

Thinking of Doing

Thomas Kerr, SUNY Empire State College, New York, USA

Introduction

In the fall of 2013, students in a bachelor's degree program with a site in Forest Hills, Queens, a borough of New York City, began a course of study that was designed to help develop their understanding of prior learning assessment. The group study consisted of 13 members in the electrical industry of Local Union 3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). While some were labor leaders and others journeymen, all had on-the-job experience in construction, street lighting, maintenance, high-voltage splicing or similar electrical trades. As various sectors of the industry, these occupational areas represent a breadth of potential experiential learning students can reflect upon as potential areas for PLA requests.

Not unlike an earlier cohort of Local 3 electricians I wrote about in "An Update on PLA for Labor Leaders and Electricians" (Kerr, 2013), these are students in a non-apprenticeship degree program with the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies of Empire State College of the State University of New York. For nearly 40 years, the Van Arsdale Center has been educating men and women who are affiliated (and sometimes not affiliated) with unions in the liberal arts and sciences related to working-class studies. Our courses include subjects like Principles of Trade Unionism; Development of the Labor Movement; Working Class Themes in Literature; Issues in Public Art; and Labor Economics. We remain one of the most progressive academic institutions in and outside of New York City.

A particular course this fall was titled *Thinking of Doing: The Mind at Work*; the reference to Mike Rose's fascinating study is intentional. Chapters from *The Mind at Work* (Rose, 2005) were among 23 primary and secondary texts the students read and reviewed during the 14-week course. Other texts focused on theoretical and practical approaches to adult learning and occupational reflection. I selected these readings for their focus on enabling students to develop PLA requests through reflection on their own learning. That is, I wanted my students to discover for themselves how they came to "know" something. I had initially hoped that once they learned more about when and how learning occurs, they each would identify areas of experience appropriate for developing PLA requests.

At the Van Arsdale Center, I serve in a dual role of coordinator of the Queens program and mentor to these and other enrolled students, and of enrollment specialist focusing on PLA development. In my role, I recognize the importance these students place on gaining credits for experiential learning as a means to accelerate their degree completion. I want to help them by making the process as simple as possible without unnecessary delay. I know that the college dropout rate is increased when graduation seems like a distant abstraction; I also know that a high-quality learning environment retains students. With these realities in mind, I developed *Thinking of Doing* in a way that would captivate the students' imagination and fulfill a practical goal.

The following essay describes the outcome of the course. But before I get there, let me say that, along the way, I came to understand something I hadn't considered before I began: The process of working with students in this type of a learning environment produces complex ways of seeing. For example, this essay is about helping students learn what they have learned and it describes how they learned anew: Both are ways of knowing. The

essay also includes a description of my own experiences as a mentor working with the students; that is, my own learning is threaded throughout. A third dimension of the essay deals with prior learning assessment and the tensions between an efficient process and one oriented toward learning.

Thinking About Learning

To be clear and fair to the issue, Thinking of Doing is a 4-credit course that includes its own set of learning objectives. For the student, the practice of requesting credit for prior learning is a process of articulating what that student knows based on previous experiences. When I describe “learning” as an outcome of the work of the course itself – what students learn in the course as opposed to learning what they know based on their experiential learning – I am separating the current learning from prior learning.

Helping students identify their prior learning suitable for PLA requests has become an interest of mine. During an initial 60-minute interview, I seem to have found a way to identify anywhere from 12 to 96 potential credits (for the bachelor’s degree, a student can include a maximum of 96 credits of “prior learning” that includes prior transcript credit, credit by examination and credit gained as a result of an individual portfolio on which this course focused). I find myself sometimes a journalist, sometimes a poet, asking many questions and creatively wondering how to ask more. Critical inquiry is a key for a mentor seeking to guide students through reflection on their life and occupational areas. Questions lead to more questions – mine and theirs – and once they gain an understanding of what’s being asked, they come up with more questions and more answers. (As I see it here, “answers” are considerations for requests that may become credits in their undergraduate degrees, and, as a result, the students with whom I’ve worked become encouraged.) However, I wondered if there might not be more opportunities for inquiry, reflection and even more encouragement.

Thinking of Doing was my answer. I came up with the course idea one day after a 60-minute interview with a student when it struck me that I ask a lot of questions, but if a student simply doesn’t understand the concept of learning and the very nature of their own learning, I wondered how helpful my interaction really is. Invited to work with the Empire State College Institute on Mentoring, Teaching and Learning in 2013, I was supported in my efforts to set high academic standards. After seeking and receiving the Institutional Review Board’s permission to conduct surveys during the course, I had a chance to track the progress of students’ learning. All these steps led to my own understanding of what it means to develop a course that tries to help labor union members understand their own learning.

