

Prior Learning Assessment Strategies for Workplace Learning: Translating Practice Into Theory

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In a response to greater needs for worker mobility across employment areas or across borders, some countries (including Australia and the United Kingdom) have invested in new approaches to assessing workplace learning. A European Union project titled “Work Based Learning Qualifications” (WBLQUAL) examines how employers, learners and higher education institutions (HEIs) can benefit from working together to provide quality and affordable training to employees (<http://www.wblqual.com/home/>). The assumption of the WBLQUAL project is that employers and higher education need to work together more closely to recognize learning that can be transferred for credit or accredited in other ways. These initiatives show that prior learning assessment (PLA) approaches are needed in order to facilitate not just the recognition of learning, but the transfer of learning, as well.

Learning stems from experiences (Edelman, 2004; Sheckley, 2006), which means that most working people engage first in experiences that then translate into learning a task or activity. Practice often comes before “theoretical” knowledge. The ability to articulate that learning is not often part of workplace requirements, and thus many individuals have trouble identifying what they know. On the other hand, academia approaches learning from more of a theoretical perspective before providing opportunities for application. As a result, when individuals attempt to document their knowledge acquired through the workplace, either for new employment or for higher education, there often is a struggle to shift the language from that of experience and action to explicit language of knowledge required in job interviews and in academia settings.

Individuals do not always understand how their work-based learning can be transferred to other settings. Although some studies have focused on creating theoretical frameworks and epistemological paradigms to provide academia and workplace leaders with ways of managing knowledge transfer, identification of knowledge gaps or needs within a company, few studies have identified ways to enable employees to identify their theoretical knowledge in order to make the crossover to academic language. Rarely have researchers focused on the experiences of front-line workers in identifying their tacit and/or informal learning. Sandburg (2012), in his study of PLA with health care assistants, pointed out that the students did not fully understand the assessment process or how their prior learning was transformed into credits.

The Centre for Education and Work (CEW) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), have developed some approaches to help workers make sense of their informal and tacit learning in order to identify transferable skills and knowledge for use in other settings. Our assumption is that many PLA strategies can and should be used to help workers identify their learning that can be transferred to other jobs or post-secondary education. PLA is often used in postsecondary programs to accredit learning for formal programs such as business, education or applied practice. Many senior managers in industry and business have opportunities to gain credit for their managerial experiences in these domains.

Very few studies have focused on the skills and knowledge acquired by entry-level workers in order to help

them transfer their learning to new occupations, jobs or postsecondary education.

We believe that the PLA strategies we share in this article can be a fruitful start to helping adults with workplace learning deconstruct that learning in order to make links with academic ways of thinking. It can help them prepare for a formal PLA process, but also for the ways in which college and universities traditionally approach teaching their disciplines.

The case studies presented in this paper represent two separate endeavors to help workers use PLA strategies to prepare themselves for gaining new employment or returning to learning: one in the pulp and paper industry and one in automobile manufacturing. These studies are separate examples of how PLA strategies can help entry-level workers identify their transferable skills and collect evidence for potential formal assessment. While neither study was influenced or modified based on available data or statistics gleaned from either case, both focus on PLA strategies to help workers in transition who were mainly interested in getting new jobs, returning to education and/or new training opportunities. Most particularly, we examined what strategies can help workers translate practice into theory.

Informal Learning

Informal learning is now recognized as an active part of most workplaces (Livingstone, 2001; Marsik & Watkins, 2001; Eraut, 2000; Billet, 2001). The discussion and descriptions of subcategories of informal learning go beyond this paper. Suffice it to say, researchers agree that considerable learning goes on in the workplace whether this is conscious or unconscious. Research indicates that many adults self-identify informal learning as their most common workplace learning experience (Coetzer & Campbell, 2006). Nonetheless, structures or processes for helping workers identify their informal learning linked to outcomes, competencies or job descriptions is seriously lacking.

