

The Multivariate Richness of Prior Learning Assessment: Reflections on a Case Study

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Abstract

This article reflects on a case study that examined the impact of PLA (prior learning assessment) on workers in transition in the labor market. The article considers the scope and boundaries of the case study approach, seeing the case as the starting point for further exploration of phenomena rather than as a terminal summation of events. Reviewing the selected case study, the article differentiates between product and process perspectives in PLA. It suggests that while many case studies are narrowly focused on a product-orientation, they cannot be totally separated from the more expansive richness often associated with PLA process outcomes and that this richness requires further investigation. The article concludes that many narrowly defined product-centered PLA case studies can be expanded conceptually and reformulated experimentally to provide a more all-encompassing appreciation of the lives and futures of those who undertake prior learning assessment, and to promote a more holistic and integrative agenda for the processes and products of PLA.

Keywords

Case studies, informal learning, job search, PLA portfolio, PLA practice, process orientation, product orientation, reconsiderations of self.

All published articles have a genesis and history that are usually invisible to the reader but, if shared, might prove useful. This article is no exception.

Colleagues and friends at *PLAIO* suggested that I write a review of a case study dealing with worker re-transitioning in the labor markets. These transitioning workers were supported by workshops designed to provide them with a functional awareness of prior learning assessment and of how this awareness might help optimize their job search and future employment prospects. The task seemed clear, but there were a number of rather perplexing questions.

The obvious question was why review a case study that was published in 2006, is currently difficult to find in print or to access electronically, and cannot realistically be considered a landmark study in the PLA literature? The case study in question is certainly robust and insightful, but why does it merit being showcased in a scholarly review at this time?

The second question was what benefit would be provided by reviewing this rather elderly case study for an issue of *PLAIO* dedicated to exploring the relationship between the assessment of prior learning and competency-based education (CBE)? The answers to all of these questions only became apparent to me — and I hope that they will, in turn, become apparent to the reader — as I began to look at the original case study, the constraints in which and through which it was produced, and the suggested but unexplored issues that it signaled.

First, at an overarching level, it will be helpful to keep in mind the nature of a review. By its

nature, a *re-view* looks anew at something, tries to see it from a different perspective, and shares the re-envisaged understanding with readers in the hope that they might approach the object of the review differently, or at least might be prepared to consider it in a different light. By its nature, the *process* of review focuses more on exploring and expanding possibilities rather than simply summarizing or encapsulating what, at first glance, seemed to define the original object of the review.

Second, at a process level, it might be useful to recognize the constituent parts and flow of this present review. The first section explores the general nature, methodology, and outcomes of the case study approach — an approach that seems to be one of the default methodological options in PLA and CBE investigation, and an approach that has distinctive benefits and limitations. The second section summarizes the original case study, *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Workers in Transition* (Centre for Education and Work, 2006), which lies at the heart of this present review. The third section re-views the case study in terms of process and product. The final section briefly recapitulates some of the implicit issues and embedded questions of this case study that challenge our current and future practice of PLA and CBE.

Case Study Methodology and its Boundaries

Disciplinary areas exhibit preferences in the ways in which they approach discovery and the methods they employ for their research. The choice of research methodologies may be historically-based or reflect the contextual environment within which the discipline operates. Certain methodologies may be privileged because they have proved particularly valuable in producing the kinds of research outcomes — in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability — that are desired or acceptable within the disciplinary community. Research in higher education, including research in PLA and CBE, is no exception and has preferred its own cluster of methodological approaches, including the case study (Harland, 2014; Tight, 2013).

Case study research and methodology have been widely used in many areas of exploration and discovery, particularly in the social sciences, in an attempt to make sense of contemporary real-world phenomena. The purpose of the case study is often, but not exclusively, to encourage investigation — observing the real world, generating hypotheses, suggesting causal linkages, focusing on relationships and relational patterns, and constructing tentative theoretical frameworks that might be applicable or at least might be worthy of consideration (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gummesson, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Creswell (2013) defined case study methodology as:

... a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 31)

However, it should be kept in mind that the case study approach is paradoxical at many levels. At an initial level of paradox, the case study attempts to capture the complexity and interconnected richness of a real-world situation while simultaneously providing a clear, focused, and consciously objective telling of that story. There is inevitably going to be a paradoxical tension between these two divergent portrayals of what is encountered.

