

Transitioning Prior Learning Assessment from Competence-based to Course-based Degrees: A Case Study in Tension and Opportunities

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Abstract

The School for New Learning (SNL) at DePaul University had an almost 50-year history with competence-based education before transforming into the School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) in 2019. Our commitment to adult students created a context in which competence-based learning (CBL) and prior learning assessment (PLA) were intrinsically linked. The crucial university-level decision to discontinue the competence-based degree in favor of course-based degrees has challenged us to rethink our approach to PLA and its relationship to various types of education. The newly created Office of Prior Learning Assessment (OPLA) has worked to facilitate these changes and leverage new institutional opportunities. This article provides historical context to our institution's involvement with CBL and PLA and its movement away from CBL. From our unique vantage point, we explore the tension resulting from the decoupling of PLA from CBL, and the opportunities taken in supporting PLA in a non-CBL context.

Introduction

As higher education evolves under social, financial, and institutional pressures, models of learning and assessment must adapt. Yet every discipline likely has a defining question with which it wrestles. For example, psychology grapples with the age-old tensions of the nature vs. nurture debate that has spurred robust research and discourse, revealing that the answer is likely somewhere in the middle. Similarly, in higher education, the tension between individualized (learner-centric) approaches and standardized (institution-centric) approaches is a common debate and one ultimately aimed at facilitating effective and meaningful student learning. These philosophical and administrative tensions are helpful in identifying the differing positions, and through research and discourse, we make progress toward understanding the complexities inherent in finding an answer. This article focuses on the tension that DePaul University – School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS; formerly the School for New Learning) has faced in supporting prior learning assessment (PLA) as the institution engaged in a somewhat unique position of switching from a competence-based learning (CBL) degree model to course-based degrees. We will provide historical context to our institution's involvement with CBL and PLA and its movement away from CBL. We will also highlight the philosophical and practical tensions we experienced, and the opportunities afforded to us in this transition.

Brief Background on CBL and PLA

CBL can be defined as a learning structure that is flexible and focused on mastery of academic content regardless of time, place, or pace of learning (Porter & Reilly, 2014). As such, the manner in which mastery is attained is not as relevant as the ability to actually gain mastery. In CBL, the focus on flexibility and multiple ways of recognizing learning is crucial to student success because these factors recognize that learning experiences can occur outside the academic classroom *and* that one can increase the ability to do so (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The focus on mastery allows learners already familiar with a topic to demonstrate competence instead of having to spend the “seat time” completing a module or course. At DePaul – School for New Learning (SNL), our competence-based framework included both prior learning

and learning that had not yet occurred, offering multiple pathways to demonstrate competence at the learner's pace and learning preference.

Competence-based educational frameworks originated in K-12 education and were grounded in mastery-based learning models from the 1920s (Nodine, 2016) and often include Bloom's (1968) well-known cognitive taxonomies. With a focus on mastery, such learning frameworks focused on the ability to perform tasks in contrast to more conventional educational frameworks, where the focus was on standardized practices and more rote-style learning. Mastery-based learning is outcomes-focused, which opened the door for implementing practices that were deemed to be more relevant to student learning (Malan, 2000). Because students are unique in terms of ability and skills, mastery-based learning is highly individualized, whereas traditional education seeks uniformity in delivery and assessment.

Given this framework, competence-based approaches are often seen as an alternative, and at times, superior to traditional models of learning (Bloom, 1968; Nodine, 2016). The tensions between competence-based and traditional models are evident at the postsecondary level where the credit hour has become the de facto standard for measuring learning. The credit hour was initially created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to measure the amount of time students and faculty interacted for purposes of faculty retirement pensions — essentially a human resources and employment administrative issue, not a learning one (Harris, 2002; Laitinen, 2012) — and studies have shown mixed results linking learning to the credit hour (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Thus, there are questions about the credit hour as a unit for measuring learning, and competence-based approaches are seen by some as a way to open higher education opportunities and access to a broader, more diverse range of students, particularly adult students.