Many workplaces spend time, money and energy on training workers. Once the training is completed, they assume no more learning is either necessary or desired. But our experience is that adults learn “in spite of” the desires of their employers. The following story is a case in point.

Charlie works for a fast food employer. Charlie makes burgers. Charlie went to training school and learned that you should cook nine burgers at a time on the grill. But, it turns out that Charlie has learned a way to cook 12 burgers on the grill at a time. When asked how he learned that Charlie said, “My friend on the earlier shift taught me.” When asked why he cooked so many at a time, Charlie said, “Well, if we make more burgers, we sell more burgers. My manager looks good, then and we look good, too.” Charlie knew the business case for making more burgers, but he also learned a more efficient, if not totally accepted way, of making burgers. By the way, Charlie’s manager did not know that he had learned a new way of cooking more burgers. In fact, Charlie’s manager might have looked down on this new way, because it was against the company policy.

Charlie is conscious of his informal learning. He intentionally undertook doing his job in a more creative way because it made good business sense to him. He also was aware of constricting “policies” concerning changes. Some employers might say, “We train people, so they don’t have to think. Just do what we say.” If you have a large turnover of staff, as do many fast food operations, this attitude may be justifiable. However, if you expect problem-solving, troubleshooting and critical thinking on the job, then you might want to identify quantitatively and qualitatively the learning that people have from their workplace experiences.

In her study on secretive learning in the workplace, Millar (2005) contended that,

Much knowledge in the workplace is tacit or unconscious. However, the learning described by workers in our study indicated they were well aware of specific learning, and, at times, this was hidden from management either purposefully or because it was deemed irrelevant by supervisors and management.

All the workers we encountered liked their jobs. They believed that they were doing valuable work and work that took ingenuity, imagination, and dedication. However, these qualities were often not appreciated by their bosses or supervisors who felt front-line workers did not need to demonstrate 'leadership' qualities. So, although a workforce may create new knowledge, it may not be recognized nor valued. (p. 7)

Most workplaces do not consider themselves as sites of knowledge creation. They believe that academia has the hold on that domain. They consider that what they make or do is an application of knowledge. Unfortunately, this means that they do not consciously applaud "learning" as much as doing the job correctly. The language of knowledge building tends not to be in their repertoire. This, however, does not mean that knowledge and learning are absent. It takes a conscious, guided effort to help workers understand that they may develop, amend or create new knowledge through the work that they do.

Case study #1: Pulp and paper workers in transition

From 2003-2006, the CEW conducted a three-year study to measure the long-term effects of prior learning assessment and recognition as a labor market tool to assist workers in transition in organizations affected by the economic downturn. To measure the effects of prior learning, the CEW studied individuals who participated in a six-week series of portfolio development workshops designed to help adults identify and substantiate their work and transferable skills. Through the portfolio process, participants assessed their prior learning gained not only through an identification of their workplace skills and academic achievements, but through other experiential learning such as parenting, hobbies, volunteer and community work. Tacit knowledge becomes more explicit knowledge when experiences are deconstructed. For example, many of our participants could tell you what their job was (such as I was a shipper and receiver). When asked what they *did* in those jobs, they might say something like "I did shipping and receiving." They have little idea about the underpinning skills and knowledge needed to do those jobs. By deconstructing the jobs and asking them to provide more and more detail, we could help them see additional skills and learning ... commonly thought of as transferable skills.

Most PLA portfolio curricula are designed to help individuals gain credit in an academic program. However, our researchers determined that, because this study concentrated on workers in transition, the curriculum should extend beyond a focus on return to formal education and integrate an opportunity for those study participants who wanted to re-enter the workforce.

We, therefore, added elements into the workshops including helping people learn how to reflect on their experiences and helping people make career and education decisions (through exercises, activities and the interpersonal relationships made while they were doing the portfolio). We also included sections on conducting informational interviews with potential employers. Informational interviews are conducted by the candidate with different employees in a company to find out more information about a company, the work and workplace culture.

