

RED CARS: Portfolio Assessment of Experiential Learning as Critical Inquiry

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Introduction

Our experience at Granite State College has been that students tend to view credit for prior learning as a simple transactional activity: *I give you documentation of my training and my professional credentials and you give me college credits.* In the case of training or a professional credential that has been previously evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE), the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or the student's receiving institution, this simple transaction of documentation for credit is in fact the case. Standardized testing options for demonstrating experiential learning for college credit, such as CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) and DSST (formerly DAN TES Subject Standardized Tests), can also be viewed as transactional: *I take the test, I get the required score, and you give me college credits.* In both instances, students have had past experiences with similar activities and therefore have little trouble carrying out these prior learning assessment (PLA) transactions successfully.

Transactional Portfolio Assessment?

When students apply the same transactional frame of reference to portfolio assessment of experiential learning, on the other hand, they immediately run into trouble: *I tell you what I've done and you give me college credits. Um, no, we don't.* The question portfolio assessment practitioners are left with, then, is, "What past experiences have these students had that can be applied to this new activity? What can we use as our common frame of reference?" Given the wide range of backgrounds students bring to portfolio assessment, from Montessori teacher to sales channel manager to heavy equipment operator to Shakespearean dramaturg, finding a common frame of reference would appear to be nearly impossible.

The Need for a Cognitive Framework

The immediate answer to this question is, of course, to require a prerequisite to the portfolio assessment course, normally a college writing course. While having this prerequisite in place helps, in practice it is not enough because students still have difficulty applying these basic skills to a highly-specialized rhetorical situation they've not encountered before and are unlikely to encounter again. Students need a structured cognitive framework to work within in order to make valid connections between their own experience and college-level learning outcomes.

At the same time, however, the framework can't be so structured that it closes off intuitive thought, those perfect flashes of insight that pop into one's head at just the right moment. In other words, students need an environment conducive to bringing out their *own intuitive judgments* about the best means by which they can demonstrate their college-level learning in a portfolio. The following passage from psychologist Daniel Kahneman's (2011) *Thinking, Fast and Slow* is instructive:

Memory holds the vast repertory of skills we have acquired in a lifetime of practice, which automatically produce adequate solutions to challenges as they arise, from walking around a large stone on

the path to averting the incipient outburst of a customer. The acquisition of skills [in this instance, developing a PLA portfolio] requires a regular environment, an adequate opportunity to practice, and rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions. When these conditions are fulfilled, skill eventually develops, and the intuitive judgments and choices that quickly come to mind will mostly be accurate. (p. 416)

Finding a Framework

On the other hand, the “eventual” nature of portfolio development has traditionally been problematic. Even when students finish the portfolio development course successfully, some never finish a portfolio that can be sent out for faculty evaluation – thereby creating an even greater impetus for Granite State College to find a cognitive framework for our portfolio assessment course that would be not only effective but expedient.

Two years ago, the college revised its general education curriculum to include two critical inquiry courses, both of which use two simple cognitive frameworks to introduce students to the concept and practice of critical inquiry: Pearson’s RED Critical Thinking Model (n.d.) (**R**ecognize Assumptions, **E**valuate Evidence, **D**raw Conclusions) and the CARS method of evaluating validity of information resources (**C**redibility, **A**ccuracy, **R**easonableness, **S**upport) (Granite State Library & Research Commons, n.d.). Through teaching these two courses, we discovered that RED CARS resulted in students’ developing their analytical thinking and writing skills more quickly and easily than we had expected, in part because the frameworks enabled them to make the connection between academic inquiry and their own past experience. We then decided to use these two simple cognitive frameworks to help students in the portfolio assessment course make the connection between college-equivalent learning outcomes and their own past experience.