Case studies further accentuate paradox in their methodology: first recognizing the general, then focusing selectively on the particular, and finally seeking tentatively to generalize once again from that particular. Potentially, this is a dangerous and self-limiting strategy. However, valuable case study outcomes can be achieved if the limits of the case are recognized and the inherent paradoxes of the methodology are appreciated. Simons (1996), who clearly acknowledged the paradoxical tension of case study methodology, suggested that “we should engage

with the paradox within the case, the tension between the universal and the particular, and the ambiguity or conflict it presents ... [realizing] both the significance of the unique instance or circumstance and the universal understanding" (p. 167).

Flyvbjerg (2013), considering the value of case studies in developing and furthering understanding of a phenomenon, observed that generalization can often be made on a single case and "the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. Formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' and transferability are underestimated" (p. 179).

As a methodological approach to making sense of a complex and oftentimes confusing social world, the case study is not only paradoxically useful but also problematically bounded. In considering a case study, its bounded condition — that is, its implicit constraints and boundaries imposed by how the case study is derived — needs to be recognized. This recognition is as critical for those who utilize case studies for instructional and educational purposes as it is for those who construct or develop case studies for scholarly or research purposes. For those using case studies as teaching vehicles, Yin (2014) noted that the "case study need not contain a complete or accurate rendition of actual events; rather, its purpose is to establish a framework for discussion and debate among students" (pp. 4-5). He also observed that teaching case studies "need not be concerned with the rigorous and fair presentation of empirical data; research case studies need to do exactly that" (Yin, 2014, p. 5).

For research case studies, a broad, fair, and sparingly edited text can go far to reduce the implicit boundaries of case study work, even although it cannot eliminate them. While appearing relatively straightforward, both case study construction and interpretation can be challenging. Many might agree with me that the best way to recognize these challenges and to confront these boundary limitations — whether the case is designed for teaching purposes or scholarly research — is to actually write one (Starr-Glass, 2017).

Case studies are bounded in three ways by:

- **Narrative:** Case studies do not, and cannot, capture all elements of context, behavior, or relationships. They are narratives and — as with all narratives — what is selected, deemed relevant or important, included, and communicated rests with the narrator.
- **Anticipated outcome:** Potentially, the case study can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways depending on the salience and logic that readers assign to the various elements contained in the narrative. However, in reading a case study — and even in its construction — there is a premature impulse to identify a particular issue, solve a perceived problem, or simply fit what seem to be appropriate pegs in equally appropriate holes. The internal logic of the case study — and the logic often adopted by the reader — is deductive (that is, theory confirming) rather than inductive (theory generating). The move toward the resolution of the anticipated problem, unless curbed, precludes other possibilities and effectively shuts down the process of creative speculation or alternative exploration.
- **Time:** Case studies are inevitably situated in the *past* and, if anything, they call for a resolution in the *present*: We believe that we are better informed *now* by what was contained in the case study. Nevertheless, the case study is historical and embedded in a context that has inevitably changed. Recognizing this, we need to be as wary about resituating the case study in the present as about projecting solutions derived from it into the future.

The focus of this article is a case study. This particular case study utilized prior learning assessment within a population of workers who were transitioning within the labor market from unemployed to full employment. This present review considers the resulting report, *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition [PLAR]: Workers in Transition*, which was written by the initiating organization, the Centre for Education and Work (2006), Winnipeg, Canada. This undertaking was not a controlled experiment but rather field research that considered the connection between

worker engagement in PLA and subsequent employment success.

Read as a case study, we need to recognize and respect the bounded nature of this particular report. However, while accepting the boundaries imposed by case study methodology and presentation, we can also *re-view* this work and speculate on how its implicit boundaries might be deconstructed to suggest ways of considering problems that have contemporary relevance even when they are not specifically addressed in the original work. In other words, a good case study is not simply a historical narrative that points toward a definite conclusion or fuller appreciation of a given context, even when a conclusion might be reflexively provided by the reader. Rather, a good case study is an enduring challenge that is perpetually amenable to different and changing understandings and — perhaps even more importantly — can serve as a portal through which we can extend and reformulate our present understanding.