The resulting PLA: Workers in Transition workshop curriculum focused on the incorporation of life events, experiential learning, formal and informal education, volunteer activities and hobbies, and previous work into the portfolio workshops with an emphasis on how these events and activities resulted in the development of employment skills.

Demographics of the study

There were 97 male and 129 female participants entering this study. Of these, an equal number of participants (n=44) were in the 40 - 44 age range and in the 35 - 39 age range, while 38.82 percent of participants (n=88) were over 45 years of age and 21.87 percent of participants (n=50) were under the age of 35. The study recruited individuals who were unemployed, underemployed or concerned about the volatility of their employment.

The majority of respondents (n=156) were unemployed. The most respondents (67.41 percent, n=156) had more than one total year of employment with the last company for which they worked. The majority of those had been in their most recent jobs for a period of three years or less (39.74 percent, n=89), several (17.41 percent, n=39) for a period of between 10 and 20 years, and a smaller number (4.91 percent, n=11) for more than 20 years. In the past year, most respondents (56.25 percent, n= 128) worked full time at their jobs. Others (25.45 percent, n=57) worked part time, or seasonally (11.61 percent, n=26). Very few (3.13 percent, n=7) did not work at all in the past year.

Unique features of the portfolio curriculum and workshops

The portfolio curriculum used in the PLA: Workers in Transition project featured:

- **A holistic approach:** The curriculum gauged individuals' emotional responses to change and self-esteem issues. Often people identify themselves with their occupation and place of employment, not with the skills they take with them when they leave. The holistic approach also allowed us to explore areas of personal development including learning styles, personality styles and other areas beyond workplace skills.
- **A focus on workplace transition** rather than on portfolio for academic credit. Academic credit is usually focused on demonstrating learning related to specific courses or programs, not usually how the learning can or will help people do other jobs or enter similar occupations. Job descriptions are not framed with learning outcomes for academic courses. Thus, we encouraged people to develop "skill statements" rather than link their learning to specific courses.
- **An essential skills framework** to match the language of the workplace. Participants recognized their top essential skills and the transferability of these skills. A literacy and essential skills (<http://www.esdc.gc.ca>) framework has been developed by the government of Canada to help employers and employees understand common skills (such as reading, writing, numeracy, oral communications, etc.) in all jobs in the workplace. By better understanding this framework, participants were able to define many of their transferable skills.
- **A focus on the reflective process** rather than exclusively on the completion of the portfolio product. Some people are "natural" reflectors. They seem to understand how to see a situation and analyze how it relates to them in a meaningful way. Most of our participants thought of themselves as doing jobs, not learning skills *and* knowledge. By teaching strategies for reflection, they began to understand the wider implications of their experience for different applications.
- **A group process** to allow participants to learn from one another, offer group and peer encouragement and give participants links for employment and networking.

Differences between the PLA: Workers in Transition study portfolio curriculum and other portfolio curricula

The PLA: Workers in Transition curriculum incorporated life events, experiential learning, formal and informal education, volunteer activities and hobbies, and previous work into the portfolio workshops with a focus on how these events and activities resulted in the development of skills. Vocational and transferable skills were identified and skills sets were developed for each participant. Goals were linked to potential employment directions. Learning outcomes were developed as a way for participants to express the depth and breadth of their skills.

In post-portfolio interviews, study participants identified the portfolio process and product to be helpful in three ways:

1. Portfolio helped participants get ready for the interview by providing them with concise information about their vocational and transferable skills. This provided participants with confidence going into an interview. As one participant put it,

I have proof now. It's much better than going into an interview and talking about it. I have proof now and feel much more confident that I can land a job, because I can prove to these folks that I've done this type of work before, that I have documents that I can share with them, or certificates or letters of validation. I don't have to go there and verbally sell myself so much as prove it through the portfolio.