PLA began in the United States to provide access to higher education for those who had acquired learning through work and life experiences but had not previously attended college (or might have had some college but no degree). It began in the 1930s with the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB; now the College Board), and throughout the decades, organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) were created to evaluate different types of training and standardized exams for college credit, many of which are now commonly accepted (Travers, 2012). Individualized PLA, such as portfolio assessments or direct assessment approaches, are not standardized or as universally accepted. Although adoption of PLA practices has increased rapidly across the country in the last decade, portfolio assessment is still the least common PLA opportunity offered across institutions. Given the disparity between standardized exam versus non-exam PLA acceptance, the issue of transferability of PLA deserves more attention, especially given the latent tension and friction that can exist between standardized and individualized PLA.

PLA overlaps with competence-based frameworks in that they are both alternative methods to demonstrate learning (i.e., not based upon seat time). However, CBL can be seen more as an educational philosophy that values multiple ways of knowing and learning; and PLA can be seen as a process rooted in competence-based philosophy that offers a specific pathway to validate that learning has already occurred, which is typically learning that has occurred outside of the formal college classroom (Tate & Klein-Collins, 2015). Understood in a different way, our experiences with our own transition have shown us that CBL is the *theory* and PLA is an *application* of that theory. At the heart of both CBL and PLA is the focus on outcomes and defining ways to be able to demonstrate them; central to demonstrating college-level learning in both CBL and PLA is reflection. A common phrase in PLA is that “experience is not learning” — that is, just having an experience does not automatically qualify for college-level learning. PLA offers a process for students to demonstrate, through reflection, that they learned from their experience and the learning is at a college level.

From Competence-based to Course-based Degrees

DePaul University's SNL was created in 1972 as part of the "second phase of competency-based approaches to higher education" (Nodine, 2016, p. 7) to offer access to higher education for adult students. SNL's undergraduate degree program was built around students demonstrating 50 competences, which revolved around a general liberal arts curriculum but included 12 competencies devoted to an individualized focus area (analogous to a major). SNL's commitment to students age 24 and older pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees created a context in which CBL and PLA were intrinsically linked. Students were informed that while they could take courses to fulfill competences, they could also demonstrate competence/mastery through a variety of PLA options, both individualized and standardized. Students were introduced to PLA through a required beginning course called Foundations of Adult Learning (FAL), a multipurposed course designed to introduce students to learning as an adult, orient them to the institution, and help them develop an individualized roadmap for graduation. PLA was taught as a means to achieve competence, equivalent to taking a course. The course culminated with the student producing an academic plan, which would include a proposed schedule of courses and PLA projects. In its penultimate iteration, students outlined an experience that could be further developed into a PLA submission for evaluation. PLA projects were built right into every student's learning and PLA was presented as an equal to formal courses in completing their competences. PLA, in essence, was a core part of the curriculum.

FAL was taught by a resident faculty member who was appointed to be the student's faculty mentor and would follow and support them throughout their academic career. The faculty mentor was a key member of the student's academic committee, a signature of the program similarly built into other programs (e.g., Kochut & Brady, 2019). This structure included a faculty mentor, a professional advisor (i.e., an external professional and practitioner within the student's focus area), and the student. The goal of this hands-on, practice-related committee was to offer an individualized, high-touch approach to student learning. The philosophy behind this approach was relational and sought to offer students both an academic and professional mentor who helped to guide the construction of a student's academic plan, as well as to be intimately involved in the assessment of noncourse-related learning projects. With this support, PLA could be seamlessly integrated into students' academic plans based upon iterative discussions and creations of these plans (Hamer, 2016). There was continuous discussion within the committee to help students determine the best course of action to write their learning narrative, as well as provide other supporting evidence of learning as it related to achieving the student's highly customized individual plan. PLA was a co-creative process with ongoing input from both student and faculty mentor. When the PLA subject pertained to the student's focus area, the professional advisor also participated in these conversations. This process was well-encapsulated by Moss, Brown, Malbogot, and Tsomko's (2016) study on practitioners' experiences with PLA and fits within the critical/radical and liberal/humanist perspectives of PLA (Berglund, 2014; Starr-Glass, 2016; Volbrecht, 2009).