Context and Content

The *PLAR: Workers in Transition* project was a three-year study (2003-2006) conducted by the Centre for Education and Work (2006). The primary goal was to explore the long-term effect of PLA strategies on workers in transition in the Canadian labor market. The study involved 300 participants who were actively seeking new jobs but had been unsuccessful at the point when they entered the program.

Program participants were given six-week workshops that provided them with strategies and opportunities to identify their prior experience in terms of workplace skills — classified in the report as “occupational, transferable, and essential” skills. Participants were also helped to link their skill set with potential positions and openings in the labor market. The central focus of the program was encouraging and supporting participants to create their own PLA portfolio. The study provided detail on how and why worker involvement in this process was an effective tool in preparing them for job search and employment transition. This study indicated that many of those who were in employment transition did not know how to manage the process or how to identify and present their competitive skill advantages. It also indicated that many participants lacked an awareness of how to conduct effective job searches or how to interview to their best advantage.

The *PLAR: Workers in Transition* document is a concise report; more accurately, it could be categorized as an executive summary. As such, it is particularly sparse on methodology and analysis, providing only very minimal demographics of those who participated and no insight into how their post-workshop views were gathered, scored, and processed. There is no information on whether there was or was not a sampling procedure, but presumably, the study utilized an opportunistic sample set based on all who applied for the program. There does not seem to have been any control, or nontreated, group. It seems that the report’s findings were based exclusively on self-reported outcomes provided at these follow-up interviews. The work is not a description of what was done or even of how it was done, but rather a summary of perceived outcomes.

The lead author of the report — Robin Millar, Centre for Education and Work — did, however, provide a fuller picture of how the report came into existence in a subsequent article that she co-authored for *PLAIO* (Millar & Miller, 2014). According to this account, during the six-week workshops, participants were guided through a process of constructing PLA portfolios. Most PLA portfolio work is designed to suggest and accentuate academic credits; however, in this study, a decision was made that prior learning recognition “should extend beyond a focus on return to formal education and integrate an opportunity for those study participants who wanted to re-enter the workforce.” Additionally, the workshop curriculum focused “on the incorporation of life events, experiential learning, formal and informal education, volunteer activities and hobbies, and previous work into the portfolio workshops with an emphasis on how these events and activities resulted in the development of employment skills” (p. 3). Certain unique

features were identified in the study, features that tried to move the study away from what might be understood as conventional PLA portfolio creation:

- **Holistic approach:** “The curriculum gauged individuals’ emotional responses to change and self-esteem issues.”
- **Focus on workplace transition:** “Job descriptions were not framed with learning outcomes for academic courses ... [and participants were] encouraged ... to develop ‘skill statements’ rather than link their learning to specific courses.”
- **Essential skills framework:** Participants expressed “their top essential skills and the transferability of these skills” in the language of employment and the workplace — “reading, writing, numeracy, oral communications, etc.”
- **Focus on the reflective process:** Participants tended to see “themselves as doing jobs, not as learning skills *and* knowledge. ... [T]eaching strategies for reflection [helped these participants] to understand the wider implications of their experience for different [workplace] applications.”
- **Group process:** Participants were encouraged “to learn from one another, offer group and peer encouragement and give participants links for employment and networking” (p. 4).

It is arguable whether this detail should have been provided in the *PLAR: Workers in Transition* document. If it had, it would undoubtedly have increased interest in the report and provided a clearer and more salient context within which to appreciate the report’s findings. However, the case study has many of the characteristics of a summary report — broadly administrative, bureaucratic, and procedural in nature — that marks the conclusion of a funded project rather than the detail and depth that would be associated with a research case study.

Of note, the report is particularly abundant in its findings (there are 17 listed) and it also offers several broad recommendations. All of the findings are listed here to provide a measure of the scope of the *PLAR: Workers in Transition* project, a wide and perceptive scope that is in sharp contrast with the sparse detail and meager description provided in the final report itself. These findings reflect the responses and attitudes of those who participated in the program. They were interviewed three months after completing the workshop, at which time many (but not all) had secured employment.