2. Portfolio helped some study participants during the interview. The skills information in the portfolio could be readily brought to mind in an interview, ensuring that participants would not falter when asked about their skills. Philip, a participant from Ontario, said,

When you go into an interview, there's your proof right with you. People say, 'Well, have you ever ...?' and you can say, 'Well, let me open my portfolio.'

While not all study participants brought their portfolio to an interview, some did. Some participants used their portfolio during the interview to demonstrate skills they had, while others reported that they simply had the portfolio with them during the interview and knew they could refer to it if required. Chantal, from Saskatchewan,

I feel more confident about interviewing and talking about what I do and how I could use those skills in different roles. I feel more excited about looking for different options, and I'm more motivated to do that. So I'm very happy with that.

Increased confidence developed through the curriculum

The single most consistent effect of the portfolio workshops on study participants was an increase in their confidence. Most study participants reported in the post-portfolio interview that they had more confidence to continue the job search process and more confidence that their search would result in obtaining a job. Much of the confidence study participants experienced came from a realization that their skill set was much more extensive than they had originally realized. They not only confirmed skills and abilities and evaluated these, but they also identified some new skills. For example, Brandon, from Nova Scotia, stated,

Like I said, it makes me feel like I have more of a chance. I know the fact that I have skills. Now I have them down on paper, I know I have them. Before I wouldn't think about it.

Brandon exemplifies the experience of many of the participants. He knew all along that he had skills, but the portfolio process helped him “remember” these and catalog and collect them. He felt confirmed and capable one he had the portfolio in hand.

One of the most interesting findings of the PLA: Workers in Transition project was that many participants found the process of the portfolio workshops and of portfolio development as valuable, if not more valuable than the portfolio product itself. The portfolio process enabled participants to review important events and activities in their lives, identifying the skills gained along the way, and put them into a context of future employment as well as career and life direction. As a life and employment decision-making exercise, the portfolio process helped participants make links between what they had done in their lives to this point and where to go from there. For individuals in transition, this is an important tool for determining next steps. Connecting values and goals to the decision-making process helped participants clarify what is important in their lives and to make satisfying career decisions that incorporated their values and goals. While this approach is common in many portfolio courses delivered by postsecondary education, it is unique for workers in transition.

Case study #2: NUMMI plant closure and re-employment efforts

Initial closure

In April of 2010, one of the largest, and arguably the most innovative, auto manufacturer in North America closed its doors and turned 4,500 front-line workers' paychecks into unemployment insurance claims. Located in the Bay Area of California, The New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI) operation was a partnership between General Motors and Toyota that brought a new way of thinking to the traditional views and processes of the automobile assembly line, and employed what was said to be the most productive workforce in the manufacturing industry. The closure, while abrupt and brought on by management issues, left 4,500 tier one employees and an estimated 50,000 suppliers out of a job in an already dismal economic climate.

The region reacted quickly, and through the Alameda County Workforce Investment Board received over \$19 million in National Emergency Grant funding. With this funding, the Alameda County WIB developed the

NUMMI Re-Employment Center (NRC) on the site of the plant to function as a one-stop career center for all those affected by the NUMMI closure, most of whom had been employed long term by the plant and in many cases for 20 years or more. In conversations between the CAEL and the WIB, the general consensus was that these workers were leaving the plant with very valuable and high-level skills (e.g., problem-solving, engineering, project management) and moreover, there was a critical mass opportunity to document these skills and work with local colleges to possibly provide credit for some classes by showcasing their skills.

As a part of the many efforts undertaken to rapidly re-employ the workforce, the WIB enlisted CAEL to develop a process that would: help the workers to document these high-level skills, categorize their work and learning experiences in a way that would help them to better understand the depth of knowledge they had, increase their capacity to sell themselves to new employers, and document their learning in such a way that they could possibly receive college credit for some of their highly dynamic skills developed on the job. To determine the best way to approach working with the dislocated NUMMI workers at large, CAEL engaged a small group of workers to try out some procedures and identify their skills. From this pilot, CAEL developed a step-by-step process and templates for the remaining workers to use.