The SNL transformed into the School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) in 2019. Several factors influenced the school's reorganization, many of which revolved around declining enrollments and fiscal challenges at both the school and the broader university. In anticipation of the reorganization, De Paul decided to discontinue SNL's competence-based program. The school was asked to create traditional credit-based, market-responsive, professional degrees to attract more students as a part of launching the newly structured and branded school. The university also decided that PLA was a vital function that would be beneficial to the entire university, and the Office of Prior Learning Assessment (OPLA) was created to spearhead this effort. Since that time, the OPLA has worked to facilitate changes in PLA processes necessitated by the decision to discontinue our undergraduate competence-based program and leverage new institutional opportunities.

Transition Consequences and Tension

The OPLA has been tasked with turning a historically student-centric, development-focused but resource-heavy PLA process into an institution-driven, assessment-focused, and cost-effective process. The greatest consequence of this fundamental shift was the loss of CBL as a guiding philosophy, which had driven our PLA process. As a guiding philosophy, CBL had a significant influence on the ideation and development of the academic committee. The main source of student connection, academic planning and advising, professional mentorship, and student support occurred within this committee. The committee was built into the fabric of the competence-based program and faculty responsibilities revolved around this committee and the role it played in student success.

After the decision was made to discontinue the school's competence-based program while also keeping PLA, a serious question arose: How could PLA be supported and promoted when it was no longer a vital part of the curriculum and was no longer rooted in a long-standing philosophy? Practically, this meant that the loss of the academic committee and the faculty mentor support revealed how weighted the influence of one person was in a student's academic career and success. Decoupling PLA from the faculty mentor revealed a significant PLA knowledge gap in the school and has shaped how we now approach PLA. We faced the exact issue described by Hoffman, Travers, Evans, & Treadwell (2009): PLA had been a central part of the competence-based curriculum; it was now decoupled from that integral learning process and was to serve as a distinct ancillary function that resided outside of the curriculum.

The resultant tension revolved around three main questions as it related to decoupling PLA from the guiding CBL philosophy: 1) What is going to be the new guiding PLA philosophy, 2) Who is now involved with PLA, and 3) Will students still have the flexibility to create individual PLA projects? An important reality here is that PLA was now less centered on student learning and more focused on student enrollment, retention, and graduation.

In response to these questions, we determined that questions 1 and 3 were inextricably linked; we were no longer able to support flexibility in PLA projects because of the shift to structured, course-based degree programs. Degree programs were no longer individualized and customizable; therefore, PLA projects needed to align with the learning outcomes set out in present courses within the curriculum. Consequently, the loss of PLA flexibility and customization resulted in an assessment-based philosophy determined by preset learning outcomes within a course-match model, or what is known as a technical/market perspective (Breier, 2005; Fenwick, 2000; Khosravi & Leiste, 2016; Starr-Glass, 2016).

In shifting to a technical/market perspective, the response to question 2 was that the faculty mentor needed to be adequately replaced, and this was partially predetermined by the establishment of the OPLA. The loss of the faculty mentor and academic committee has resulted in the decentralization of PLA. Students now needed access to PLA through multiple modalities. Whereas the role of the faculty mentor meant that students needed to reach out to them for academic progress, we now needed to proactively reach out to students regarding PLA.

While challenging, the shift away from a CBL philosophy has also revealed and highlighted issues that we had to face in the competence-based program due to inconsistencies and inefficiencies in the process. This has created opportunities to strengthen our new and developing PLA model.