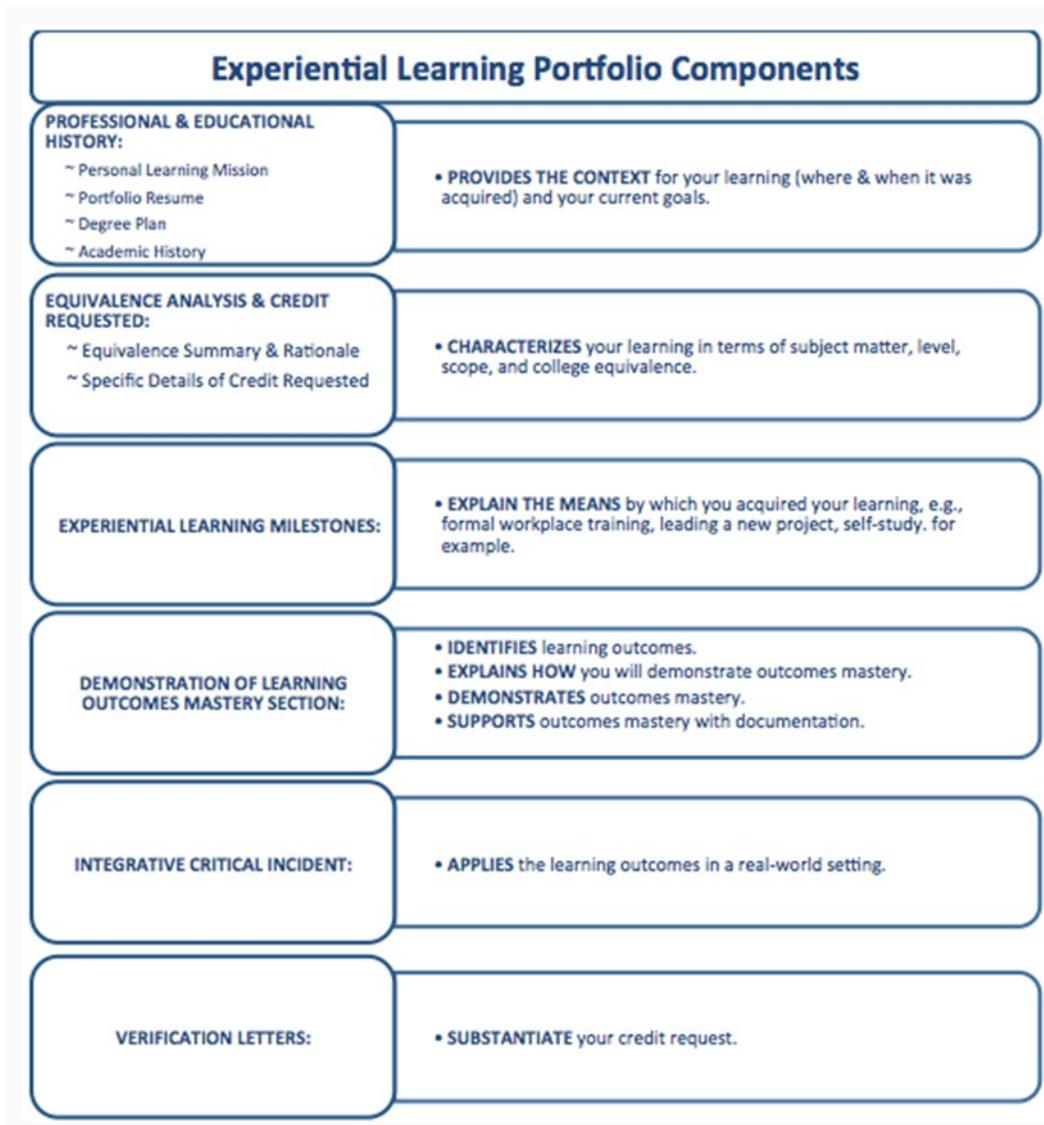
Applying the Framework

We began by first framing the portfolio assessment process as a critical inquiry:

Portfolio assessment of experiential learning is, at its heart, a critical inquiry into your own learning:
How can I demonstrate that the skills and knowledge I have acquired through experience are equivalent to the learning outcomes of the college course for which I am requesting credit?