Drawing out the hidden skills

To begin the process of assisting the NUMMI workers to identify and document the depth and breadth of their skills, focus groups were developed that included some of the pilot members who CAEL worked with initially along with the remaining NUMMI workforce. These focus groups engaged varying levels of workers including team members, team leaders and shift supervisors. Through these conversations, we helped the workers to dissect their workday by thinking about what they did before, during and after each task within their day. By taking a full work day and breaking it into “digestible” pieces, the workers were able to uncover various skills that they used during a day, and more importantly, show how each task encompassed several high-level skills that they otherwise didn’t realize they had mastered. Most of the conversations were tempered with “I *only* did this” or “I *only* did that” when they were actually describing very defined skills such as troubleshooting, time management, critical thinking, scaffolding teaching, problem-solving and staff management. These were skills that employers are consistently seeking within a good employment candidate. The guidance from CAEL helped these workers to see their skills, understand how they’ve developed them, and have a proper way to document and articulate these skills and experiences in a way that a resume writing class just couldn’t develop.

Developing guidance materials

By taking the information gathered in several small group sessions, which engaged about 100 former employees, CAEL was able to develop a template of the step-by-step process for other employees to use. This process helped these additional employees to see how sophisticated their skills were that they utilized throughout the day-to-day tasks at the plant. The template was used to help employees document their transferable skills using evidence from their job experiences. The template also requested individuals to indicate if they needed a “light,” “medium” or “heavy” level of guidance to document all the skills they had developed over the course of their employment.

The following are examples of the guidance materials and templates created for the NUMMI workers.

General user instructions

Using the Chart

The Before, During, After Chart is broken into three columns:

Before, During, After	Transferable Skill	Your Experience
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- Step 1

Fill out as much as you can in the Before, During, After chart under the “Your Experience” column.

You can create more entries about work you did on a separate sheet, if you want.
- Step 2

Draw an arrow between your description of the tasks you did and some of the transferable skills in that column.
- Step 3

Think about the transferable skills you now can see you have. You also have stories or experiences linked to those transferable skills which can help you when potential employers ask you to tell them “about a time when you used...”

Open-ended prior learning template version

Before, During, After Chart

Before Doing a Job	Transferable Skill	Your Experience
Review logbook from previous shift	Document use Job task planning Decision making Prioritizing tasks	
Read manifest	Document Use (reading skill)	

Before, During, After - Sample Chart with Prompts

Before Doing a Job	Transferable Skill	Prompts
Review logbook from previous shift	Document use Job task planning Decision making Prioritizing tasks	What kinds of things did you do to review the logbooks from the previous shift? What did you do after you read the logbooks? What skills did you use to apply what you read?
Read manifest	Document Use (reading skill)	Describe what a manifest looks like? How exactly do you read and follow it? How is this different from other charts or graphs you might read? How is the manifest related to the work you were asked to do?

Creating their own personal chart of experiences and transferable skills was a cathartic process for the former employees. In fact, one gentleman who participated in the focus groups was initially bemoaning his employment prospects and lamented that “he’ll be qualified to work at Burger King.” At the end the process, seeing all of the high-level supervisory skills he developed during his time at the NUMMI plant, he left the session by saying “I might still be working at Burger King, but I’ll be a manager and not a cook.” This transformation was typical for workers who participated in the process. They were able to think about the work they did every day, why it was done, how they made decisions and managed daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly goals in a way that they did not realize when they were in the position.

By drawing on experiences of the initial small group of workers and documenting how their daily tasks connected to skills and validated their stories and experiences, their peers were able to make similar connections to their own personal experiences and see value in their skills and abilities. By using the first group’s results, the second group could see the process and had examples and a format from which to work. The template structure created a “Rosetta Stone” for the workers to translate how their actions built high-level skills, and understand how those skills were applicable in the workforce, across a number of career opportunities or in a college pathway. In this particular situation, or transition where a group of workers are being dislocated, this process was invaluable to the employees interested in going to college – or starting up again – as well as to the higher education institution. Employees can use evidence to document their learning, identify their transferable skills or competencies, and present these to new employers or higher educational institutions to potentially gain college credit for their learning. Once these templates are completed, they represent a solid foundation of a portfolio that can be assessed for potential employability or college-level learning credit.

