Bridging the Gap: Prior Learning Assessment in Higher Education

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The idea of prior learning assessment (PLA) originated in the years following World War II, when returning veterans found it difficult to secure employment due to the fact that they had left for war before they were able to complete their degrees (Polson, 2010). As a result of this observed barrier, methods were developed for assessing on-the-job military training, allowing service members to, “…enter academic programs at the appropriate point based on their prior learning experiences.” (Polson, 2010, p. 267). Since its conception, PLA has spread beyond the military and new methods of assessment have been developed, allowing adult learners of all persuasions a myriad of opportunities to earn college credits for college-level learning obtained outside of the formal classroom setting (Travers, 2013). However, there are still significant wrinkles in the system of assessment that need to be smoothed out before large institutions can begin to offer PLA services on a large scale. In this essay, we will take a look at some of the potential benefits PLA offers to adult students, as well as the systematic challenges in the PLA process.

In order to stay competitive in the fast-paced society of today, many adult students are returning to the realm of higher education from the workforce (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). As a result of economic strain on the economy and the inflated costs of higher education in the United States, many of these adults learners are looking for ways to reduce the duration and price of achieving the credential that they need in order to move forward in some capacity of their life. Prior learning assessment has the capability to offer a variety of value benefits to adult learners. PLA recognizes and legitimizes the informal and non-formal learning that adults have engaged in throughout their lives, bridging the gap between the labor pool and higher education (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010, p. 2).
The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (2010) conducted a study of the impact of PLA, using data from 62,475 students at 48 postsecondary institutions. The overall academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, were overwhelmingly more positive for the adults who earned PLA than for adult students who didn’t. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn the degree, which is not necessarily shocking since the PLA credits generally take less time to earn than taking the same number of credits would (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010). Individuals associated with the study suspected that perhaps the students following through with PLA process are students who are already highly motivated or academically successful (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010). However, PLA itself is a powerful motivator for students (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010). It can boost self-confidence by validating that what the student is learned in his or life is of value.

While the benefits of PLA to the adult learner are apparent, the challenges inherent in this type of process are glaring. The underlying question with PLA is simple: How can this be done effectively? Certain methods of PLA, such as ACE credits, CLEP testing, and DSST exams are more straightforward, in that universities like Penn State have determined which subject tests they will accept and what courses they will be accepted for. However, when it comes to more ambiguous methods like credit by exam or credit by portfolio, assessment becomes increasingly more convoluted. Another issue is that the process is subjective and in many ways, inherently biased. The faculty and the institutions decide what courses, if any, they will allow assessment for and how the prior knowledge will be assessed. In some cases, the individual seeking the PLA could potentially have more experience in the field than the individual evaluating it.
While DePaul University, in conjunction with the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, created a certification program for prior learning assessment practitioners, there does not appear to be a standardized or universal process for approaching PLA at this point (“Prior Learning Assessment Certificate Program”, 2013). That said, with the wide array of different types of academic institutions and the internal complexity of a single college, combined with the diverse potential for prior learning an individual might bring to the table, the prospect of developing a standardized is daunting. Based on conversations that I’ve had with prospective adult students, it is not surprising that the approach taken with PLA varies greatly from one institution to another. Some universities are willing to give large chunks of credits for prior learning and will pre-assess these individuals before they are even required to apply to the institution. At Penn State, most of the prior learning assessment is done on a course-by-course basis and is not discussed in detail until after an offer of admission has been given.

Another foundational element in the complexity of this process is that we are attempting to compare and make assessments based on very different types of learning: informal/non-formal and formal. Why is it that we continue to place a higher value on formal learning experiences in comparison to other types of learning, when the value is really determined by the learner themselves and how they can transform and apply the knowledge that they’ve gained? How can we properly evaluate that what someone has learned on the job is equal to what they have learned in the classroom? Conversely, how do we justify not giving someone credit who has been doing the exact job that the course in question is meant to prepare them for?

A major conflict in the process is figuring out how to maintain academic integrity and the values of higher education, while still honoring and validating other types of learning.
Institutions providing PLA options to students are battling issues of accountability from multiple parties including faculty, accrediting agencies, faculty, and students (Travers, 2013).

PLA is changing the nature of higher education institutions as the fountains of knowledge acquisition (Travers, 2013). “PLA can challenge classic paradigms of higher education with respect to where learning takes place, what belongs in the curriculum, how faculty oversees the curriculum and instruction, how learning is assessed, and what learning is represented by assigned credits and credentialing.” (Traver, 2013, p. 56). Faculty members and academic institutions are no longer responsible for providing all of the knowledge comprised in its degrees (Travers, 2013).

Currently, Penn State offers a variety of PLA options to students, including credit for AP exams, College-Level Program (CLEP) tests, credit via an exam that has been developed by the academic unit offering the course, credit for specified certifications or training, DSST (formally DANTES) exams, ACE transcript evaluations, and credit by portfolio assessment. However, many of our faculty are still fighting to preserve the traditional/archaic notion of academia and maybe for good reason, given the complex nature of the process and the potential threat PLA could have on the integrity of higher education. However, we must be innovative in order to stay competitive in today’s society. Professional development opportunities are critical to understanding the PLA process and moving forward on a departmental and institutional level (Travers, 2013).

With the influx of adult students returning to higher education who possess pre-existing skills and knowledge in a variety of fields, there is a dire need to accommodate these learners and develop new ways to assess for prior learning, while still insuring that the goal and values of higher education specifically are not being watered-down or comprised. There is a lot of work to
be done and it must be a collaborative effort between faculty, administration, and the institution as a whole. The fabric of higher education is changing and we must change with it.

Works Cited


