We asked six colleagues, all of whom have been involved in PLA/RPL (prior learning assessment/recognition of prior learning) for many years, "What are your thoughts on current and future trends in the evaluation of workplace learning?"

Tina Grant, Excelsior College, New York, USA

Until recently, the relationship between prior learning assessment and workplace learning was almost a tacit one. In small collegiate circles, it was considered standard practice; yet, it is only recently that the relationship is enjoying recognition in the national arena. In addition to colleges and universities exploring the potential of providing such a powerful student-centered service, employers also are realizing the vital role they can play in the completion agenda.

To clear up any misgivings and challenges still facing the awarding of college credit for workplace learning, it is necessary to communicate standards and best practice created by the pioneering PLA-focused colleges in concert with the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning CAEL), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the New York State Regents Research Fund, National College Credit Recommendation Service (National CCRS). Foremost is the persistent, misguided notion that credit is being awarded for happenstance life learning occurring on the job or elsewhere. Instead, marrying workplace learning to that of college-level learning requires careful attention to the structured and assessed learning experiences provided by employers in their efforts to address the skills and knowledge paramount to their specific business or industry. The nuance occurs in the translation and in the line between theory and practice. There must be enough of both in order to meet the demands of employers and the requirements of academia simultaneously. The challenge to academia, then, lies in preventing that line from becoming encumbered with procedural restrictions and in shifting focus toward outcomes and competencies rather than inputs.

Judy Harris, Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia, Canada

There is relatively little academic literature and research on this theme. RPL in workforce development is different from RPL in education and training. Whereas RPL in educational contexts requires the alignment of prior learning with learning outcomes, level descriptors and/or program content, RPL in relation to workforce development and industry is dependent on different variables, e.g., robust social partner approaches to industrial relations and collective agreements. RPL in workplaces needs to connect to industry classification systems and benchmarks, skills bands, pay scales and industry or company-specific in-house training, as well as articulating to the learning outcomes of education programs and associated qualifications, if need be. It could be more complex than RPL in relation to education and training.

Mary Beth Lakin, American Council on Education (ACE), Washington, D.C., USA

A broader definition of credit for prior learning is emerging, reflecting the growing diversity of learners taking advantage of prior learning assessment (PLA) options and a greater number of sources for learning. The challenges of validating those sources accompany expanded possibilities for a wider range of learners. Organizations will continue to be pressed to develop trusted means of verification that are recognized within the higher education community and across other sectors, as well. Longstanding methods for individualized assessment and organizational evaluation will be rethought and revitalized to meet those challenges.

Recent initiatives in competency-based education, degree qualifications frameworks and PLA offer new opportunities for a broader and deeper look at teaching, learning and assessment. A more integrated approach to competency-based programs and PLA will allow learners to "crosswalk" their learning in more meaningful ways and in multiple environments. Current conversations about the language of PLA highlight the need to coin different terms that are accessible to the community of PLA players: practitioners, employers and learners in particular. That same community will drive the creation of tools for better navigation of, and increased access to, credit for prior learning options and opportunities.

Lisa Sax Mahoney, National CCRS (National College Credit Recommendation Service), New York, USA

Recent attention on microcredentials, competency-based education combined with a demand for a stronger linkage between higher education and industry to address workforce skill gaps, has paved the way for advancement in the field of prior learning assessment.

Traditional prior learning assessment offers numerous advantages to adult learners. In addition, adoption and application of new ideas to current practice can engage employers and academia as partners to benefit an even greater number of adult, working, nontraditional students.

Given the research on the positive influence of prior learning assessment on degree completion and persistence rates of adult learners, along with the increase in the number of nontraditional adult working students, an assessment model that recognizes emergent and workplace learning is vitally needed.

Historically, prior learning assessment offered by institutions of higher education has focused on learning that occurred before a student entered college. It requires learners to prove their knowledge with evidence, such as test scores, portfolios and other written documentation. Reflecting on knowledge and skills, as well as gaining college credit for prior learning, are undoubtedly beneficial. However, the practice does not fully bring to bear opportunities to engage employers in an endeavor to build upon newly acquired skills and emerging competencies developed through workplace learning.

