

**Partial Alignment and Sustained Tension:
Validity, Metaphor and Prior Learning Assessment**

David Starr-Glass, SUNY Empire State College, Center for International Programs, Prague

Introduction

While the impetus of prior learning assessment (PLA) has many origins – empowering learners, renegotiating institutional power, promoting social inclusion or radically challenging disciplinary hegemony – the process is remarkably uniform: determining prior knowledge, making comparisons and arguing for academic equivalency. Methodological approaches to PLA differ; however, the outcomes are similar: elucidating areas of prior experience that have resulted in a substantial new understanding equivalent to college-level study or employment qualifications. Essentially, PLA is grounded in comparison and equivalency and, irrespective of motivation or approach, all of those involved in the process – practitioners, candidates and institutions – are best served when comparisons made and equivalencies recommended are demonstrably valid.

Validity, which might be understood in terms of reasonable similarity, only becomes apparent when comparisons are made: validity is a *quality* of comparison, not an inherent property of what is being compared. But validity can also be the desired goal of the comparison: the *expectation* of comparison. For example, in test construction, the desired expectation of a test instrument is its validity: it measures accurately and consistently what it purports to measure. Comparison between test instrument results and other measures are made to confirm an expectation of validity. In other circumstances, comparison might be employed to reveal qualities that were not initially considered, but which have now become apparent, remain persistently dissimilar, and are unexpectedly useful. In that case, the degree to which validity – reasonable similarity – attaches to the result is more nuanced, tentative and open: open in the sense that the comparison serves to suggest new alternatives, rather than to confirm preconceived expectations. In this article, metaphor is used as an example of a comparison where value lies in resulting openness and utility. Validity work in PLA lies somewhere between the objectivity associated with test-construction and the subjectivity inherent in metaphor. PLA compares things obviously different, but with a degree of similarity. While it might be thought that validity in PLA is simply a matter of ensuring a greater degree of similarity, it will be argued that the degree of remaining different is particularly important. To approach validity from an exclusively statistical approach, as in test construction, undermines the PLA endeavor and restricts the artful creativity of the process. To consider PLA as quintessentially metaphoric, limits the perceived value of PLA and diminishes its credibility and acceptance in the broader academic community.

Often, a fruitful way of inviting PLA candidates to reflect on their experience is through the creation of a self-narrative. When mentors work with candidates in the preparation of assessment portfolios, new insights and creative perspectives can be suggested through narratives that begin with simile, metaphor and totemic systems—an extended invitation to consider the usefulness of connections, parallels and analogies (Starr-Glass, 2002). Yet in many PLA systems, the candidate's portfolio is reviewed and evaluated by others who were not involved in the production of the original narrative of discovery and who assess it in terms of what are taken to be “objective” course equivalencies. A more holistic appreciation of the overall PLA process (from the guidance and mentoring at portfolio creation through to its evaluation and credit recommendation) is important, not

only to share values among those directly involved in the assessment, but to provide broader opportunities for the consideration of different perspectives across disciplinary-based faculty and the institution.

Comparisons lead to alignments and tensions, which differ depending on the goal and purpose of comparison. An understanding of alignment and tension dynamics is critically important. Process dynamics can be seen in traditional validity work, for example, in test construction. They can also be explored in the application of conceptual metaphor theory in, for example, areas of study such as organizational behavior. Significantly, process dynamics are also central to PLA.

The first section of this article focuses on construct validity in assessment instruments. The central concern is to enhance alignment between what is measured by the test instrument and the underlying construct. Increased alignment leads to greater confidence in the outcomes of the assessment process. Increased alignment, which is a measure of validity, is however moderated by the consequential impact of decisions made and actions taken based on an initial reliance on a validity relationship.

The second section looks at metaphor. Metaphor is a valuable tool that can be used in PLA portfolio creation, but metaphor itself is “metaphorically” as a process in assessing the candidate’s work. Unlike test construction, alignment between source and target is inevitably tenuous and creatively incomplete. The creative provocation of metaphor relies on a constructive and enduring tension between source and target, in which convergence between the two diminishes the vitality of comparison.