The initial question I asked was whether the number of PLA requests that each student identified as a result of our individual interviews could be increased if they became familiar with what it means to learn. Asking someone “what they know” often results in a blank face; there needs to be some context. For example, “What does anyone know about walking?” I ask. “But what do you mean by walking? I walk.” “No, you put one foot in front of the other, then the other, and you look out for tripping hazards, etc.” “Oh you mean *how* do I walk?” That sort of exchange then gets transferred to a topic of something all electricians understand: safety. “How do you stay alive on a job site?” Or on collective bargaining: “How do you face off with management when negotiating for your fellow union members?” “One foot in front of the other; look out for tripping hazards.” When you explain to students that they are talking the language of prior learning, they begin to get it.

In the initial interview, I use such dialogue that focuses on everyday life examples to relate to occupational skills as a means of getting students to reflect on their experiential learning. I also believe that reflection upon our knowledge can result in a sort of transformation of thinking, and perhaps, a change in our ideas about how life is lived. I completed a master’s thesis at Empire State College, writing a novel about personal transformation. The protagonist is a marionette who learns that life can be lived differently than hanging from strings at the mercy of a puppet master, and so the marionette learns to be his own person. This image has not been far from my mind as I’ve thought about this PLA process.

I did not believe that all 13 students enrolled in this course would have an epiphany. In fact, I stated repeatedly that I did not intend for students to divorce their spouses, dye their hair or do anything particularly radical. I admit: Learning about learning is a challenge. When at the beginning of the term I queried students about the term “transformation,” none understood, yet all seemed to understand what had been suggested to them during our initial interview about “learning” (how to describe walking). Personal transformation did occur among some when, at the end of the term, they gained a greater sense of their own knowledge and, in turn, increased the number of areas in which they sought credit for their prior learning. To get to that point, we began with some exercises to help break down the techniques of occupational and social participation.

On the third week of the course, I visited my local hardware store and spoke to the manager about his role in the business. It turned out that he also is the owner and holds an MBA from a local college. He listed areas on which he focuses: business management, marketing, bookkeeping and corporate contracts. I encouraged the electricians to think outside their industry by introducing the talents of a professional they know by common association. I asked them if they could list the responsibilities of a hardware store manager by breaking down their assumptions of what responsibilities are faced at an independent, local store by their own experience as shoppers. The nuts and bolts section of the store requires inventory control; staffing is considered human resources; dealing with the public – that’s customer service. Through this activity, the group brainstormed an understanding of what it means to “know” a set of professional skills.

Here is another example, and one of the more exciting approaches to PLA development I’ve tried out: A couple of students who have a high-level status in their local Masonic lodges shared what it means to be part of a private organization. I had wondered for six months about how to help one of these men understand his prior learning, but we couldn’t get past talking about the internal mechanics of the organization, of which he didn’t want to share much, and I didn’t fully comprehend what he felt comfortable sharing. I was told by experts that someone cannot request credit for “being a Mason” because the organization “is secretive,” so I learned to approach the subject in a different way. After sharing my frustration with a colleague, he suggested I look at Robert Putnam's (2001) *Bowling Alone* for the concept of "social capital." Not only did I do that, but after reading the introduction and first chapter of Putnam with the rest of the class, I invited another student who was not enrolled in Thinking of Doing to attend a session of the course and talk about what he did as a lodge member. With this new context in mind, one that might help to approach the nature of the roles Masons play in society, the other students were able to begin to tease out the learnings that come with participation in a lodge: for example, the nature of community service, as lodges donate finances and time toward the mentoring of boys; fundraising skills needed to host holiday dinners at retirement centers; and insight into mentoring gained by working with other lodge members through their rituals and the study of texts. Indeed, many commonly understood skills might be described as part of a PLA request for an area that could be called: "Community Participation."

At the beginning of the course, the second Masonic member who shared his experiences with the group hadn’t requested a PLA for his learning in this area. At the end of the term, “Community Participation” was an additional title he added to 13 others. While course success can’t be based on numbers alone, there were significant increases in the number of requests for PLA identified by students. In September, the 13 students had listed a total of 51 requests for evaluation; by the end of the term, that number had increased to 70.

