. Disproportionate institutional emphasis on equivalency curtails this process, marginalizes other outcomes and limits benefits that are left unconsidered.

Perhaps, the better questions are: How can the powerful process of PLA benefit more fully those who engage in it? How can this process provide more value for all? What are the remains that went unconsidered because they slipped through the mesh that was used?

Dream: Transformations Through Experiential Learning

Experience by itself does not necessarily lead to learning. For learning to materialize, there must be a capacity for experience to be reviewed and reflected upon. It is in that reflection that transformation may take place. Learner transformations are often associated with the process of PLA, and many who have engaged in the process report a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Thomas, Collins and Plett (2002), considering a

group of learners who had completed portfolio assessment, note that "respondents who had developed portfolios had learned to see their lives, past and future, in terms of learning… [acknowledging] that this was both an understanding and a skill that had become, to them, valuable in itself" (p. 13). These learners had become acquainted with the process of reinterpreting and reframing past personal experiences. These experiences had been translated into academic credit, but that was only a small part of what was gained by the learner.

Outcomes other than academic credits, or accelerated degree completion, can be initially unconsidered by the student and only later recognized in powerful and life-altering ways. Stevens, Gerber & Hendra (2010), who worked with another group of PLA candidates, report that one student said at the end of the process: "You told us that if we allowed it to, this experience [assessment portfolio preparation] would change us. I was so angry with you for saying that because I liked who I was and didn't want to change. But you were right. And I'm glad" (p. 377).

Transformation can occur when the learner discovers that prior experience, which was an intimate part of her personal and social world, is validated and valued by others. Theories encountered in formal learning begin to resonate with past action, while current learning confirms and legitimizes previous inquiry, or brings it into question. A different, more inclusive, narrative of the self can be written and considered. A bridging continuity can be constructed between displaced worlds of involvement, both personal and educational. A continuity of self-worth can be created and recognized within the parameters of a PLA process that provides encouragement, unconditional trust and emotional safety. These transformations, different in magnitude and consequence, are initiated within the learner when the worth of prior experience is recognized by her and by others, even when it does not translate into academic credit or educational equivalency.

Recently, after teaching a management theory course, I asked students to reflect on the course and their personal work experiences. The course participants were active service members of the U.S. military: all with long service histories, most with exacting and highly responsible jobs. The goal in calling for reflection on work-life was not to find real world examples of textbook theories or to consolidate learning. Rather, it was to encourage a critical appraisal of what has been done in the past and to suggest continuities between college-life and work-life, between service-life and personal-life. Angela (not her real name) saw parallels, but more than that, she was able to find connections between her past experience and present learning.

> Angela: *I have been a manager so I am able to relate to the assignments. It does bring a few things to light. Things like structure and organizations. I appreciate that I am able to use my experiences with my learning.*

Amy saw the pragmatic value of prior experience in affirming her present studies. At a deeper level, she saw a new strand of continuity between work experience and present learning that prompted a re-evaluation of worth.

> Amy: *It always helps to be able to apply what is being discussed in a classroom with what has been experienced in the real world. It's always easier to understand the concepts. … my work experience, coupled with the class, makes me feel that my past has more value than just the surface.*

Andrew had explained several times during the course that he had "found a name for what I do." It was not simply labeling the "primitive" with management jargon. By considered these "new names," he tried to understand different aspects of his different world involvements. In his exchange there is a self-acknowledged sense of inspiration.

> Andrew: *I feel that most of [us] use the tools and knowledge presented in this course in our daily lives, albeit in a very primitive way. When young soldiers are given a task to accomplish they often do not*

see that the task may have been driven down from a Joint Chiefs of Staff directive, but nonetheless they are participating in [the process of] organizational communication which is in turn part of the organizational structure. Taking this course has been inspiring to me since I already work in the project management field and these tools give me insight on how to do my job better. It definitely helps me in my day-to-day duties. In the same way, I'm confident that my work skills give me an advantage while taking courses.

Reviewing Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, Taylor (1998) identified three themes: "the centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation" (p. 15). Experience is often richly and abundantly generated in work-related engagement, but that experience cannot be used as a potential for transformation unless it is supplied with the catalytic elements of critical reflection and rational discourse. The process of PLA directly stimulates reflection and encourages discourse. In learner transformation, there is a "move toward more dependable frames of reference to better understand our experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). The process of PLA purposefully provides more dependable frames of reference through which the student can recognize and re-configure past events in ways that allow those events to become the foundations for transformation. New self-efficacy gained through reviewing and re-contextualizing prior experience may decline in the future, but it is a significant result of the PLA process (Rudman & Webb, 2009).

