

Where Context is King: Prior Learning Assessment in the Workplace

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In U.S. higher education institutions, prior learning assessment (PLA) is typically used to help students demonstrate what they know and can do, and then translate that learning into college credits, the currency of an academic degree. Often that means finding ways to compare a student’s learning with the content or learning outcomes of specific courses already offered at a particular institution. The student earns credit for the learning that “fits” that particular academic mold.

The various articles in volume 24, issue 2 of the *Journal of Workplace Learning* (“Special Issue: Learning Through Experience: Developing Synergies Between Research and Practice in Workplace Learning and the Recognition of Prior Learning”) suggest that this typical U.S. approach to PLA is analogous to preparing crust for a pie. The baker starts with a nice round hunk of dough, rolls it to approximately the right size for the pie plate, fits it in place and then trims the edges. You end up with quite a nice crust, but what to do with the excess dough? While there are lots of good uses for the creative and economizing baker (one of our mothers has always been good at turning scraps into cinnamon-sugar crust sticks), we confess that we tend to toss the scraps of perfectly good dough in the garbage.

This is like PLA as we tend to practice it in the U.S., in that good practitioners find ways to make good use of a student’s prior learning – from the workplace, from the military, from life experiences and from self-study – *so long as it fits a certain academic mold*. Overlooked and under-recognized is valuable learning that falls outside of the 3-credit course options, or that satisfies only part of a course’s requirements or that is simply not understood by those in academia who may not fully grasp its value in a workplace context. Like scraps of pie crust in the kitchen of a wasteful baker, that learning is ignored and essentially discarded.

Research from around the globe suggests that this approach is not the only way to use PLA, particularly portfolio assessments. Instead, when assessment of prior learning is done while considering the context in which that learning has been acquired (not just the “what” but also the “how” and the “why”) and the context in which that new learning can be applied, there are benefits to the student, the employer and to the academy. Authors from Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia point out that portfolio assessment has great value for recognizing and leveraging learning beyond the purpose of formal credentials.

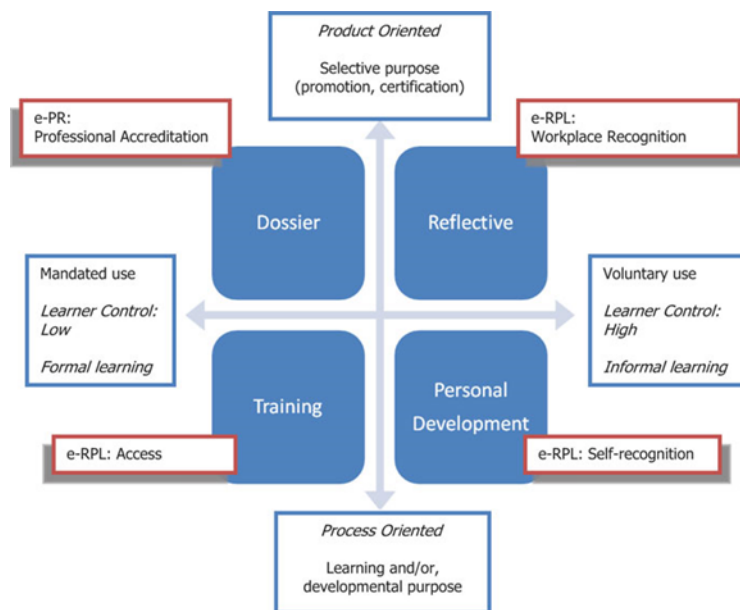
Examining the Many Potential Uses of Portfolio Assessment

In “Recognizing Workplace Learning: The Emerging Practices of e-RPL and e-PR,” Roslyn Cameron (2012) examined recent papers and conferences in Australia on the topic of e-portfolios for PLA. The two main types recognized in Cameron’s environmental scan are “professional recognition” (e-PR), which records evidence of prior learning and compares it with requirements of a specified profession; and “recognition of prior learning” (e-RPL), which collects and records prior learning acquired “formally, non-formally or informally or a combination thereof.”

Cameron observes that historically, RPL in Australia has most commonly been used for the purposes of credentialing (similar in some ways to the U.S.), but that this application is, in fact, narrower than it should be. Recent papers and presentations have highlighted how RPL can be used for purposes related to development rather than for academic or, in the case of e-PR, professional credentials.

