

## **Breaking Barriers, Finding Alternatives: An Interview with Susan Simosko**

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*For many years, Susan Simosko has contributed to major initiatives in assessment and evaluation in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. She regularly works with businesses, governments, education and training organizations, regulatory bodies, associations and other stakeholder groups. In the United States, Simosko was associate director of the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) at Educational Testing Service (ETS), director of testing and assessment at Edison State College, and director of communication and international affairs with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). For more than 10 years, Susan Simosko contributed to national developments in the U.K., helping to develop national standards and assessment strategies for National Vocational Qualifications and other initiatives. Most of these were about recognizing, crediting and supporting workplace training and on-the-job skills and knowledge. In Canada, she has worked closely with the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), provincial ministries, employers, regulators, educational organizations and other key stakeholder groups. Her Canada-based company, Susan Simosko Associates, Inc., headed a national initiative, Access to Assessment, that helped to establish assessment opportunities in every region in the U.K. for adult learners and employees in all major employment sectors. She is the author of several books, dozens of articles and hundreds of reports.*

*Thanks so much to Susan for her participation in this project.*

**Viktorija Popova-Gonci:** What was the goal of the project that resulted in *Assessing the Skills and Competencies of Internationally Trained Immigrants: A Manual for Regulatory Bodies, Employers and Other Stakeholders* (2012)?

**Susan Simosko:** The Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) and I wanted to provide materials for employers, professional regulators and educators to introduce them to some of the basic evaluation tools that can be used. Here in Canada, as in the U.S., we recruit thousands and thousands of immigrants who come with high expectations and get very frustrated when they can't get regular employment. So the government has been making a major effort to reduce red tape and help internationally-trained immigrants to enter the Canadian work force in less time and with less frustration. This particular manual was produced as a primer for those people who need to learn more about assessment as they work with immigrants.

**V. P-G.:** So your audience was employers?

**S. S.:** The manual is primarily for licensing bodies as well as employers. A number of educators have also said they found it useful because it expands their understanding of assessment and the range of tools that could be used to assess learners beyond their classrooms.

**V. P-G.:** Is your focus on the evaluation of "prior" learning or is it on assessment more generally?

**S. S.:** For me, there really is no difference. Assessment is about determining what people know and can do and

it's about providing useful feedback to learners so they can progress. In this sense, we should think about PLA/PLAR as something we do all the time. For example, as a job applicant, I read a job description and I identify whether my skills and knowledge are comparable to that description, and if they are, I start getting more information and reflect on what I know and can do within the context of the expectations of that job opportunity. And then the person at the other end has to assess my learning based on the materials I send or on what I say in an interview. If, in the end, I get the job, you can say that I have had my prior learning and had my skills and knowledge recognized or accredited. We don't need the "prior" because there's no other kind of learning that we're assessing. You can't assess *future* learning! Regardless of when or how you learned, whatever it is you learned, we are trying to assess it.

**V. P-G.:** It's interesting to think about this process of assessing as more generalizable.

**S. S.:** This process can be for admissions, placement, credit, employment or academic progression. The tools discussed in the manual could be used in a variety of ways depending on the context. Of course, I fully understand the motivation behind gaining college credits. Quite honestly, I just wish we could do it for more people, whether they are immigrants or not.

**V. P-G.:** How do you deal with the issue of quality control, of the fairness of the assessment process itself?

**S. S.:** Or we can ask it this way: How do we know if three different assessors reviewing the identical portfolio would agree on how much or on the nature of the credit that any student would deserve? When I was working at Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey (U.S.), we were very concerned about that and it's one of the reasons why we started moving toward a "learning outcomes" approach. We asked the learners to try to identify course descriptions or learning outcomes from accredited institutions that would match their learning. I think that this is hard but not impossible. There are a number of approaches to this. For example, in the U.K., we did a lot of work with unwaged workers who were basically housewives and quickly saw that many of the women assumed that they didn't know very much. Yet, as we worked with them we — and they — began to realize what incredible managers they were. Using the national management standards, we looked at how many of these learners could get recognition and credit for their skills and knowledge as managers and supervisors. Of course, not everybody was able to gain credit, but a good number of women were, and some then did part-time courses and worked toward a degree. We need to have good evaluation tools that respond to the students' experiences, to be clear about the purposes of the assessment and, importantly, to know that we have good quality assurance measures in place.