Learning occurs in the workplace each day through formal and informal training, self-guided practice, modeling and peer-to-peer interaction. While formal training can be assessed by evaluation services – such as those offered by the National College Credit Recommendation Service – informal workplace learning verified by an employer has not yet become common practice. Yet, today's employers, particularly those who have invested in training and talent development, are adept at defining occupational competencies aligned to job responsibilities. They also know what evidence most suitably validates mastery of an occupational competency.

Each day, employers base important decisions about training, hiring, promotional advancement and organizational direction on their knowledge of workplace learning and competencies. Positions such as "chief learning officer" and "talent development director" are now commonly found in corporate environments. Many of these professionals use practices and tools that are similar to those found in academic settings.

Large corporations have put into operation learning management systems, online learning and digital badges. They also utilize academic resources, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs). The widespread adoption and borrowing from academia offers multiple avenues for employers and educators to creatively work together to develop new systems and processes to assess emergent learning, to recognize occupational competencies and to provide learners with access to academic credentials gained through contextualized learning.

By utilizing employer input to validate attainment of competencies demonstrated through completion of workplace activities and projects, college faculty members benefit from candid insight on trends and changes that affect industry, the labor market and education. Employers profit through organizational knowledge creation,

an engaged and competent workforce, and cultivation of a workplace that encourages and values learning.

Bringing prior learning assessment and workplace learning together through an employer-industry partnership in a meaningful way requires a complex analysis of skills and characteristics that make evident a level of proficiency, a shift toward assessment of emergent learning rather than a focus on past learning and an openness to various modes of constructed knowledge.

Most importantly, it requires respect for nontraditional learning and a mutual desire by industry and academia to work together to increase opportunities for today's adult learners.

Anne Murphy, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland
In my experience, PLA in the context of post-compulsory education operates at individual, corporate, sectoral, professional and state levels with regard to learning *in* the workplace or *for* the workplace.

Individuals pursue PLA of both formal certificated prior learning and prior experiential, work-related learning to progress, or to change, their own careers. This might involve gaining access to a new qualification at initial or advance stage, or gaining exemptions with credits on a formal education/training program.

Companies and organizations continue to use PLA as a skills audit and diagnostic mechanism to plan different levels of training and staff development.

Occupational sectors are now using PLA to generate sectoral qualifications frameworks for current workers *and* to regulate standards of practice for their sectors.

Regulated professions continue to use PLA to establish professional membership routes nationally and internationally, and to safeguard professional practice.

Models of **PLA at the state level** vary with ideological and economic contexts, from PLA entitlements underpinned by legislation, to pragmatic models as immediate responses, to re-skilling or up-skilling needs of particular sectors and particular regions.

What is now apparent is that meso- and meta-qualifications frameworks, and increasing regulation of occupational and professional standards, have moved PLA predominantly into a space where it is more "useful" than a model of PLA focused on individual affirmation and personal development.

This is an objective commentary based on analysis of available data and on my own professional experience over 20 years: it is not a value-judgment on different models of PLA.

Ruth Whittaker, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, Scotland
The creation of more flexible pathways into and through higher education, for example, work-based learning and smoother articulation between different parts of the education system, are actively being pursued within Europe as part of national qualifications frameworks development. The capacity to recognize the informal and nonformal learning that takes place within the workplace is crucial to this agenda.

However, the practices of RPL can often present barriers to accessing higher education (HE) to the very learners it is seeking to target. This can be linked to the way in which HE frames, understands and values the learning it is seeking to assess. Approaches to assessment are currently being explored within the global RPL community that seek to recognize the broader aspects of a learner's competence and knowledge developed within the workplace rather than being constrained by program-defined learning outcomes, which give both learners and assessors greater agency and empowerment in the presentation and evidencing of informal learning, and

that recognize the pedagogical value of the RPL process itself. Unless we are prepared to challenge our assumptions of how RPL "needs to be done," our assessment practices in many instances will always privilege those students with existing high levels of educational capital, those already familiar with the disciplinary conventions and discourse of academia. We need to ask what changes we can make to our approaches to recognizing prior informal learning that more effectively embrace the learning that is derived within the workplace, and will enable greater numbers of learners from a wide range of backgrounds to use RPL as a means of successfully engaging in higher education.

*We invite you to share your thoughts with us and our PLAIO readers
about your experiences evaluating workplace learning.
Please also let us know about any questions you have
regarding this dimension of PLA/RPL work.
Please log in and post a comment.*