Her synthesis of the various typologies offered is reflected in the following diagram:

Figure 1. Expanded Typology of Portfolios for e-RPL and e-PR



Source: Adapted from Smith and Tillema (2003) and Cameron and Miller (2004)
(Cameron, 2012, p. 100)

In this typology, Cameron borrows and adapts definitions of the different types of portfolios:

- A *dossier* portfolio records achievement or a mandated collection of work for selection or promotional purposes required for entry to a profession or program; a precise specification of levels of competence is required.
- A *reflective* portfolio is a purposeful and personally collected array of work providing evidence of growth and accomplishments to be brought forward for promotion or admission to a workplace.
- A *training* portfolio provides evidence of a students learning for the purposes of access to a course or program.
- A *personal development* portfolio contains personal evaluation and a reflective account of professional growth during a long-term process (p. 91).

The diagram shows how each form of portfolio has different characteristics, whether in terms of purpose (i.e., selection vs. development) or in terms of the level of the learner’s control over and input into the process (high

vs. low). This typology greatly expands the concept of what additional forms that portfolio assessment could take in the workplace – far beyond the narrow focus that U.S. institutions currently have.

This may be changing somewhat, as we see the growing use of e-portfolios in K-12 and in higher education for the purposes of capturing students' academic and extracurricular achievements, as well as serving to showcase their skills and competencies for, say, a prospective employer. These e-portfolios are along the lines of the *dossier* and *reflective* portfolios in Cameron's typology as they result in a product that is meant to help the student in his or her professional career.

The *training* portfolio in Cameron's typology is most similar to the PLA portfolio used in higher education today, if you expand her definition to include "college credit awards." In some cases, U.S. institutions also expand the training portfolio to have more of the *personal development* function by incorporating significant autobiographical self-reflection as part of the portfolio development process.

Another example of the *personal development* portfolio is showcased in Pauline Armsby's (2012) article, "Accreditation of Experiential Learning at Doctoral Level." The Doctorate in Professional Studies by Public Works at London's Middlesex University was designed for professionals who already have a number of work products that are part of the public domain. The doctoral program uses in-depth reflective and critical analysis of the student's previous "high level work" as the main product for assessment.

Interviews with the doctoral candidates and their evaluators suggested that using such portfolio assessment as the basis for awarding the doctorate raises many questions about the evaluation process and the difficulties that some evaluators may have in understanding fully the contributions that the candidate has made to the field. A clear finding, however, is that the candidates themselves gained from the *developmental* benefits of the process. Noted Armsby (2012), "Embarking on the programme gave candidates a unique and rare opportunity not just to review their past career, but also to consider their future progression in some depth. [... This] was perceived as a most helpful aspect of the programme" (p. 142). This developmental benefit from self-reflection activities, when required as part of the portfolio, also has been cited by PLA practitioners in the U.S.

The *reflective* nature of this process also fits the top half of Cameron's typology, as Ambry notes that the experience of reflecting on professional achievements helps to build an individual's self-confidence in the job market, which would presumably (and actually, in the cases of two candidates) help the degree holders to further their careers.

The Workplace: Where Context is King

Three articles in this issue of the journal bring us to the pie crust idea – that a purely academic approach to portfolio assessment invariably leads us to miss valuable workplace learning, or, at the very least, to underappreciate it.

Helen Pokorny (2012), in her article, "Assessing Prior Experiential Learning: Issues of Authority, Authorship and Identity," described findings from a very small scale study of four students and their portfolio assessors in England. These students were attempting to earn higher education credit for learning acquired in the workplace. Two of the students experienced the assessment process positively, and the other two, negatively. The positive students' experiences were ones in which the student found the process to be transformative and empowering, having "a positive impact on the students' sense of agency and their identity as an expert in their professional contexts" (p. 129). In the negative experiences, in contrast, students found the process demoralizing, onerous, time consuming and difficult.

Subsequent interviews with the students and their assessors revealed clear patterns in how the assessors may have played a role in these experiences. The "negative" assessors were trying to fit the students' learning into

the clearly-defined academic requirements; the assessors viewed themselves as the primary authority as to whether the student's learning met higher education expectations. Pokorny refers to this as the "monologic" approach.

Conversely, the "positive" assessors used a more "dialogic mediation" approach in which the assessor recognizes the learner as sharing authority as to what learning is valued. These positive assessors engaged in dialogues with their students about the context in which the learning took place; the assessors recognized that in order to conduct the assessment, they needed to understand the students' workplace experiences better. Pokorny (2012) explained that the positive assessors "were perceived by the students as facilitators rather than as teachers, in the sense that they were willing to enter into the spaces inhabited by the students as experts" (pp. 127-128).