Overall, the results from this process were found useful and could potentially be used for anyone who would like to get a better grasp on the skills they have and how those skills can be translated either into career progression, career transition or college pathways. One lesson learned was that having people document their skills on a blank piece of paper was not helpful; they were more successful when working with a structure that assisted them to think about their experiences and draw out the associated skills and competencies.

Supporting the case managers

Due to the large number of workers, this project was not able to engage the full spectrum of workers affected by this closure. As a result, a template was needed that the workers themselves could use to document their skills independently. In addition, materials were needed that the case managers could use to replicate the focus group process on their own and touch far more workers. Guidance was incorporated to help the case managers address the overwhelming sense of loss created by the plant closure. Many of the workers had been working with the same crew and in the same position for 10 to 20 years. The closure created an environment whereby former employees had significantly reduced self-worth and were not able to see how their work experiences could translate into new employment opportunities. The duty of the case manager was to help mitigate these feelings and provide some level of empowerment to the former employees as they embarked on their next step: whether to go on to school for a certificate or degree or to go back into the workforce. A case manager's guide was developed that walked them step-by-step through the process, including how to understand what the workers were feeling and thinking due to the closure, key tips for successfully facilitating a focus group and guidance for helping workers complete the documentation process.

The following is an excerpt from the case manager's guide.

Help the worker to make steps to overcome the fear.
Help them to reinforce and appraise hard work, effort and sacrifices
made to achieve success.

Case managers may ask questions such as:

- How can you improve the way you acknowledge yourself?
- How can you accept yourself as being successful?
- How do you measure success?
- How can you eliminate excuses for being unsuccessful?

The case managers are there to help the Nummi workers
believe in themselves again. They are the bridge who provide
the tools and support to their future.

As a capstone to this project, CAEL conducted a training session for all the case managers and job developers at the NRC to present the final skill template guides (both employee and case manager guides) and walk them through the challenge of engaging the workers through the focus group format. Essentially the exercise was to help build the advisors' capacity to facilitate a conversation through which the job seekers began to see value in their work and learning experiences. Advisors, counselors and other community college partners also were included in this process so they could better support this group of workers should they choose to go back to colleges.

Lessons learned and challenges moving forward

In the attempt to replicate this process in other areas across the country, a few road blocks have been encountered from workforce boards and other workforce development professionals. In most cases, these groups had difficulty understanding and buying into the process. Most notably, and in reaction to the NUMMI case study, workforce boards dismiss the value of the skills templates because they are not typically dealing with this "large" of a scale transition. What is important to note here is that this process can be valuable for any worker in transition (as exemplified by both case studies detailed in this paper), regardless of whether their dislocation is due to a large closure or not. The value of the process and skills templates resides in the outcomes for the

worker as an individual. The process can be facilitated in either a group session or in a one-to-one conversation for those that have been recently dislocated, who are looking to change careers or who wish to progress within their current sector.

One shortcoming discovered is that, consistently, there seem to be limited resources within the workforce system and centers to facilitate the process and incorporate skills template review and documentation into the work that they currently do with clients; however, this maybe a short-sighted perspective. What is important to understand is that the skills template process can actually be a more efficient way to do the work. Individuals are already required to attend resume building workshops and skills/interest assessment exercises, which are really a part of the portfolio building process. Perhaps by redesigning the typical re-employment training procedures using prior learning assessment processes, individuals would not only gain the current required skills, but also increase their ability to recognize their abilities and present themselves better.

