

PLA and CBE: Some Reflections

Catherine Marienau, DePaul University, Illinois, USA

I appreciate the invitation to provide my historical perspective on the relationship between PLA (prior learning assessment) and CBE (competency-based education). Having retired from nearly 50 years of working full-time with learners in adult-focused programs, I find myself reminiscing about the early days of PLA and CBE. So, I will start with a bit of time travel.

My back-in-the-day began in 1971 with the University Without Walls (UWW) program at the University of Minnesota (1971-1983), followed by the School for New Learning (SNL) at DePaul University (1983-2019). In both settings, our efforts focused on creating pathways for adult and nontraditional learners to demonstrate their learning — *regardless of time and place* — in order to earn college credit for what they knew and could do. In both settings, PLA had a welcome place at the table. The highly individualized program of UWW-Minnesota used a criteria-referenced framework that consisted of broadly described areas of knowledge and skills, shaped by facets that helped students and their mentors interpret the criterion, construct independent study pursuits, and guide assessment of learning. SNL's individualized, competency-based framework was comprised of domains in liberal arts areas, with wraparounds in lifelong learning and focus areas. Each domain consisted of required core competencies and a menu of optional competencies, all of which could be satisfied through various means (e.g., independent pursuits; courses, including SNL-sponsored courses with clear competency-based outcomes). Both programs featured the integration of liberal learning with a specialization (often career-focused) and fostered lifelong learning.

We were among the wave of experimental and innovative programs that answered the call to revolutionize higher education (Postman & Weingartner, 1971) — SUNY Empire State College, Goddard Adult Degree Program, and the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities (UECU). Some of our grand ideas were supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), a program initiated in 1972 by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

In those early days, we were neither guided, nor hampered, by definitions, models, or policies. We made things up, collaborating with colleagues through the UECU and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) networks, and vetting our work with faculty from traditional disciplines and fields (e.g., the arts, physics, education, business, community health, psychology, and other social sciences) who were interested in ways to turn colleges toward adults. Given the individualized nature of the UWW and SNL curricula, our efforts centered on devising criteria and processes to assess each learner's demonstration of learning. In competency-based (or criterion-referenced) terms, learners presented evidence of what they knew and how they were able to apply the knowledge and/or skills in particular contexts. Prior learning — that which occurs outside of the academy — was a respected source of learning. In fact, we encouraged it and taught learners how to extract what they had learned from various sources and contexts, and how to present that learning to satisfy curricular requirements. PLA thrived in these flexible program structures in large part because we considered assessment an integral part of learning. We recognized that the process of identifying, reflecting on, and readying evidence of

learning for assessment was itself a powerful learning experience, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between prior and new learning. We discovered that it is nearly impossible for a learner to reflect on what has been known without seeing it with fresh eyes and gaining new insights. Often, engaging with the PLA process helped learners decide what else they wanted to learn to enhance their repertoire of knowledge and skills.

My understanding of PLA has remained essentially the same over the years. PLA processes “enable learners to extract what they have learned from experience outside the academy and demonstrate that learning in ways that are credit worthy or competence worthy” (Younger & Marienau, 2017, p. 6). CBE, which can take the form of a variety of models and strategies, is a structure in which PLA can exist. Both “permit — even invite — a range of learning experiences that lead to the same outcomes ... [but] operationalize them differently” (p. 5).

I have experienced the natural fit between PLA and CBE and how powerful this union can be for adult learners. In writing about that relationship with other colleagues (Brewer & Marienau, 2016; Cleary et al., 2016), we place learning at the center, supported by sound assessment practices. George Kuh (2016) contributed a provocative piece for *CAEL Forum & News* about “Getting Assessment Back on the Right Track.” He traced how assessment began to pull away from its accent on learning to become an agent for accountability, to help prove the value of higher-level learning to regional accreditors, state agencies, and the like. Today, Kuh is optimistic that assessment may be reclaiming its focus on learning.

In my experience, when accountability becomes the driver instead of learning, policies and practices tend to become more binding, and tensions surface. To be sure, the field does need to be accountable, to learners most of all, for maintaining integrity in learning and assessment. I have contributed a fair amount of my time and thought over the years to creating and advocating for definitions, standards, and accountability measures for both PLA and CBE. Having been one, I think the practitioner-scholars in the field are best equipped to inform policies, create criteria, and model best practices. CAEL and C-BEN (Competency-Based Education Network) have been constructive forums for such endeavors. We no longer need to make things up at the local level; plenty of guidance is available in various forms — consultants, publications, tool kits, and model programs.

I cannot predict in what direction higher education is heading with respect to PLA and CBE. I certainly hope that PLA and CBE flourish, supported at local, state, and national levels. To the practitioners in the field, my advice is to stay focused on learners’ demonstration of learning outcomes — wherever that learning occurs — that meet the test of rigorous (not to be read as rigid) assessment practices. This is not the time to get bound up in technical know-how or debates that do not advance the movement. When the pendulum swings toward more conservative policies and practices, and it almost always does, be bold and keep pressing the envelope in service of the learners.

References

- Brewer, P., & Marienau, C. (2016). The theory and practice of prior learning assessment. In V. C. X. Wang (Ed.), *Theory and practice of adult and higher education* (pp. 399-419). Information Age Publishing.
- Cleary, M. N., Wozniak, K., Marienau, C., Wilbur, G., Tolliver, D. E., & Meyer, P. (2016). Learning, adults, and competency-based education. In K. Rasmussen, P. Northrup, & R. Colson (Eds), *Handbook of research on competency-based education in university settings* (pp. 210-231). IGI Global.
- Kuh, G. D. (2016, December). Getting assessment back on the right track. *Excerpt: 2016 CAEL Forum & News, December 2016*, 1-7. http://degreeprofile.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Kuh-2016_CFN_Assessment_Back_on_Track.pdf
- Postman, N., & Weingartner, C. (1971). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. Delta.

Younger, D., & Marienau, C. (2017). *Assessing learning: Quality standards and institutional commitments* (3rd ed.). Kendall Hunt.