Students are then provided with a version of the RED model that we have modified for PLA – **R**ecognize Assumptions, **E**valuate Evidence, **D**emonstrate Learning – and the course activities are categorized according to each section of the framework, for example, a discussion on identifying the assumptions each student has about PLA and a group activity to revise the standard CARS checklist for the purpose of evaluating evidence for a PLA portfolio.

The experiential learning portfolio components are introduced into the critical inquiry framework by identifying their rhetorical function:



The Global Learning Qualifications Framework

The Global Learning Qualifications Framework developed by SUNY Empire State College (n.d.) provides an additional tool for portfolio development that fits nicely into the cognitive framework of critical inquiry. For example, students use “Questions to Consider” to identify their relevant skills and knowledge; they then move into the deep questions of critical inquiry to actually develop a valid case for college credit:

Specialized Knowledge

Definition: Specialized knowledge includes a range of factual, theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as competencies and skills in a particular discipline or profession.

Students use their specialized knowledge to understand the field and its interconnectedness and limits.

Questions to Consider About Specialized Knowledge

- What are my accomplishments in my area?
- What skills and competencies have I gained?
- What different techniques and approaches have I learned over time?
- What are some of the theoretical concepts that go along with the practices in my area?

- What are some of the principles involved in my knowledge? How have these principles impacted the ways I think about or use my knowledge?
- When I apply my knowledge, what are the reasons behind its application?
- What are the historical roots of my area? How have these impacted the field? How has it changed over time?
- What do I understand now that I did not understand when I first started learning about my area?
- What is new and exciting in my field?
- What main ideas would I need to teach someone else so that they can learn this area?
(Specialized Knowledge section, paras. 1-4)

Critical Inquiry

... [T]hinking is not driven by answers but by questions. Had no questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field ... the field would never have been developed in the first place. Furthermore, every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate thought.

... Deep questions drive our thought underneath the surface of things, forcing us to deal with complexities. Questions of purpose force us to define tasks. Questions of information force us to look at our sources of information as well as at the quality of our information. Questions of interpretation force us to examine how we are organizing or giving meaning to information. Questions of assumption force us to examine what we are taking for granted. Questions of implication force us to follow out where our thinking is going. Questions of point of view force us to examine our point of view and to consider other relevant points of view.

Questions of relevance force us to discriminate what does and what does not bear on a question. Questions of accuracy force us to evaluate and test for truth and correctness. Questions of precision force us to give details and be specific. Questions of consistency force us to examine our thinking for contradictions. Questions of logic force us to consider how we are putting the whole of our thought together, to make sure that it all adds up and makes sense within a reasonable system of some kind. (Paul & Elder, 2006, pp. 62-63)

Discoveries

An unexpected benefit we've discovered from using the critical inquiry framework for portfolio assessment is that the language of critical inquiry, "metacognition" and "metacommentary," in particular, serves as a form of shorthand between instructor and student that greatly facilitates the process of portfolio feedback and revision. We have also discovered that the portfolio development process proceeds much more smoothly if students seeking credit for specific course equivalencies use deductive reasoning to build their case for credit, while students seeking general elective credit for college-level learning that doesn't need to match a particular course use inductive reasoning to build their case.

Through the process of incorporating the Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF) into our portfolio development course, as well as developing rubrics based on the GLQF, we discovered that trying to use all eight domains of knowledge became unwieldy, so we've focused on the "Specialized Knowledge" and "Applied Knowledge" domains as the most broadly applicable, with access to the other six domains as supplemental resources.

Looking Ahead

After successfully piloting this critical inquiry approach to teaching the portfolio assessment course, we revised the course to be the third in a series of critical inquiry courses in the college's general education curriculum: Critical Inquiry, Conducting Critical Inquiry and Critical Inquiry in Prior Learning Assessment. Looking ahead, our next goal is to develop an ePortfolio platform that closely aligns with the cognitive framework of the revised portfolio assessment course and provides a good balance of structure and flexibility for students to develop their portfolios, for the course instructor to provide feedback and for the faculty assessors to evaluate the students' demonstrated learning for college equivalence.

References

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