Emergent PLA Changes and Opportunities

Standardization

Without the faculty mentor and academic committee, the assessment of PLA had to be redesigned. The focus of full-time faculty shifted from individualized mentorship to course and degree development. With the combination of the loss of relational touch and removing PLA as

part of the core curriculum, significant deficits emerged. Faculty knowledge and experience with PLA were now less directly available to students and needed to be addressed elsewhere. However, this loss has brought new opportunities to the table to address some of the PLA concerns we faced in the competence-based programs. For example, in the past, faculty mentors could set their own definitions of college-level learning and could present students with different expectations for PLA project length and depth of inquiry. So too, academic committees were only loosely regulated, which created idiosyncratic processes. Both expectations of students as well as faculty engagement varied, which meant that it was difficult to ensure consistency in the learning experiences and quality of work. Thus, while Moss, Brown, Malbogot, and Tsomko's (2016) description of assessing prior learning stated that standards and methods discussed upfront in collaboration with the student appear ideal, our experiences revealed that the quality and rigor in which this takes place drastically varies, which can negatively influence learning experiences from student-to-student.

The loss of the committee opened the opportunity to standardize the procedures, expectations, and student experience, which has allowed us to provide increased consistency (and hopefully equity) in the process. In overseeing the shift to an assessment model, we have observed that successful PLA processes do not need to fit within a developmental model, but clear procedures, structures, and supports must be in place, providing us direct experience with the priceless value of the growing PLA resources and best practices available. Emergent opportunities from standardization include:

1. Utilizing the latest in PLA research and best practices (Kelley, 2017; Travers, 2015; Younger & Marienau, 2017), we developed a PLA rubric that is publicly available to both students and assessors. The goal of the rubric was to help demystify what is entailed in a PLA project and to provide consistency in the content of the projects and how they are assessed. While previously, standards for PLA tended to be related to a student's faculty mentor within the competence-based program, and thus, not widely known, the rubric is now available to all. Hopefully, this will help a widespread adoption of PLA across the university, whereas the competence-based PLA model was limited to a single school that shared a specific philosophical approach.
2. We created a course, Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL), which scaffolds the creation of a PLA project for course match assessment and helps prepare students to plan for future independent projects. This course offers a consistent student experience with PLA that is not individual faculty mentor dependent. Students elect to enroll in this class only if they want to pursue PLA. The rubric is presented to students in this course and provides uniformity in terms of their understanding of how they will be assessed, as well as provides consistency in the actual assessment.
3. The OPLA was assigned a dedicated PLA advisor who works with students through the PLA process. This has provided consistency in how PLA is supported. As of 2020 when this essay was written, data shows that students who consult with the advisor are more likely to have PLA approved for credit.
4. The OPLA has improved structural efficiency. The competence-based programs had a PLA acceptance rate of 97%. Buried in this impressive rate are the exhaustive drafts some mentors required and the number of PLAs that were never submitted because mentors did not approve them, in addition to differing standards of acceptance. The time requirements for PLA project development and assessment were nebulous. As of 2020, data shows that the overall pass rate for PLA in the new course-match process is 65.38%. The steep decline is mitigated by the rates of students making use of the available resources in a much shorter period: 72.73% of PLA projects were approved after consultation with the PLA advisor, and 87.5% of PLA projects were approved after the completion of RPL. The OPLA has implemented policies to provide a concrete assessment time frame for assessors to complete their assessments. We advise students submitting PLA that it may take up to two weeks to complete the assessment, but the actual average assessment time has been reduced to 6.84 days.

Collegewide PLA Investment

Another unexpected practice that evolved due to this transition was that others started developing supports around PLA due to the loss of direct faculty involvement. That is, moving PLA outside of the teaching and curricular realm into the purview of the OPLA created the need to recruit, educate, and train others in the colleges around PLA who are front-facing with students. Unintendedly, moving PLA outside of the faculty realm into a more public arena has allowed both students and nonfaculty college staff to better understand PLA. This has created several emergent opportunities:

