

The Power of Experience Inside Out

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Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is known by many different names. For example, some refer to PLA as: Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Reconnaissance des Acquis (RDA), Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Erkennen van elders of informeel Verworven Competenties (EVC).

Regardless of its name, the practice of assessing learning acquired outside of the academy through work and life experiences is becoming more widely accepted. Three trends are evident in the ways that PLA is used: 1) knowledge is assessed for admission to and placement within higher education, 2) knowledge is assessed for and granted credit toward a degree in higher education, and 3) knowledge is assessed for granting workplace certifications and job placement (Harris, Breier, & Wihak, 2011).

The increasing acceptance of PLA is seen worldwide. Werquin (2010) researched the outcomes, policies and practices of non-formal and informal learning recognition across 21 countries and reports on a wide range of practices. For example, in Australia, the Vocational Education and Training (VET) division has developed national policy that incorporates the recognition of prior learning in workplace credentialing (Cameron, 2011). In its 2011 report, *College Completion Toolkit*, the United States Department of Education identified prior learning assessment as one of the solutions for recruiting and retaining adults. The Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has developed a virtual prior learning assessment center, LearningCounts.org (see article in this issue), to address the growing demand for the systematic assessment of prior learning for college credit. The newly formed Adult College Completion Network (funded through the Lumina Foundation) reports on prior learning assessment as one of the key practices for adults completing college.

As PLA practices have increased, so has the research. For example, CAEL recently undertook a comprehensive study to compare persistence rates for PLA and non-PLA students across 48 U.S. and Canadian institutions (n=62,475 students) that utilize a variety of prior learning evaluative models (Klein-Collins, 2010). Overall, Klein-Collins reported that PLA participating students have higher rates of degree completion than non-PLA students regardless of size, level or type of institution. The data also indicates that even if the students did not complete their degrees, PLA participants persisted for longer and took more credits at their institutions than did their counterparts.

PLA is also gaining scholarly recognition. The *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (<http://www.irrodl.org>) released a special issue in 2010. *The Journal of Workplace Learning* just released a special issue on PLA in February 2012. *The International Journal of Lifelong Education* will be releasing a special issue on PLA within the year. And, in this issue, we announce the birth of this new journal, *PLA Inside Out: An International Journal on Theory, Research and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment*, or *PLAIO*.

Many have asked us “Why ‘*Inside Out*’”? This journal has been created to respond to a serious need to encourage, share, distribute, discuss, and understand the theories, research and practices in the field of prior

learning assessment across the world. This need includes but also pushes beyond the goal of reporting on our diverse practices – it includes acknowledging and questioning the assumptions underlying what we do, encouraging and trying out new approaches, and regularly asking about the complex relationships between the academy, the world of work, and the quality of our social and individual lives. Such a critical spirit will necessarily take us “Inside Out” and then right back again, hopefully with new insights and directions to keep the field growing.

Prior learning assessment began in earnest less than a half century ago in a handful of North American colleges and universities as a means to legitimate the power of experience, to examine the limitations of conventional understandings of knowledge, and to question seat time as the only measure of what can be learned. At its root, the recognition of prior learning was seen – and continues to serve – as a means of access – a means to welcome into the academy and into the workplace people, ideas, skills and insights that had previously been denied a place.

Prior learning assessment is not without its skeptics, who have quite appropriately seen in its spirit and through its practices a critique of the institutional structures and intellectual habits of the academy and credentialing systems. Indeed, for many around the world, it has been a tool of social change and a means to a more just world. It is our responsibility – and one of the goals of this new journal – to prompt the discussion, encourage the questions, share the research, and promote the experimental nature of practice that might help us attain such an end.

In that spirit, within this inaugural issue, you will find a variety approaches and directions in assessing prior learning. The interview with Sir John Daniel explores new directions in expanding access to higher education across the globe and the role that prior learning might play in open learning contexts. Elana Michelson’s article uses queer theory to lift the questions and tensions that PLA poses to challenge traditional concepts of higher education, and as a vehicle for change. David Starr-Glass poses ways to glean the transformational potential of prior learning assessment through a model of appreciative inquiry. Shelley Stanhope-Goodman and Pamela Nordstrom share practices that use an acknowledgement of prior learning to provide greater access to the profession of nursing for immigrant women. The articles within this issue challenge the readers to think about the role and power of knowledge and the ways by which naming and assessing this knowledge can open access and opportunities to individuals who otherwise might be barred from traditional routes to education and work.

We encourage our readers to take each of these perspectives and move them to the next step to see how they might help you frame your practice, theories and research in prior learning assessment. We also encourage you to pick up the torch, raise it, and help the field to continue to grow and evolve. The half-century worth of practices, theories and research is barely the tip of the iceberg. This is a scholarly field in its youth, and all of us play an important role in its development. What we believe is that prior learning can have an increasing impact on the global expansion of access to higher education and successful employability. It can continue to be a tool of social and personal transformation.

Please consider a submission to *PLAIO* in the areas of theory, research and practice. We look forward to your ongoing contributions and to the fuller recognition of a PLA community of theorists and practitioners around the world.

References

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