The dialogic mediation approach is similarly explored in Nan L. Travers (2012), "Academic Perspectives on College-Level Learning." Travers describes the findings from a survey of faculty at a U.S. university on the question of how they use PLA to assess college-level learning. The faculty identified several ways in which assessment of prior learning differs from the assessment of classroom learning, which leads them, in a PLA situation, to see if the student has "engagement with and communication of the concepts; an understanding of how to learn and use that ability to learn more; a theoretical underpinning to the learning and ability to bridge theory and experience, as well as demonstrating critical writing skills" (p. 113). In addition, however, the faculty also looked for the ways in which the experiences had been acquired, in order to better understand how the experiences led to knowledge. They considered that context-setting dialogue with the student to be an important part of the assessment process.

The Pokorny and Travers articles highlight the value of workplace context to the student and to the academic assessor. But workplace context in the assessment of prior learning is just as, if not more, important to employers. In "Recognition of Knowledge and Skills at Work: In Whose Interests?" Leif Berglund and Per Andersson report findings from interviews with human resource managers, team leaders and union representatives in two Swedish companies and two Swedish municipalities. The findings paint a picture of a "system" of learning and skills assessment that takes place within these employer organizations. These systems work to identify the skills and knowledge brought in to a company by new employees, the knowledge and skill that is acquired on the job, as well as the skills and knowledge that would leave with a retiring employee. These employers only care about the credentialing of this learning for the purposes of meeting production demands or "enhancing the legitimacy of the organization." Otherwise, what matters to the employers is how and why learning takes place in the workplace. The role of assessment is to make the non-formal and informal learning – the learning most closely tied to the workplace context – more visible and understood.

Implications of This Research

This collection of articles offers rich perspectives on the assessment of workplace learning and the potential use of portfolio assessment – both within the workplace and in making the connections between the workplace and academia.

Some key takeaways from this collection are:

- **No learning is without context.** The learning that takes place in the classroom setting can differ in important ways from similar learning that takes place in the workplace. Learning in the classroom is typically a deliberate process, and classroom learners may understand more clearly *how* they are learning compared to the workplace learner. The classroom learner also may have a clearer picture of theoretical concepts, while the workplace learner may understand those concepts only as they are applied within the narrower scope of a particular workplace. Yet there can be great value in understanding how a student's workplace learning is acquired and how that learning is applied in a specific workplace situation. To be sure, some of

this learning may only be important to employers – or to a specific subset of employers, or maybe only to one employer. Yet, the academic assessor may miss the full picture of a student’s learning if the learning context is not explored as part of a learning assessment.

- **Some workplace learning may never be revealed or recognized, unless different assessment approaches are used.** When traditional PLA methods are used to assess workplace learning for college credit, there will invariably be learning that is never captured or recognized; that is, learning that does not precisely match a college course’s requirements. Like the extra pie crust, it is ignored and for all practical purposes, discarded. As described in Pokorny (2012), one possible solution is for assessors to recognize the expertise of students and engage with them in order to clarify the workplace context. Another solution may be to shift from course-based assessments of prior learning -- in which students must show how their learning maps to specific course outcomes -- to competency-based assessments of prior learning. An assessment approach that zeroes in on more universal definitions of competencies required for a degree may be better units of measure for workplace learning, allowing for more of the learning to be recognized in meaningful ways.
- **Learning portfolios may be underutilized in workplace settings.** The communication with employers about learning portfolios, as it occurs in the U.S., is often limited to a narrow definition of a learning portfolio -- one that can result in college credit that can be applied toward a postsecondary degree or credential for the employee. This certainly has value for employers who actively encourage their employees to earn degrees or credentials, particularly employers who can see PLA as a way to save costs in their tuition assistance programs. However, there is perhaps even more value from a human resource perspective to consider how employers might use employee learning portfolios for other purposes, particularly for developing their employees, capturing/valuing the specific knowledge and skills that are developed in the workplace, and identifying how informal learning takes place. This should not replace the credentialing purpose of learning portfolios with employers: Employees need to understand that their workplace knowledge and skills have real value outside of the organization, and they need to understand how to articulate how that knowledge and those skills apply to different contexts.

Collectively, these articles reveal how PLA practitioners and researchers can benefit from thinking about portfolio assessment in new ways, while also considering how to better capture and recognize the full range of learning that is acquired in the workplace. An increasingly important issue in the ongoing conversation between employers, educators and policymakers focuses on the relevance of what is learned and the transfer of that learning across the academic-workplace divide. Methods for teaching and assessing learning that recognize and appreciate the essential link between knowledge and skills and their contextual demonstration have much to contribute to this conversation. The ability to apply prior, classroom or workplace learning in new situations (contexts) is critical to effective learning transfer. Portfolio assessment, considered more broadly, has the potential to provide a way to both demonstrate and facilitate the development of this ability.

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