1. Academic advisors are now encouraged to talk with students about potentially pursuing PLA. Since advisors are now students' primary contacts, this relationship makes sense. However, advisors typically do not act as assessors and their focus is on student graduation, which has caused some tension around this added responsibility. This has necessitated a closer collaboration between the advising staff and the OPLA to share online student resources and communicate issues of academic rigor.
2. PLA now has better integration across college stakeholders. Within the previous competence-based program, PLA was squarely in the domain of each faculty mentor and the academic committee. Besides general advertisement of PLA and background administrative support, college staff and part-time faculty (who teach the majority of courses) were only minimally involved with PLA. The elimination of the academic committee has opened the need to better educate and integrate PLA discussions with curriculum committees, degree program directors, and even with marketing and communications staff. This has resulted in the OPLA being intimately involved with how to market degree programs by providing information about PLA. Importantly, this has resulted in new degree program development, placing PLA front and center as a potential option for students.
3. The OPLA has centralized support and information for PLA. In the competence-based program, the faculty mentor was the student's main point of contact and source of knowledge about PLA. This placed the majority of authority with the mentor, who also acted as a student's gatekeeper for PLA submission. By providing multiple sources for information and resources, while allowing students open access to the submission process, it could be understood that the OPLA democratized PLA.
4. Whereas PLA historically resided within a singular academic unit and PLA credit was accepted through a combination of standardized and individualized PLA processes, creating a universitywide PLA office has initiated discussions between advocates of standardized PLA processes (those who prefer limiting types of acceptable PLA and low caps on the amount of PLA students could use) and advocates of individualized PLA (who countered with calls for open PLA processes and high caps). These discussions at the university level resulted in a first-ever universitywide PLA policy. While caps were placed on PLA, the recognition of PLA as a university process allows the broader DePaul community to join a growing chorus of educators recognizing that college-level learning happens outside the traditional classroom and processes need to be in place to allow students to demonstrate that learning and earn credit for that demonstration.

Conclusion

We have found that CBL and PLA are interconnected, but that relationship is ultimately dictated by institutional priorities and financial and enrollment realities. Our historical commitment to students age 24 and older pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees created a context in which CBL and PLA were intrinsically linked, which allowed for critical/radical and liberal/humanist perspectives (Berglund, 2014; Starr-Glass, 2016; Volbrecht, 2009) on recognizing prior learning. However, we have learned that PLA can also work even if it is not integrated into the educational curricular development process, but to do so, it needs to be advertised, valued and supported through consistent structures.

Shifting from a developmental model to an assessment model has surfaced tension between PLA in the competence-based and course-based degree programs. Individualized PLA as

represented by the academic committee/faculty mentor processes can help programs fulfill the potential of competence-based programs. The hands-on approach can drive students to complete PLA. It also can recognize a wider range of knowledge that is college-level that may not be represented in existing curricula. However, this approach requires an institutional prioritization of funding to support faculty and students because it is labor-intensive to provide the learner with individualized mentorship throughout the degree designing and PLA process. This prioritization is hard to justify when financial and enrollment realities often set the stage for administrative decisions. As a result, we have found ourselves in a position of developing PLA processes because of financial directives instead of educational philosophy. Decoupling CBL from PLA caused philosophical and structural conflict, and we needed to become clear that PLA in the restructured school would take on the technical/market perspective (Starr-Glass, 2016); the shift and impetus for a new PLA model was an economic one.

Yet standardized, institution-centric PLA processes can also be beneficial, especially in light of diminishing fiscal resources. We have learned the importance of creating structural efficiencies and standardizing assessment processes while continuing to provide course-based support (in the form of the RPL course) and support personnel (in the form of the PLA advisor). These lessons are also guiding us as we begin to collaborate with colleges within the university that have not historically allowed students to avail themselves of PLA. We additionally plan to increase available standardized and individualized PLA opportunities for students across the university. While we experienced the loss of our historical PLA legacy with the restructuring of our school, PLA remains one of the ways we can continue to honor competence in our course-based future while also elevating a type of PLA that may be more readily accepted by the university-at-large.

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