

PLA and Competency-Based Education: Friends? Family? Or Only Acquaintances?

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Recognizing Learning: The Context

Over the last half-century, the recognition of all kinds of learning has become more mainstream. Thousands and thousands of colleges and universities across the world now take for granted some version of prior learning assessment (PLA). It is no longer a quirky practice of a few experimenting institutions but is more often viewed as a legitimate method of assessment to capture knowledge and skills that people have gained outside of the traditional academic setting. And it's not only true in the academy: PLA has also become increasingly more prevalent in the world of work to certify knowledge and skills ^¾ competencies ^¾ for employment.

Indeed, competency-based education (CBE), competency-based learning and assessment, and competency-based hiring have all experienced an upsurge in practices in which the purpose is to document, with greater clarity and transparency, what people know and can do. Typically, documentation of learning highlights knowledge and skills demonstrated through various kinds of credentials (e.g., degrees, licenses, certifications). Yet skill-based demonstrations alone are usually insufficient in describing the bigger picture of a person's overall competencies, even in the workplace. Recent work in the competency area has focused on methods to promote both competency acquisition and its documentation through various forms of instructional strategies, learner engagement, and performance assessments. This is a crucial direction.

Prior learning assessment and competency-based learning/assessment are significant change efforts. Both strive to find better ways to recognize and credential knowledge and skills regardless of the source of learning or when it was acquired. Both also push us to recognize learning that has been typically ignored, undocumented, or poorly documented. In this important way, PLA and CBE should be considered integral parts of social justice movements that address and critically evaluate mainstream practices that have limited who can participate or be credentialed based on explicit or implicit assumptions of what specific knowledge and skills can be recognized and credentialed. Both root themselves in principles that seek to recognize what people know with transparency, clarity, and fairness ^¾ both eschew, in every way possible, arbitrariness.

Two very important questions thus follow: What is the potential impact of these two practices on higher education and the world of work? How would higher education and work be different if prior learning assessment and competency-based learning became part of our common practices?

PLA and CBE in the Context of Higher Education Today

Fundamentally, we would argue that the purpose of higher education is the development of:

- Citizenship for a democratic community.
- Talent for economic viability.
- Community around an evolving body of knowledge.
- Opportunities for human development through engaging learning.

In tension with these four broader purposes, we must also recognize that higher education is a self-perpetuating industry. As such, higher education can too often be reduced to its bottom line for survival and efficiency, placing its practices in conflict with these core purposes. In effect, a preoccupation with efficiencies can foster significant resistance to change and move the system toward a more and more rigid state. Indeed, once efficiencies are codified, the system becomes inflexible, reproducing what is known, and always seeking to build consensus around those often-limiting practices. And while seeking to act in the name of learners, institutional practices often create distances between education and learning.

As we see it, trust is a critical component in changing these practices. Indeed, central to the legitimacy of PLA and CBE, trust is fundamental to accepting any form of assessment and credentialing. Trust is needed between and across higher education institutions, employers, and social organizations of all kinds. Trust is at the root of all this work, regardless of the source of learning, how the learning is evaluated, how the learning is bundled and credentialed, or how the learning is signaled to others. Building and sustaining trust is the lifeblood for all the work we do to help learners get recognized and credentialed for what they know and can do.

When this foundational trust is attained (and, no doubt, it does not come automatically and there are struggles at every turn), we believe that we can agree on what learning is counted, how it is counted, and how it can be shared. Credentials exemplify the agreed-upon trustworthiness and the agreed-upon value. Quality of credentials relies upon this trustworthiness; it is defined by value, which is dependent upon trust. Value is determined by the usability of the credential. An excellent credential that is not recognized anywhere has no value regardless of what it took to achieve the credential or the learning that is embodied within the credential. Recognition is the key.

This brings us back to the four fundamental purposes of higher education; that is, what learning is recognized and accepted and how it is credentialed are based on how they are viewed and trusted. When it is agreed upon that the purpose of higher education is to enhance citizenship for a democratic community, develop talent for economic viability, support a community around an evolving body of knowledge, and provide opportunities for human development through engaging learning, the recognition of learning (regardless of its source) brings a learner closer to these goals and becomes part of our value, quality, and trust propositions. With these four purposes in place, the role of higher education is focused more clearly on the growth and betterment of individuals, institutions, and society as a whole. It also enables different learning domains to grow, incorporating newer approaches to and expansions of any institution's learning repertoire.

When higher education is focused solely on itself as a business enterprise, learning recognition and credentialing get designed in such a way as to support that institution's business model. Such a reductionist approach stands in contrast to the goal of humanizing learning recognition, placing it in competition with other business operations. This reductionist approach only strengthens fears that prior learning assessment and competency-based programming will take students away from traditional academic courses. These fears are often shrouded in anxiety around quality and integrity; yet quality, integrity, and trust must be based on agreed-upon value propositions.

Of course, we do not believe that this juxtaposition needs to be an either/or choice: expanding approaches to learning *can* be aligned with the "business" of an institution. However, when the knowledge gained outside the institution is not allowed into the internal knowledge domain, the sphere of existing knowledge runs the risk of becoming outdated and possibly obsolete, thus diminishing the business bottom line. When higher education integrates the variations and interconnectedness of knowledge and shapes its academic offerings to include internal and external learning, the sphere enlarges and provides opportunities for growth and long-

term viability.

The ways in which knowledge is created, fashioned, and used in the 21st century are very different than ever before. The expanding use of knowledge to meet contemporary demands calls upon us to gain a broader understanding of different knowledge constructions, different ways of learning that knowledge, and new insights into the interrelationships across knowledge bases. The knowledge held within any institution needs outside thinking and influence to prosper, and some of that influence can come from *the learners themselves* ^¾ those who are paying to come to our institutions. In other words, the business model can call upon learners (indeed, our paying customers!) to contribute to the academic and professional development and the overall well-being of the institution and its faculty.

Where do we go from here?

So, are PLA and CBE friends? Family? Or merely acquaintances? Maybe, we'd argue, they are closer to accomplices in the evolution of education. Regardless of the characterization of their relationship, both highlight that learners have "value" before they even walk in our institutional doors. Some of that value includes experiences that contribute to a vibrant democratic society, support industry development and sustainability, expand the awareness of fields of knowledge, and/or provide insight into different ways of knowing and being in the world. Our learners are the most critical part of higher education and cannot be reduced to credits, courses, and credentials. When we can share with transparency and in trusted ways what we have learned about and validated for our learners, we have increased the value of postsecondary education. The very viability of higher education depends on this alignment with its true purposes.

To reach a married state of PLA and CBE, genuine democratization of the curriculum and learning recognition is crucial. We must become aware of how we come to our judgments of what gets recognized and credentialed (what criteria we use), and how we can make those decisions transparent and trustworthy. Trust comes from the discernment process itself: we are more likely to accept the conclusions if we believe that the process by which those conclusions were reached was, in itself, fair. There is hard work ahead of us. This effort can't be taken lightly.

We have the responsibility to create a space for sharing knowledge and to recognize shared knowledge that responds to the needs of the people, of industry, and the entire society. We face a risk ^¾ a risk of relegating individual knowledge (and insights and skills) to a place outside the collective knowledge, thus repeating what has occurred for hundreds of years. Right now, we can expand the collective to include the individual. Prior learning assessment and competency-based learning and assessment help us do just that: they provide the basis for examining and incorporating knowledge beyond the walls of our institutions, thus enhancing the quality and value of what we deem acceptable knowledge. Through these important strategies, we are supporting the goals of education that we all cherish and, in one way, are contributing to a fairer and more just society.