The nature and quality of reflective thinking – ways of fostering transformative learning, student readiness, relational connections and autonomy, and the degree of affective understanding – all remain under-researched in transformational learning; however, transformative theory still provides robust and significant means of understanding these important dimensions (Taylor, 2007). Not all who engage in PLA will necessarily experience a transformational difference; however, entering into a narrative that constructs and reflects on experience can result in significant changes in how they understand the continuities and discontinuities of their lives. The PLA process provides a heightened ability to consider personal learning perspectives, the perspectives of others, and to gain a deeper appreciation of the learning process (Lamoreaux, 2005). The use of critical reflection challenges assumptions and gives "new meaning… to former experience" (McGinley, 1995, p. 60). Critical reflection itself "begins with identifying the assumptions and beliefs we take for granted, but it must not stop there. It needs to go further and involve engaging in particular learning processes (instrumental, communicative *and* emancipatory) that will either lead to a validation or rejection of our assumptions" (Kreber, 2004, p. 44).

Focusing on instrumental outcomes only obscures the underlying complexity and potential of the PLA process. Stevens, Gerber & Hendra (2010), in a qualitative study of assessment portfolios, found that while the institutional objective was to obtain college credit, or accelerate the award of a degree, students expressed significantly different values associated with the process:

> Its larger effect can be to challenge the learner – in whatever context – to assign value to life's experiences through critical reflection and reflective discourse and to act on the newly constructed knowledge. This self-affirming act can increase the learner's awareness of the ways she or he learns from experience and foster the capacity for transformative learning. (p. 401)

The dream phase of Appreciative Inquiry provides an opportunity to consider possibilities of transformations inherent in the act of prior learning reflection. It permits us to look beyond what is done. It moves candidate and evaluator from simply recording what has been and from crystalizing that in the past. It allows us to "appreciate" that what seemed to belong in the past is actually co-present in the present and future. PLA has a vitality and dynamic presence that should not be simply transcribed into a catalogue of accomplishment. It might be more innovatively and actively employed to promote and further continue transformations. The question is how might this be accomplished in our practice?

Design: Resituating, Rescripting and Recruiting PLA

Critically reflecting on prior experience can enrich the learner by presenting the opportunity to reconstruct life narratives and to find continuities and connections. All of these may have a direct and significant bearing on motivation, persistence and appreciation of what is currently being studied. This positive flow can be channeled in ways that are formally accepted and instrumentally recognized: providing academic credits and accelerating degree completion, which are undoubtedly highly desired outcomes for most students. But the positive flow generated in the process does not have to be exclusively directed in these narrow and limited channels of credit creation and academic equivalency.

The question is, how can the other benefits accrued in the reflective process of PLA contribute in a fuller, richer and potentially transformative manner for not only the student but also for her peers, faculty and institution?

- *Enhanced institutional value.* Educational institutions that use PLA often see it as a short-term, product-oriented enterprise that confers economic and marketplace advantage. Students are attracted by accelerated degree completion possibilities, while the non-transferability of college equivalencies locks the student into the institution. Interest in PLA as a short-term solution will undoubtedly be strong in a future filled with economic uncertainly, persistent unemployment and shaken career confidence. The challenge is to communicate the long-term institutional benefits of PLA. It potentially provides students with deeper confidence, stronger self-efficacy, and increased satisfaction – attributes that can increase student retention and completion rates, particularly relevant in turbulent times. Repositioning PLA will undoubtedly require considerable effort in institutions where historically PLA has been seen in terms of credit production. It should undoubtedly be easier where the institutional ethos is student-centered and concerned with open-access, relational development and learner experience.

- *Anticipatory PLA practice.* PLA practice is rightfully concerned with the quality of its process and product: constancy, reliability, validity and a positive attitude toward making the enterprise succeed (Leiste & Jensen, 2011; Travers & Evans, 2011). Care is focused on having students translate prior experience in terms of what has been learned, learning perspectives in different disciplines, academic comparability and institutional expectations (Travers et al., 2011). The PLA process should, however, be anticipatory: recognizing and articulating the theme that prior learning does not cease after evaluation; that it provides a significant repertoire and repository for ongoing reconsiderations of self and future development. The PLA process ideally provides the student with a language for examining the past and anticipating the future, a language rich in metaphor and provisions for changing narratives (Starr-Glass, 2002). The evaluator's language is critical in accessing and translating prior learning in terms of institutional expectations (Travers et al., 2011), but that language is also crucial in encouraging and promoting ongoing change in the learner after credit-equivalents have been ascertained.