The third section considers what happens when traditional validity and metaphor are superimposed on the process of PLA. PLA is neither resistant to validation nor restrictively construed as metaphor. Its dynamic power and creative provocation derive from sustaining validity and metaphor perspectives in a productive equilibrium. In its traditional test construction form, validity certainly has a place in PLA and researchers are encouraged to explore it. However, unconsidered attempts to mechanically align academic discipline, community practice, and personal experience misrepresent the nature and the regenerative dynamism of PLA. It is argued that maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between the alignment and tensions of PLA contributes significantly not only to our practice, but to candidates, institutions and to the wider disciplinary-focused collegiate community.

Validity: Increasing Alignment, Reducing Tension

The history of validation in assessment has progressed through three phases: criterion-based models, construct-based models and comprehensive unified construct-based models (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Dimitrov, 2010; Kane, 2001; Moss, 1992, 2007). A brief review of these will show how approaches and priorities have evolved over time. Earlier criterion-based models considered a relationship between two narrowly defined attributes: the criterion and test scores. In these models (Kane, 2001), “validity was couched within a realist philosophy of science, in which the variable of interest was assumed to have a definite value for each person, and the goal of measurement was to estimate this variable's value as accurately as possible” (p. 319).

Consider the relationship between performance on a training program designed to improve business communication skills and subsequent displays of communication competency in the workplace. An analysis of the workplace would be used to develop the criteria by which “effective communication” might be identified and measured. A positive correlation between measures of performance (criteria measurements in the workplace) and performance on the training course (test scores obtained at the end of the course) suggests validity. Validity is not a quality of the training program. Neither is it an inherent quality of the final test nor of the performance measurement. Rather, validity is the degree of confidence in making predictions about training program performance and subsequent demonstration of effective communication. In this kind of validity approach, selection and measurement of the criterion (“the criterion problem”) has always been problematic. This is so because, while the criterion is usually defined narrowly, in real-world situations, criteria tend to be dynamic,

multifaceted, contextual and used for different purposes (Austin & Villanova, 1992; Messick, 1967).

Second generation validity work (construct-based models) attempted to redress some of these problems by considering broader underlying constructs. The construct-based model (Kane, 2001) “developed three methodological principles: the need for extended analysis in validation, the need for an explicit statement of the proposed interpretation, and the need to consider alternative interpretations in the context of validating theoretical constructs” (p. 324).

A construct is just that: a theoretical, psychological or social representation – a mental construction – of an attribute that, while not directly observable, is considered relevant. Constructs are developed through a consideration of what are *thought* to be relevant assumptions, theories and knowledge structures. This requires a careful and critical exploration of the attribute of interest and an expansive understanding of how the construct is derived from, and integrated into, existing disciplinary-related theory: what Cronbach and Meehl (1955) termed its “nomological network.”

Consider, for example, measuring a construct such as “organizational empowerment.” The first task would be to explore the place of “organizational empowerment” as a construct within existing organizational theory. During this process, the construct would be differentiated from similar or competing constructs. Its connectedness with other constructs would be mapped, relevant processes and outcomes considered, a discipline-consistent model developed, and an inclusive nomological network produced. Once the construct has been established, ways of measuring it will then be developed. In any validation process, a well-considered nomological network is essential because it sheds light on the robustness and utility of the construct. While a complex task, nomological networks have been published for organizational constructs such as “organizational empowerment” (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004), “trainee reactions” (Brown, 2005) and “structured selection interview” (Chapman & Zweig, 2005).

The third way of approaching validity (the unified construct-based model) represents the current standard in education and psychology (AERA, APA, & NCMA, 2004). This model stresses a holistic integration of the mechanics of validation studies and—critically – the *consequential impact* of interpretations and decision-making based on the measurements produced. Messick (1989), whose work led to the adoption of the unified construct approach, defined validity as “an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the *adequacy* and *appropriateness* of *inferences* and *actions* based on test scores or other modes of assessment” (p. 13, emphasis in original).