The report maintained that PLA portfolio preparation was beneficial for those in workplace transitions in the following areas:

- Helping in the job application and search process.
- Clarifying job interest and employment focus.
- Preparing candidates for job interviews.
- Increasing confidence in work skills and experience.
- Creating better understanding of whether skills match employer expectations.
- Identifying transferable skills.
- Naming and valuing broad range of transferable and occupational skills.
- Helping to apply existing skill range to newer occupational possibilities.
- Overcoming lack of formal educational credentials.
- Improving labor mobility.
- Applying for wide range of jobs due to recognition of skills acquired through informal learning.
- Providing occupational direction in different life situations.
- Evaluating factors associated with midlife career change.
- Preparing immigrants for employment.
- Reframing skills of those with acquired disabilities in terms of what they can now do, not what they previously did.
- Focusing on skills and experience rather than on age.
- Identifying further education and training relevant to employment (pp. 3-14).

The *PLAR: Workers in Transition* report, like all summaries of case studies, attempted to set the scene. It tried to describe *what* has transpired; however, it did not explore *how* and *why* these results seem to have emerged after PLA portfolio completion. The *how* and the *why* were left open to the speculation and input of other practitioners and scholars who might be trying to develop a more complete and nuanced appreciation of the value of PLA in the workplace and in the academy.

In that sense, the document followed the normal course of the case study: it presented a scenario and provided very limited guidance as to how that scenario was to be interpreted. Its narrative was historical and its meaning was available in the present. However, as with good case studies, it also presented us with opportunities for further consideration and creative extension into the future. To explain this, it might be helpful to differentiate between two entwined constructs — product and process — that apply to PLA as much as they do to case studies.

Product and Process

An initial reading of the *PLAR: Workers in Transition* project reveals a *product-based* goal. Participants were introduced to the concept of the PLA portfolio and encouraged to produce their individual portfolios. As with much PLA in academic and work contexts, the anticipated outcome was a product — something new, distinctive, and separable from those involved in its production — that provides utility for the participant and the institution or the future employer. That makes eminent sense for all of those who are involved; indeed, all PLA and CBE work needs to include “an understanding about what the recognizing/assessment process in itself produces ... documentation/grade or a ticking off of a course, but it also allows new learning” (Fejes & Andersson, 2009, p. 51).

That new learning — expressed in PLA through the conversion of informal to formal learning and its documentation — is part of the resulting product. Products have instrumental uses. As such they tend to have a clearly defined end: providing the PLA candidate with academic credits, assisting those who are transitioning in the workplace, allowing immigrants to compete more effectively in domestic labor markets, etc. The context may differ, but the well-conceived PLA product — just as the well-constructed CBE product — should provide the necessary instrumental value for those involved (for a brief review of several articles that accentuate the instrumental, or utilitarian, value of PLA products in the workplace, see Klein-Collins & Winters, 2014).

The recognition of prior learning or the demonstration of competencies can certainly be regarded as “products,” but they do not materialize *de novo*: they can be identified as “new,” but they cannot be completely or convincingly detached from the learner’s existing knowledge and historic experience. Tara Fenwick (2010) made the point that an inherent source of confusion lies in the fact that, in English, we use “the term ‘learning’ as both a verb (the process of learning) and as a noun (the product of a change process). While process and outcome are related, they are enacted as different phenomena and provoke different questions” (p. 87). Of course, product and process are not only related, they are entwined. Although learning (as a noun) might be considered an outcome or a *product*, it cannot materialize independently or be identified separately from the underlying and ongoing *process* of learning (as a verb) that brings it into being.

The *process* of PLA involves and engages people — real people who are changed to some degree by that process into which they enter — not so much the initial process of learning and acquiring experience but rather the process through which that prior learning and experience is recognized, institutionally accepted, and validated. Participants are prompted — or in some cases continuously encouraged — to revisit what they have done and see in those activities elements that were previously invisible, feelings that were not previously recognized, and connections that were not previously made.

Further, recognition of process directionality does not flow from the present to the past. Inevitably, reconsideration and new sensemaking in the present challenge not simply *what was done* and *who we were*, but also challenge *what might be done* and *who we might become* in the future. Although the change processes of PLA are inescapably connected with the production of its designated product, the “meaning and scope of the term learning” is rarely made explicit and consequently “not only hidden realities, but also hidden normativities lurk in these enactments” (Fenwick, 2010, p. 88).