- *Wider faculty involvement and development.* PLA is often conducted at the beginning of college life, as a way of gaining entry to a program or fulfilling prerequisites. Temporally, this isolates PLA from the student's college life; structurally, it distances the PLA process from the faculty and the wider collegiate community. PLA should not be considered an isolated credit-granting opportunity for students, but a process with rich pedagogical and personal potential. To realize this, wider faculty participation and understanding is required. When faculty members are brought into the PLA process it is often as subject-matter experts or academic arbiters. This gives faculty a very limited appreciation of process. PLA might be more positively presented as a facet of faculty development with engaged involvement in the experience of the student, of her assessment portfolio, of her personal narrative. From a faculty development perspective, PLA raises fundamental and important questions about the nature of learning, the legitimacy of different knowledge, subject-specific paradigms and interdisciplinary boundary crossings. Transformative possibilities exist for learners and PLA candidates, but they also exist for those who work with them and consider their lives and aspirations.

- *Recruitment of prior experience into present learning.* Mignonne Breier (2005, 2006) recognizes that personal experience is institutionally limited by using PLA exclusively for gaining entry into an academic program. After formal recognition, she considers the ongoing recruitment of subject-specific experiential learning into formal academic learning. Learners can be encouraged to draw on prior experiences to complement and advance the subjects that they are learning, sharing it with peers and contributing to a broader understanding of subject matter. Breier (2005) rightly points out that this can be difficult, even problematic, within certain disciplinary-bounded subject areas (she examined labor law) and this has to be considered. PLA candidates who have been encouraged to compare and contrast formal and informal learning may have an advantage in negotiating disciplinary-specific learning (Muller with Taylor, 2000). In the comments quoted from my management theory class, students had undertaken PLA experiences in the past and had been led to believe that their experiential worlds were now officially closed. I encouraged them to return to their prior experience not to provide "real-world" examples, or to consolidate learned principles, but to make connecting narratives and associations between *what* was being learned and *who* they are. Prior experience is not an abstract concept but is situated vitally, uniquely and presently in the person. It is "prior" only through contextualization, detached procedurally from the learner. Recruitment of prior experience into present learning might be encouraged if faculty had a great appreciation of its formal and informal aspects. In many subject areas – management perhaps more than labor law – it can be a useful pedagogic resource. PLA assessment products are usually split off at the beginning of the student's academic engagement; however, richer more considered value might be available for advanced coursework, when the student has re-examined experience from a newly acquired disciplinary perspective and is more cognizant of contested understandings of what constitutes knowledge.

Diana Whitney, a founding scholar-practitioner of Appreciative Inquiry, tells a story about her experience when consulting with a major airline (as cited in Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Sitting with a large number of organizational participants, she asked about the most significant problem they encountered. There was quick agreement that it was "retrieval": the time and delay that travelers experienced when luggage was delayed, misdirected or lost. The group was eager to start thinking about how the retrieval problem might be addressed. However, Whitney stopped them and asked another question: Why does retrieval matter? Moving beyond the obvious, and after considerable workgroup discussion, the consensus was that retrieval impaired the "excellent arrival experience" that they wished for all passengers.

Most educators would wish that their students had an "excellent arrival experience" in reaching their academic goals. A seamless collection of luggage, in terms of credit-equivalency, is certainly part of that. PLA as a process – for connecting students with their past experience and present learning, for validating and rewarding different expressions of the person, for creating individual value and promoting self-efficacy – can contribute continuing and persistent value to the "arrival experience." Value might be centered in the learner, but it is not limited to her. It impacts faculty, institution and the wider collegiate community including those who engage in the practice of PLA. Elaborated and anticipatory PLA, by allowing this value to flow further and longer, can contribute significantly to excellent experiences for all of us. It is argued that the possibilities, and often untapped potential, of PLA lie in innovative ways of resituating it within a holistic educational experience, rescripting its practice to accentuate development, and recruiting it into the present and future.

Destiny: A Way Forward

PLA does not trace its origins to a specific place, theory or consideration. Its complexity and eclectic purpose provide it with considerable strength and potential. Breier (2005) considers four broad perspectives: (1) Technical/market, with a primary focus on translating prior experience in terms of college-level equivalences with a concern for analysis, reliability and validity; (2) Critical/radical, with a primary focus on recognizing and articulating other ways of knowing and bringing them into the academy to confront, challenge and rescript traditional perspective with concerns for broader inclusion, social justice and empowerment (Harris, 1999, 2000;

Michelson, 1996, 1997; Volbrecht, 2009); (3) Liberal/humanist, with a concern for the growth and development of the adult leaner and the recognition that prior experience is a rich resource for change and transformation; and (4) Disciplinary-specific, which understand the paradigmatic nature of the discipline as symbolic systems with a form and structure that contributes to its "games, practices, and strategies" (Bernstein, 1996, p. 170), with concerns about the relationship between informal experiential experience and disciplinary understanding.