The shift toward a unified understanding of validity has, as Kane (2001) noted, taken us “from the early, realist models, in which the attribute to be measured was taken as a given to the current emphasis on interpretations” (p.329). This change has been gradual, but increasingly “explicit and consistent”. The external consequential aspect of validity, rather than its internal self-referencing, has been accentuated because it “appraises the value implications of score interpretations as a basis for action as well as the actual and potential consequences of test use, especially in regard to sources of invalidity related to issues of bias, fairness, and distributive justice” (Messick, 1995, p. 745).

Validity often has significant consequences when it is used as the basis for decisions that affect people. Validation of a test instrument for “organizational empowerment” would have to understand that the test might subsequently be used to make decisions such as diffusing organizational power, training employees and managers, assessment of performance, and rewards and sanctions – all of them financially and operationally significant for the organization and for the organizational participants involved. Validation would consider whether intended actions would be adequate and appropriate if made on the strength of the results provided by the test instrument. Validation is broader than correlations between test scores and criterion performance, or alignments between construct maps and the instruments that purport to measure them. Correlations and degrees of

isomorphic fit are part of the unified validity process, but they no longer define it exclusively. The move toward including consequential results acknowledges that assessment always takes place within a broader ethical, social, political and administrative context and that using assessment always has costs and consequences.

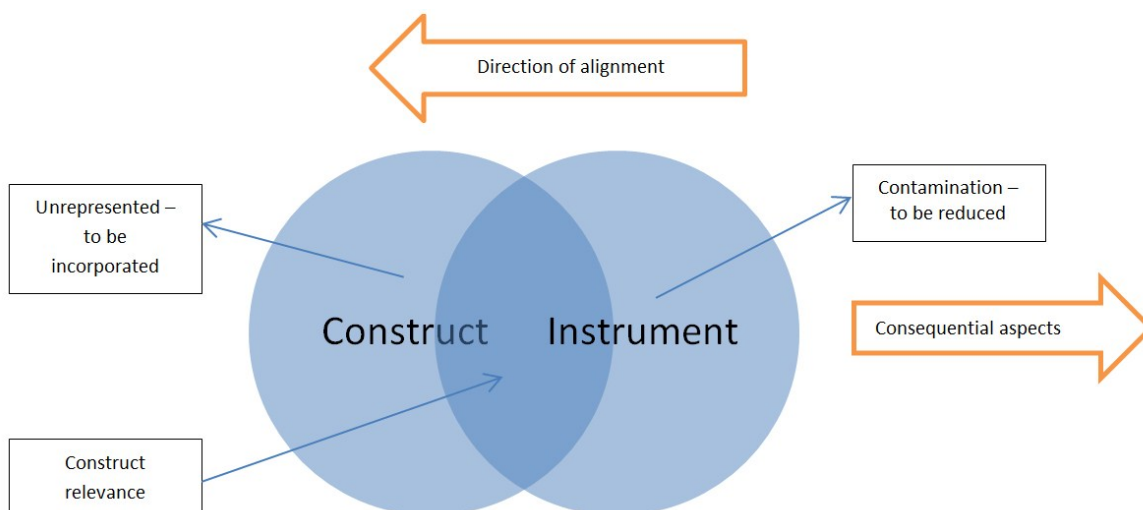


Figure 1. Aligning elements of a test instrument with the underlying construct that it purports to measure, to enhance representation of content, structure, theory and generalizability associated with the construct domain. Closer alignment increases the value and positive impact on consequential aspects of the validation process.

Figure 1 summarizes the validation process. A construct has been explored and an instrument developed that will be used to measure it in different situations and contexts. Validity is a process of trying to obtain closer alignment between the test instrument and the underlying construct. Higher validity is associated with reducing construct contaminants and increasing construct representation in revised instruments. The top arrow represents the dynamic movement of increasing validity. While it is probable that a complete overlap will not be achieved, attempts to increase test instrument validity bring the two circles closer together. The arrow to the left indicates the tension to include consequential aspects that might not be evident in, or measured by, the construct.