In *PLAR: Workers in Transition*, however, these realities are a little less hidden. Of the 17 findings, most pointed toward process rather than product — how participants reconsidered what they did and what they learned. They also reconsidered *themselves* and what they had become or what they might become. *PLAR: Workers in Transition* pointed toward these as significant transformative outcomes but did not explore them in any detail. As with most case studies, there was only a laying out of the contextual and a vague description of the territory, not a detailed map. The mapping — with the methodological accuracies and inductive logic of the researcher as cartographer — was only alluded to and left for others to initiate.

Of course, a great deal of the relationships and potential causalities of the PLA process have been noted and tentatively explored in the literature. For example, the impact of the PLA process on participant self-efficacy, self-reliance, and transformational reconsideration have all received attention, as have student engagement, student persistence, and college completion rates (Klein-Collins, 2010; Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2018; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010; Travers, 2011). It is arguable — but from the present author’s perspective and experience it seems incontestable — that these life-changing and self-reevaluating impacts of the PLA process provide its ultimate value for those who engage in that process. It is *through* the PLA process that students engage, persist, and succeed. It is *through* the PLA process that learners reconsider themselves, their lives, and their futures.

Nevertheless, the richness of PLA process outcomes has tended to be overshadowed by the narrower pragmatic utility of its products. Pragmatically, it is easier to evaluate the short-term utility of college-level credits in the educational system rather than the long-term value of increased self-efficacy. Without question, both PLA product and process are desired: they are effectively interrelated and comingled, and it is not a matter of preferring one over the other. Equally, it should not be a matter of focusing exclusively on instrumental utility while discounting more subtle forms of personal enrichment. Deeper research and more extensive publication of the process value of PLA would undoubtedly increase the perceived value of PLA in both the academy and the workplace. It would also refocus the efforts of practitioners and better inform those who engage in the PLA process.

Concluding Thoughts

The object of the present article was to reflect on an existing case study, not to critique it or focus on the bounded horizons that delimit all field studies. On further thought, this reflection was informed by three separate strands that have hopefully merged into a single focus.

First, in considering any case study or field research, it is critical to appreciate that the work is fundamentally “about real people and real situations ... [that] illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Willis, 2007, p. 239). The phenomenon — in this case, PLA — is not separated and isolated; rather, it is only understandable through the ways in which it impacts and is perceived by real people within the given context of the study. PLA is not separate from those who engage in it. PLA cannot be limited to a procedure because the meaning of PLA is embedded in how it is perceived, changes participants, and creates new realities for those involved.

Second, in considering or reflecting on case study research, we need to acknowledge that “we

enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how [people] function in ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn" (Stake, 1995, p. 1). Rather than ascribe what PLA products and processes *should have* delivered, we need to determine what they *actually did* deliver from those involved. *PLAR: Workers in Transition* attempted to do that or at least pointed in that direction. It is a report — reporting the perception, experiences, and understandings of those who engaged in the PLA process.

Case studies set out the pieces without stipulating a pattern. The pieces may have been assembled selectively and may be contestable, but without the pieces it is impossible to infer or deduce the broader patterns associated with PLA. Case studies are summations of what has occurred — a bringing together of the collected pieces — but they are only the starting point for the process of pattern recognition. In that sense, it is better to approach all studies of PLA, whether initiated within the academy or in the workplace, as nascent rather than as fully developed, as suggestive rather than conclusive, and as signposts rather than as destinations.

Third, it is hoped that further consideration of the original report might energize PLA practitioners and scholars to move beyond what are often narrow and instrumentally constrained expressions of the assessments of prior learning, and explore the diversity and richness of PLA outcomes and their impact on those who are engaged in the process. This is not to diminish the importance of pragmatic products or the instrumental value that these products bring — PLA portfolio assessment can provide the desired academic credits and contribute to the hiring of the worker in transition.

But exceptional PLA reports and case studies — just like exceptional PLA practice — suggest more. They point toward a more all-encompassing appreciation of the lives and futures of those who undertake PLA. They signal a more holistic and integrative relationship between the processes and products of PLA. They further suggest a richness of outcomes that enhance not only the reputational standing of PLA but also benefit the lives of those who engage in the process. It may well be that *PLAR: Workers in Transition* is ready for replication and expansion into a more comprehensive and rigorous exploration of the multiplicity of outcomes associated with the assessment and recognition of prior learning and experience.

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