Specifically in the case with the NUMMI workers we heard, overwhelmingly, how the PLA process should have been conducted prior to or in conjunction with a resume workshop. Before participating in the transferable skills conversations, these workers felt that building a resume was essentially a list of adjectives that one included with job titles, most of which they didn't believe were true statements of their work experience. In the aftermath of working through the skills templates, workers indicated that they had the confidence and self-esteem they needed to truly build a dynamic and accurate resume to support their re-employment efforts.

Reflections on the Findings From These Studies

Workers are not aware of their transferable skills

Workers thoroughly understand their jobs and how to do them. They need support to deconstruct that work in order to delineate sub-skills of their jobs. The strategies used in this specific case study to pull learning from experiences, such as the before, during and after job task approach, do help people reflect and deconstruct their learning. However, workers may need support to “repackage” these skills in ways that transfer to other settings. For example, workers in the pulp and paper environment and the NUMMI plant regularly read a manifest, which was a document similar to work orders, and needed to see how this skill translated into reading and deciphering complex information. These skills can be used in many other settings that would require navigating documents, such as manuals, specifications, etc., or academic materials. Additionally, once people learn the language of transferable skills, they can make links from their own learning to learning needed in new settings.

Many PLA portfolio courses help individuals do this. The Workers in Transition project, as well as the NUMMI project, helped people identify their specific skills and translate these into a more generic description of those skills. However, another lesson learned was that the workers in these projects needed guidance in understanding and reassurance that in no way were they changing their experience nor prevaricating about their experience if they call it something else. The workers clearly needed to see the value in renaming their learning in ways that those outside of the setting could understand what they knew.

Workers do not “talk the talk” of higher education

Individuals with little or no postsecondary experience had great difficulty conceiving that they might have “college-level learning.” Going to college seemed to be a mysterious concept to them and totally out of their realm. Nonetheless, many with work-based experiences had considerable skills and knowledge that are transferable, and were able to document them through the PLA portfolio process. However, the language that is used to talk about knowledge and learning in the workplace is considerably different than the language used to talk about learning in academia. Workers need to be taught how to reflect on their learning in new ways that separate knowledge from practice, summarize knowledge in assembled chunks, and promote articulation of that knowledge using academic vocabulary.

Workers can be helped to make their tacit learning conscious

Most people do not naturally reflect on their workplace learning as “learning.” They think of their learning as “just doing my job.” So when asked about what they learned on their jobs, their first response is “Nothing. I just did my job.” In addition, few workplaces frame the training and/or learning presented to do a job as *learning*. Rather, the training is presented to help people do their work more proficiently or to manipulate new equipment or to do new processes. Few workplaces ask people to think about *how* they learned these tasks.

Many people beginning an assessment of prior learning use the portfolio process to learn how to reflect and think about their experiences and how they transfer to learning. Based on the success of work conducted by both CAEL and CEW, the process of going through a portfolio exercise is, in some cases, even more important than the resulting portfolio as a way to help adults understand the learning they have acquired over their work and life experiences. By breaking down their experiences, people understand how learning is connected to their work and see the transferability of skills from one work experience to another – this is an invaluable exercise. People are able to gain a different perspective on their past experiences and will approach their new experiences with a higher awareness of when, where, how and why learning is gained.

Roles for Higher Education

- **Working with industry to prepare adult workers for education**

Higher education can partner with employers to help them prepare employees for higher education. In many ways, this is not just training people in “study skills” or returning to learning, but helping to identify their learning and translating that learning into new contexts. Higher education can partner with employers to help crosswalk academic with workplace language, skills and competencies. CAEL recently developed an online tool, the PLA Identifier, which is an easy way for individuals to gather and reflect on their learning from the workplace, home and community. This could be a starting point for career advice and/or course direction.

- **Provide onsite “advice” sessions for incumbent workers**

Often, employers do not offer career or college advice to their employees. For many, deciding to go back to school or to think about a career change is a very scary contemplation filled with too many variables for them to pursue without some level of guidance. Colleges have become, in many respects, experts in advising – both from the academic side of the house, but also in understanding how courses/certificates/degrees connect to careers. Higher education can offer counseling and group or individual “advice” sessions for the incumbent workforce as a consulting service to the employer.