**V. P-G.:** Does responding to the quality control issue suggest that we should always be trying to link learning with the earning of college credit?

**S. S.:** This question brings up a 30-year debate! I think it's always better if the learner knows he or she is receiving credit for something that's specifically linked to a college or university-level program. If a student studied witchcraft, for example, and that wasn't offered as part of a particular college American history program, I think that learner could be guided to college-level programs that include the history of witchcraft. I think it's only fair to the learner and to the institution that the assessment is tied to specific learning or performance-based outcomes.

**V. P-G.:** Do you think that PLA/PLAR has been marginalized?

**S. S.:** In some cases yes, but things are changing. People might do it informally but often they don't do it fairly, openly or consistently. As I mentioned earlier, the government of Canada has invested large sums of money trying to attract immigrants and provide vehicles for recertifying and relicensing people so that they can apply their professional training and expertise to work in Canada. Part of that funding has included some prior

learning initiatives. Right now, there is a wide range of projects that have been implemented across the country. Most of them are about reducing the barriers and the marginalization for both learners as well as those people who are involved in PLA/PLAR. (You can see some of the work [www.recognitionforlearning.ca](http://www.recognitionforlearning.ca).) So, the impact is definitely growing. For example, at this fall's CAPLA conference, the head of McDonald's Canada is doing the keynote address. I don't think McDonald's Canada would have accepted the invitation if it didn't see value in PLAR as a potential concept and set of tools to enhance the workforce. I think that we continue to battle against many of the same forces that institutions in the U.S. and elsewhere do, but I think we are gaining.

**V. P-G.:** Can we return to your thoughts on “quality” and “standards”?

**S. S.:** Yes; regardless of context, whether it's for licensure, employment or credit, we need to have clear criteria for both learners and assessors so that we know what we're assessing. Assessors also need training in how to do effective assessment and make decisions that are valid, reliable and fair. And this is the case whether the assessor is a supervisor in a workplace or a member of a college faculty. In addition, we need to monitor assessors' performance to ensure the consistency of their judgments. This is essential to the quality assurance process.

**V. P-G.:** Has PLA/PLAR in higher education dealt adequately with reliability?

**S. S.:** There's so much literature on reliability but it's my sense that in colleges and universities, we don't look at it enough. I cannot comment on what is happening in the U.S. and other countries right now, but I know that here in Canada, working with professional organizations that license nurses, doctors and pharmacists, it is a given that they have to ensure assessor reliability. If anyone brought a case to court, for example, the regulating body would be expected to describe the assessment and quality assurance process. I don't think the court would look kindly on the outcomes of the assessment if someone were rejected and there were no specific criteria for evaluation and/or no training for assessors. Yes, some worry that systematic reliability research would just be too expensive, but I actually think it doesn't have to be that expensive. It's always better to be safe than sorry!

**V. P-G.:** Are you arguing that some assessment tools are just better than others?

**S. S.:** Each assessment tool has its strengths and limitations. The key is trying to find assessment tools that are best suited for the purpose and appropriate for the learners. So, take your concern about people's ability to write: maybe it's not appropriate to ask people to create big portfolios; maybe asking them to do a demonstration and/or using oral questioning might be a preferable method of assessing what they know. Once again, it is important to match the assessment tool to the purpose of the assessment and in some cases, to the nature of the learners.

**V. P-G.:** And this would include self-assessment tools, as well?

**S. S.:** I believe that one of the best things about PLA is that it provides a marvelous opportunity to profile skills and knowledge, which in many instances enhances people's self-confidence. It can help them to plan their lives, assist them to screen themselves out of something and recognize that “No, that's not appropriate for me.” Here's a concrete example of what I mean: In British Columbia, we have an aging workforce of paramedics. As a result, there are efforts to attract internationally-trained paramedics from across the world. But sometimes people come here and say, “I was a paramedic in my country and I've learned what paramedics actually do here in Canada and I now feel that there's no way I can become a paramedic.” By way of example only, in their home countries, paramedics may only *drive* ambulances, whereas the paramedics here in British Columbia are expected to take major medical responsibility for assessing anyone at an accident scene. That's

quite a difference. We hope to develop an online self-assessment tool that paramedics anywhere can use to determine whether it's worth their while to think about applying to be a paramedic in British Columbia. What they need is a realistic perspective on the requirements and an effective way to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

