

## Our Assessing Ways

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Issues related to quality must be at the heart of any conversations about prior learning assessment. Whatever the context in which we work, without vigilant attention, PLA activities, already viewed with suspicion by many, will lose – or will fail to gain – the legitimacy upon which our efforts depend.

Put in another way, assessing learning must be a rigorous, fair and effective process, whether it is the assessment of classroom learning, of skills gained on the job, or of myriad examples of prior learning that have been part of a person's experience. That is, the criteria by which any institution (academic or otherwise) or any individual expert assesses learning, and the tools of assessment themselves, are inherently value-laden and demand our scrutiny. There are always philosophical underpinnings and tacit judgments that inform policies, procedures and the outcomes of our PLA practices. As the pieces gathered in this issue of *PLAIO* demonstrate, critical reflection on our assumptions and close analysis of our assessment strategies can encourage the regular and deep questioning of the assessing in which we are involved in just about every important aspect of our professional lives.

There are many approaches to the assessment of prior learning that are identified, described and dissected in this issue. The mode could be standardized examinations, third-party assessed learning, challenge or competency-based exams, or portfolio assessment; the context could be industry, community or higher education – whatever the form or context, we are always embedded in assumptions about how learning is defined, categorized and how it is valued, or not. This means that PLA is always contested, open and vulnerable to debates about learning.

Jen Hamer's invited essay on "assessment philosophy" and Loffie Naudé's invited piece on RPL "within an interactive activity system" both point to the ways in which particular philosophical stances shape the assessment process and its outcomes, and how, if permitted – if welcomed – new, unexpected learning can emerge from our assessment efforts. And, as Judith Harris asks in her review of Elana Michelson's recent volume, *Gender, Experience and Knowledge in Adult Learning: Alisoun's Daughters*, What exactly are the "theoretical boundaries" that we are tacitly accepting or sometimes, importantly, "pushing" ourselves to consider? How far can we go?

This issue of *PLAIO* also includes five "Inquiry" (peer-reviewed) essays that take up significant dimensions of assessment as, in itself, a learning process. As contemporary brain research indicates, all learning evolves through an ongoing assessment of what is and what is not experienced in any encounter. Thus, as Heinrich and Rivera describe, it's vital to our work to acknowledge how "prior" and "emergent" learning are intertwined and how claims about a simple division of "old" and "new" learning are either impossible or just unnecessary. In this spirit, it's also valuable to search for and use assessment methods that encourage assessment as a reflective process that can result in those being evaluated recognizing their own learning. Such

recognition gained through “thoughtful assessment” not only contributes to “hastening, ensuring and enhancing graduation” (Starr-Glass), but to uncovering the evaluated and the evaluator’s “ways of knowing” (Stevens) that often go unnoticed and that, on too many occasions, fail to “effectively engage marginalized students” (Rogers and Forte) whose learning we need to acknowledge and celebrate. And, as Andersen’s contribution makes so clear, pausing to ask ourselves how, what and why we are assessing and the ramifications of our assessing ways is not only relevant to our judgments about so-called “liberal learning” but to “vocational education,” as well. Whatever the assessment realm, the questions never disappear.

Everything we do attests to the mutual dependence of theory and practice. Our insights into one arena ripple right into the other. The five “Practice Today” pieces that are part of this issue all point to this theory-practice dance. As is the case in our invited papers and inquiry essays, the PLA assessment practices described here come from different national and institutional contexts. We need to become that much more aware of what others are doing and of the frameworks, the tools and the standards that are being used to shape the assessment of learning. The fact that there is an increasing number of “Resources” available (and, of course, what we have gathered in this and in previous editions of *PLAIO* is only a small sampling) reflects significant efforts to try out different approaches in order to bring more consistent, better quality and, above all, a keener critical eye to the assessment process – all goals that our dear colleague Urban Whitaker, who we remember here, never lost track of.

Thank you to all of our contributors and to our readers. Thank you for your patience and for your ongoing interest in *PLAIO*’s efforts to be a part of the building of an international PLA community. We welcome your comments within the journal. Please [register](#) yourself as a reader/[log in](#) to easily use the “Add Comment” function.

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We look forward to our next steps together.