The anecdotal information is equally useful in developing a sense of the course success. Many students wrote testimonies to the quality of work they came to realize they do on their daily job sites and these were captured through weekly writing assignments based mainly on multiple handouts and chapter excerpts. As the term progressed, student responses to various questions displayed an arc of learning about what it means to “learn” – a central goal of the course.

For example, an initial assignment asked students to read part of Rose’s (2005) chapter on “Rethinking Hand

and Brain” where he describes “a teacher’s knowledge” (p. 159). Using Rose’s perspective, I asked how their own “knowledge” might be articulated. One student’s response seems to open up a series of questions an evaluator might ultimately pose to the student during an evaluation interview:

An electrical foreman is one who must be proficient in all aspects of electrical construction and electrical installations from the beginning of the project to the finish. He must also be part salesman, psychologist, mediator, priest and bartender. Everything and anything associated electrically on a job falls on the shoulders of the electrical foreman.

If this were an introduction to a PLA request on “Advanced Supervisory Practice,” I would have asked the student to elaborate on the five part-time roles, especially what types of religious and social counseling roles a foreman plays on a for-profit job site ensuring the contractor and owner get their work completed on time and on budget.

I followed up that session with an introduction to Bloom’s taxonomy of 1956 by asking students to take the six key stages into consideration as they reflect on their occupational processes: knowledge; comprehension; application; analysis; synthesis and evaluation posed a process (as one student wrote) of “categorizing and assigning words and theories to ideas [that] has helped tremendously ... to organize and structure my thoughts into meaningful essays.” By the assignment of words, the student refers to those included in various lists of verbs attributed to key stages (where “application” means apply, choose, demonstrate, etc.). I had asked students to similarly respond to what is meant by the term “construction” to which they came up with their own collective list including: “formulas to keep safe”; “practice well-being”; “go home the way you came”; “methodology”; “understanding, awareness, avoidance.” I had intended this type of exercise to help them interpret their experiences using language they can share with others through essay writing and the PLA evaluation process. (Empire State College requires that students write an essay on their experiential learning, which is then submitted to an evaluator who interviews the student and writes a narrative on the student’s learning to determine its college-level credit equivalency.)

Among the other essays students read was one by Gilbert Ryle (1949), a chapter titled “Knowing How and Knowing That” from *The Concept of Mind*. No simple text, it was a frequently cited essay throughout the term in comments and formal responses. One student considered Ryle:

so hard to read and understand but my desire to understand completely what he was trying to say lead [sic] me to read it 3x. His way of writing was incredible when I finally understood what he was trying to say gave me so much courage and desire to learn more and not give up. I felt if I could read this I can read anything. We were just recently given an article of Michel de Montaigne (“On the Education of Children” from his Essays [1580]) and was told that Harvard and Stanford students read this material and boy did I find the reading to be much easier than Gilbert Ryle. So hey maybe I have hope in becoming a Harvard student.

In this case, transformation manifests itself as a progressive act of improving learning skills, rather than reflecting on prior learning per se. Still, the work on prior learning served as an impetus for this new set of insights.

At the end of the term, another student wrote how his learning had “shifted” saying: “I generally understood learning as metric or quantitative [sic]. Now I view learning or what I have learned as fluid, not static, and more experiential.” And the benefits of the course were expressed by another who discovered that:

learning is both intellectual and practical or experiential. You don’t need college to gain both but it helps by bringing experienced people in a certain field bring insight to the table.

Another student wrote how he had “not thought about the learning process at all before this class.” He shared, “It has been interesting to think of all the theoretical aspects over the semester.” He actually had taken that

sentiment one step further after reading an excerpt from Allen Tough's (1979) *The Adult's Learning Projects*. The chapter, "Focusing on Highly Deliberate Efforts to Learn" was so influential to this student that he told me on the final day: "That's me! I'm a lifelong learner!" If there was one practical drawback to this course it was in his decision not to submit the two additional PLA requests he had identified during the term, saying "I want to take more classes."

All of this reflects the sort of "learning" that I had hoped from the course at the outset.

While the course, and this essay, are over, my intention to continue with this project is not. I hope to further the development of Van Arsdale Center students' understanding of how to reflect upon their prior learning through a deep reflection of what it means to learn. I suspect that such a goal will require the publication of a manual that can "train" others to learn how to generate PLA requests through interviews with students while giving emphasis to both the efficiency and learning-of-learning approaches. I know the fall term is over, but I see "Thinking of Doing" as beginning a longer process that will reveal more to me and other students, not only what we know today, but can know in the future.

Note

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