

Assessing Student Portfolios for College Credit: Everything You Need to Know to Ensure Academic Integrity in Portfolio Assessment

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A Review of:

Assessing Student Portfolios for College Credit: Everything You Need to Know to Ensure Academic Integrity in Portfolio Assessment

By Chari A. Leader Kelley

Introduction

At a time when competency-based education (CBE) is quickly becoming the norm globally, measures have and are still being taken to authentically measure student learning according to the level of content and skill mastery that is demonstrated. Professionals involved in higher education are more and more cognizant that college-level learning occurs in various contexts and at different periods of time other than that which can be measured by contact hours in a classroom environment. It is along this vein that prior learning assessment (PLA) is being popularized, as potential students are invited to seek credits for university courses based upon learning that has taken place outside the walls of the university. Chari Leader Kelley (2017) has expertly taken us on a journey through the PLA process in an attempt to clarify what it is, how it works and where it is heading in *Assessing Student Portfolios for College Credit*. This review will attend to the organization and structure, content and the level of applicability of Leader Kelley's text. The thesis of the book is clear: "The purpose of this book is to demystify portfolio assessment while providing everything you need to know about portfolio assessment to ensure academic integrity in your portfolio program" (p. xi).

Organization and Structure

Leader Kelley approached the organization of her book as a progression, from simple to complex, an approach endorsed by Jerome Bruner (1960) in his theory of discovery learning. In this way, the book supports the learning level of any "audience" who is interested in or becomes involved in the PLA process. It takes the potential student from the point of learning experientially, to systematically analyzing this experience for college-level learning when juxtaposed with a tertiary-level course outline. Drawing once again on the work of Bruner, Leader Kelley reveals the concept of a learning structure where, as Bruner (1960) described it, "understanding the fundamentals makes a subject more comprehensible" (p. 23). This is what was accomplished when the text began with what PLA is *not* and subsequently shared insight into the realities that underlie the PLA evaluation process, thereby making it more realistic, reachable and authentic for its readers. Bruner (1960) speaks to readiness for learning (that is, learning can take place at any age and at any level), and Leader Kelly expertly demonstrates to potential and current PLA students how accessible learning really can be if one takes the time to reflect on and be guided by one's experiences.

The text is organized in order of sequence, thereby allowing students – and assessors alike – to experience the process required for the creation of the portfolio of prior experiential learning. To me, this presents a live

demonstration of the step-by-step procedures that are involved from the initiation to the assessing of the portfolio.

It has also been organized thematically, so that the content of each chapter fits very comfortably into the title it has been given. Additionally, anyone who picks up the book will easily locate the specific information that he or she is seeking. This thematic construct has also shown how well the content from one unit flows easily and accurately into the subsequent chapter, thereby ensuring a high level of cohesiveness, so at no point does the reader become lost and disconnected from the content.

Content Analysis

Marc P. Singer (as cited in Leader Kelly, 2017) clearly alludes to the technicalities of the portfolio assessment process, as well as to stakeholders' accountability toward its progression. Leader Kelly presents compelling information related to the intricacies of the prior learning assessment method and the creation of learning portfolios, which has the problematic potential of becoming a convoluted cognitive and experiential practice.

This text is so inclusive that it entertains the voices of all the stakeholders in the PLA process. It showcases actual student portfolios, so we gain an understanding of who the student is. Faculty share their experiences of and perspectives on PLA, which to me, lends credence to all that Leader Kelley has meticulously outlined.

With the inclusion of a practical component, the text quickly becomes a workbook where course outlines are supplied, along with samples of actual student portfolios and experiences to demonstrate what is both an intricate and personal process. This means that learning about PLA is no longer an abstract exercise or activity, but rather an experience in constructive and cognitive learning. If readers are anything like me, I need that practical element so that I can transfer or apply what I have learned almost immediately. Moreover, it is very beneficial to have the brief, yet concise critical notations made throughout each of the sample portfolios. These jottings highlighted aspects of the portfolio that exhibit exemplary use of language to demonstrate learning, different styles for linking direct learning through reflection and critical thinking, and the most effective ways of validating the content that is placed in the portfolio. This, to me, was a thoughtful element that further proves that the student is at the heart of this whole PLA process. This type of "side-by-side" feedback also guides the assessor to the quality of consistent and meticulous critique that is needed to ensure that the learning that has taken place is absolutely well defined.

Based on the fact that Leader Kelley passionately chooses to dispel the misconceptions of prior learning assessment and relay instead its truths upon which she subsequently builds the content, I am inclined to conclude that a clear and pragmatic view of this burgeoning method has been provided.

Level of Applicability

It is my view that the text *Assessing Student Portfolios for College Credit*, can be used as a stand-alone instrument for engaging students in the PLA process. The language used is quite simple, although, importantly, theory has also been infused throughout the book. It has been broken down for readability suitable to all learners. This leads me to a related point – that the book has been designed for various learners. As Leader Kelley shares in the introduction, there has been a pivotal change in the type of student who is now seeking college-level or university-level education; consequently, in form and in content, the author did an excellent job in trying to appeal to all.

I would like to discuss, however, the book's applicability to cultural relevance. In the Caribbean, PLA is in its infancy. As far as our higher education system is concerned, we are experiencing a similar change in the

student demographic alluded to in the book's introduction; that is, in part, as a result of the introduction of the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) program in Trinidad and Tobago, a doorway was opened for those individuals who could not have previously afforded to attend university due to financial constraints. Even though using the PLA method may be relevant to Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean, is it going to be effective should one of our students migrate to the United States and seek credit for work that she may have engaged in at home? Likewise, should a student from the U.S. come to reside in the Caribbean, would she, too, be eligible to apply for PLA credit based on her experiences? Could we make the assumption, then, drawing from the content that has been explored, that PLA candidates will have the opportunity to gain credit through the portfolio although they are not likely to have been privy to certain types and levels of knowledge that may have been acquired within a different cultural context? Put in another way, while Leader Kelley is very clear about what PLA is, as well as about the mechanics of how it works, imagining PLA as being universally accepted raises difficult questions.

Conclusion

Chari Leader Kelley is an accomplished practitioner and champion of the field of prior learning assessment (PLA), and has sought to bring a more intimate understanding of the process to the relevant stakeholders. You might ask who these interested parties are, and I will emphatically say: students who may wish to reduce the financial burden that is attached to higher education, and persons who have worked for years and are now ready to either begin or restart their academic careers, perhaps for purposes of promotion or professional and personal advancement. It is also a wonderful handbook for faculty and portfolio assessors. The author brings PLA to life in her book by using simple language and user-friendly examples. For me, with every turn of the page, I experienced heightened levels of engagement and excitement for prior learning assessment. She has provided easy reading, a hands-on, concrete approach to learning about PLA, and student- and assessor-friendly content. Leader Kelley's book clearly caters to all learners who may either know absolutely nothing about PLA, or those who have misconceptions about what it is (for instance, the typical Caribbean student). She gives faculty and assessors the tools that we need to guide learners through this experiential-reflective-cognitive journey; she offers students a guide to successfully preparing a learning portfolio with all of the elements intact; and her writing helps assessors effectively assess these learning portfolios. The content presented underscores accountability and transparency of the PLA process, which together reveals the expectations for the faculty, for students, and for assessors. Most definitely, I believe that Chari Leader Kelley has successfully fulfilled her primary purpose in writing this book: She has "demystified" the PLA process, and she has encouraged all of us to focus on "academic integrity" in everything we do.

References

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