**V. P-G.:** Is the written portfolio losing its prominence as a central assessment tool?

**S. S.:** Portfolios are certainly being used for learner profiling, but I think that more and more people are using simpler devices. We've developed a portfolio model in one profession that requires only a few pages, but also requires the applicant to demonstrate how he or she meets the provincial standards. In the *Assessing the Skills* manual, we tried to be particularly aware of the problems with "language." Language can be an impediment for people successfully completing portfolios, so we need to think of other ways to assess what people know and can do. I also think there are ways we can improve our method of portfolio assessment in order to make it a more open, more transparent and an easier way for a person to describe what he or she has learned and the skills he or she possesses.

**V. P-G.:** The alternative to the portfolio seems especially relevant to practice-based knowledge and skills.

**S. S.:** If you are a musician and seeking credit in that area, we might ask someone to play, not write a five-page essay about their ability. Let's just find out how we can see or hear what they've done. Here's another kind of example — a true story! When I worked in the U.K., I was involved mostly with higher education institutions including the technical colleges. A man had heard that the government had set up a pilot prior learning assessment program, so he came to a college in Wales seeking credit in certain areas of automobile mechanics, and the advisor said: "Oh my gosh, you've worked in this field in the U.K. for 20 years. This shouldn't be a problem. Come in and take the end of the semester test and you'll be done with your assessment." And the guy looked at him and said: "I can't take the test because I don't read and write very well; I would fail; I couldn't possibly take that test. The truth is, my employer already thinks I have an associate degree and I have nothing. I am a high school dropout and everything I have done I've learned on board; I've just worked my way up." Because this was part of the pilot program, the advisor said to him: "Oh well, I think we can assess you in a different way." So the advisor went to the automobile mechanics department of the college and asked if there were a couple of faculty who would be willing to spend a few hours with this man, assessing him through demonstration and oral questioning, letting him do all the things that were required in this particular course of study. A technician and a faculty member went into the parking lot of the college with this man and were so impressed by his skills and his ability to describe not only *what* he was doing but *why*. He *did* have the foundation knowledge; he passed the assessment with flying colors! In fact, they were so impressed that they told him that if he was willing and able to improve his literacy skills, they wanted him to become a teacher at that college. When I left Britain about four years after this particular incident, the man was working part-time at a college in Wales in the automotive department, and why? Because someone had the foresight to give him an opportunity to demonstrate what he knew. That example has always stayed with me. I think it points to the kind of assessment possibility we need to have instead of asking people to do portfolios or take standardized tests — tests that know they could not pass.

**V. P-G.:** It's an important story to consider.

**S. S.:** Yes, it's a fabulous story, and I have other stories like that. It's the kind of thing that keeps me going in this field. I feel so blessed that I and others have the opportunity to help people think more creatively about how we make judgments about other human beings, which is really what we are talking about and why we have to be so careful about what we are doing.

**V. P-G.:** As the story makes clear, we are always judging, so we have to be aware of the basic fairness of our

assessments.

**S. S.:** Coincidentally, someone sent me this quote from Albert Einstein just today: “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” If we hadn’t helped that gentleman to demonstrate his knowledge and skills in a way that allowed him to showcase his abilities, he’d probably think he was too “stupid” to go to college let alone teach. We have to figure out ways to help people demonstrate what they do and how they do it well and to celebrate that. I feel passionate about that. Years ago, I thought about PLA/PLAR as something that invites people into academia or into a profession, but I’ve come to see that much of assessment seems to be more about colleges and universities screening people out. I really hope that those of us who are on this path – you and me and all the other thousands of PLAR practitioners around the world – continue to try to break down barriers, help people demonstrate their skills and knowledge, and whenever possible, help them receive credit and recognition for their achievements, fairly, validly and reliably.