This essay has considered PLA from a liberal/humanistic perspective, suggesting realignment of PLA in order to bring about more significant outcomes. This is not to negate the power and relevancy of other perspectives -- quite the contrary. The repositioning of PLA – returning its concerns and aspirations to a more central discussion in the life of the collegiate community – will also further its technical, radical and disciplinary perspectives. Recruitment of PLA, by exploring and utilizing its theory and results in more extensive and extended ways, will allow for its wider appreciation and spur innovation.

In the evolution of powerful concepts and transformative practice, forward-looking initiatives have proved useful. The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) was for many an interesting, but peripheral and nebulous, academic specialty emerging from the seminal work of Ernest Boyer in the 1990s (Starr-Glass, 2011). Two decades on, this has changed dramatically. SoTL has gained a wide international acceptance. More significantly, it is being actively employed to reconsider academic practices and stimulate teaching and learning excellence.

In reviewing the two decades of growth, Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone (2011) write:
> There are now many more teachers engaged in the study of their students' learning, more outlets … for what they discover … campus policies are evolving to create space and rewards for such work, disciplinary and professional fields have promoted it…findings from the scholarship of teaching and learning are being brought to bear in individual classrooms and in the design of curricula in ways that make a difference for students. (p. 1)

This was accomplished by moving SoTL out of a somewhat self-limiting, academic sub-discipline into the collegiate mainstream. While comparisons may be odious, the evolution of SoTL as an invigorating area of involvement may have lessons for the future trajectory of PLA.

- *Centers for the Recognition and Utilization of Prior Experience (CRUPEs)*. Long-term efforts are required to reposition PLA from an instrumental procedure to a transformational practice. CRUPEs would be institutional, or perhaps trans-institutional, centers established to encourage theoretical consideration of PLA, support relevant research, and establish innovative communities of practice. They would incubate multi-disciplinary scholarship, sharing thoughts and findings with a broader community of practice. CRUPEs would demonstrate excellence and insightfulness in conducting analytical and instrumental determinations of college-level equivalency. They would facilitate faculty development related to prior experiential learning, suggest and initiate innovative inquiry into ways in which prior experience could be utilized, and bring APL into the discourse of the institution. They would provide resources and working papers in an open-access forum for the institutional community and those beyond. Like Centers for SoTL and CETLs (Centers for Excellence in Teaching and Learning), CRUPEs would support, advocate and provide leadership for PLA initiatives. They would work actively to create an institutional culture that values effective PLA practice and appreciates the connection between ongoing excellence, potential learner transformation and prior experience. CRUPEs would most likely first emerge in colleges with vibrant communities of learning that have long and dynamic experience of the possibilities of PLA.
- *Outlets for research and publication.* A really powerful idea becomes more powerful when it is discussed, explored and researched. PLA has different perspectives and lends itself to different ways of inquiry and methodologies for research. The wider dissemination of theoretical approaches and evidence-based research is at the core of any evolving disciplinary area. PLA research has found many publication outlets in differing disciplinary journals. This allows for a slow and scattered diffusion of PLA theory and practice,

but it also tends to marginalize it. A journal dedicated exclusively to a subject provides a centralized source of information, creates a community of interest, and generates a focus of encouragement, reflection and inspiration. This has certainly been the experience of SoTL. It is particularly exciting and auspicious that the journal *PLA Inside Out* has been launched to stimulate thought and action in the assessment of prior learning. Its publication will undoubtedly encourage many in the PLA community of practice to reconsider positions, further the process involved, conduct relevant research, and share their understandings and findings with others. The publication of *PLA Inside Out*, particularly in the form of an open-access online journal, will unquestionably inspire as much as it encourages. It will provide a sense of community for those who are engaged in PLA and, perhaps more importantly, provide bridges beyond that community to the wider college.

These shared thoughts are explorations, not recommendations. They are sign-posts indicating possible journeys, not destinations. They are designed to initiate new consideration, not to pre-emptively limit it. A glimpse of PLA through the prism of Appreciative Inquiry reveals that what we find in prior experience only makes sense through the narratives that we construct about learning, competencies, and disciplinary boundaries. By questioning these constructions we may arrive at new sign-posts that indicate different directions and new destinations. The poetic narrative of PLA is robust and flexible, allowing for possibilities that return it to a central debate about educational values and learning purpose, rather than sidelining it as a somewhat mechanical process of credit generation. That narrative of PLA is best known by its practitioners, but it is not exclusive to them and deserves to be shared more widely with the larger community of learning. Through crafting new inquiry and seeding innovative practice, we might more positively impact those who undergo the PLA process and bring increasing value to them, our collegiate communities, and the institutions within which we work.

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