- **Develop short workshops to help workers identify transferable skills**

Facilitating group conversations – as described in both case studies – is an incredibly effective way to help workers not only identify, but believe, the transferable skills they have developed on the work site or in their prior life experiences. The workshop format allows people to identify with each other’s experiences and draw out correlation or similarities from their own experiences. People learn from each other and adopt a common language that supports each other to continually develop new and hone existing skills. As a learning community, individuals are less likely to hold onto former attitudes, such as “I just did what I was told” or “I just did my job,” and are more likely to be encouraged to engage more with the skills, competencies and learning that occur within daily tasks.

- **Career development/workplace progression**

In order to impact career development and workplace progression through the portfolio development process, or other PLA strategies, understanding how local employers address employee development is important. If additional education, maybe a specific level of credential, is necessary for the incumbent workforce to progress and continue feeding the pipeline, then higher education is a key stakeholder in this equation. Knowing if local employers have tuition assistance programs and to what degree these are utilized and have impact on career progression would be beneficial. Using PLA practices and processes could help to use these tuition dollars more effectively, both from the perspective of the employee (they will spend less money achieving a degree if they are successful with some form of PLA) and from the perspective of the employer (by lessening the amount of money spent on their employees taking courses).

Strategies That Work Before, during and after

The strategy we used in the NUMMI work is easily repeatable for programs that prepare adults to return to academic learning. By helping individuals develop reflective approaches about their work, we enabled them to identify, categorize and link their work-based learning to a compendium of skills and knowledge. In this way, workers begin to have an idea of how their skills could transfer to possible college credit or success in postsecondary education.

Compiling an amended portfolio

Students can prepare for pre-assessment using electronic tools that reduce the burden of doing a paper-based portfolio. For example, CAEL's PLA Identifier allows an individual to electronically identify and list a range of learning experiences. This tool can help people gather preliminary documentation for a PLA assessment. The tool itself can be used by career counselors and advisors to help adults reflect on their learning before they begin a course of study or to help them identify future career paths and employment transitions. It also allows both counselors and students to consider how workplace skills can transfer into college programs.

Guidance in linking portfolio to employment

Our experience is that developing a portfolio is too difficult for an individual to do on their own. However, with minimal support, workers in transition could easily build a basic portfolio linking their skills to other employment opportunities.

Advising workplace candidates how to talk about their skills

Since so much of workplace learning is tacit or unconscious, individuals need support in "how to talk about their skills". This is a pragmatic approach that can have enormous spinoffs. Once workers deconstruct their experience in order to capture the learning, they can then speak to others more cogently and authoritatively about their knowledge and skills. This is particularly important when being successful in job interviews or being successful with a PLA challenge.

Many individuals do not necessarily realize the sophisticated skills they have gained and continue to develop at the workplace. Studies within the workplace context demonstrate approaches that assist workers to become aware of their capabilities and progress within their career pathway, transition to new jobs or connect to postsecondary education. Many entry-level workers with little postsecondary education feel the world of higher education is beyond their reach and have difficulty translating workplace learning into the academic setting. The ability to associate workplace learning with the rigor embedded in academic settings can help overcome obstacles to career progression and transition.

Higher education can assist workers to make these transitions in various ways. Colleges and universities should not assume that returning adults understand how to articulate their college-level learning or how to navigate the internal PLA systems. Adults need specific supports to learn to reflect upon and translate their experiences into formats that colleges require to evaluate learning.

A number of strategies and approaches that work and can be trusted by PLA professionals, human resources managers and workplace learning developers have been presented in this paper. These approaches are not the only ones to recognize and translate workplace learning into the higher education realm; however, these studies indicate that the presented strategies offer an effective approach to begin sorting through prior learning and shifting the mindset of workers who might not recognize the value they can bring into the workplace and higher education.

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