Validity depends on a clear appreciation and *operationalization of the* underlying construct. In educational contexts, part of that appreciation is an understanding of the assumptions of the disciplinary knowledge that constitute the domain map within which the construct is situated. Disciplinary-anchored understanding may include agendas and scripts that are not obvious, even to those who embrace them. However, especially in approaching PLA, practitioners should have some understanding of the nature and boundaries of disciplinary-defined bodies of knowledge because these will shape the discipline construct and are often reflected in considerations of validity.

Donald (2002) surveyed modes of inquiry and thinking within different academic disciplines and showed considerable and persistent differences between them. She suggested that physics might be described as “hard” with high levels of consensus and precise conceptual frameworks, whereas the humanities are more diffuse, permeable and “do not have a body of theory that is subscribed to by all members of the field” (p. 10). Schwab (1962) looked at the content and transmission of scientific thinking and felt that it was not communicated as an active way of explaining the world, but as a passive set of “rhetoric of conclusions” (p. 24). As Ford (2010) put it, Schwab was concerned that if learners understood science as a rhetoric of conclusions, “rather than as a set of ‘enquiries’, [then] they fundamentally misunderstand it. Rather than serve as a resource for creative thinking about nature this knowledge may become for them nothing more than stale memorized dogma, or inert

knowledge” (p. 273).

An academic discipline evolves boundaries and paradigmatic perspectives that serve to unify its traditions and practice; however, these also distance it from other disciplines. Some disciplines (notably STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are explicitly defined, having a set of “strong theories.” Others (the social sciences) are more permeable with “weak theories.” Disciplinary content and boundaries are required to assess the theoretical significance of a problem, to focus effort on problems that might have solutions, to evaluate competing formulations of theory, and to provide a catalyst for growth and perpetuation (Berger, Willer, & Zelditch, 2005; Cole, 2001).

Disciplinary discourse constitutes part of the network that defines the domain. Additionally, unarticulated meta-discursive rules may be recognized by practitioners, but not reflected in the constructs they create. These inclusions and exclusions influence the completeness with which a construct in a given discipline can be defined and the extent to which it can be measured. As such, PLA involvement with different disciplinary domains will lead to engagement with differently understood notions of reasonable fit, adequacy and validity. For example, if a PLA candidate is being counseled to include “an introduction to mechanics” in her portfolio, it is likely that the portfolio will be reviewed with a disciplinary understanding of physics. Significantly, disciplinary-centered comparisons may be biased toward notions of validity grounded in criterion or construct approaches, with little regard for broader consequential aspects. The question is not exclusively whether “an introduction to mechanics” resembles a taught course in that area, but also whether recognition of the candidate’s work results in her future success in studying physics, leads to degree completion, or contributes to greater diversity in the learning community.

Metaphor: Partial Alignment, Sustaining Tension

Traditional validity begins with an invitation to see one thing (construct) in terms of something different (an assessment instrument). If the invitation is accepted, the next stage is to determine the degree to which empirical evidence demonstrates an adequate and appropriate reasonable linkage between the comparison and the subsequent inferences made and actions taken. Metaphor also begins with an invitation: to see one thing as something else. Many linguistic and conceptual invitations are open – simile, metonym, allegory, symbolic and totemic systems – but metaphor is interesting because it insists that A is B, even although that is not literally true. What leads to a metaphoric comparison being accepted? What are the consequences of accepting the invitation?

While there are a number of competing claims as to how metaphor works, the most influential was put forward by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999). Consider saying that “love is a journey.” Lakoff (1993) explained that this conceptual metaphor can be understood as “a mapping (in a mathematical sense) of a source domain (in this case journey) on a target domain (in this case love) ... There are ontological correspondences, according to which entities in the domain of love ... correspond to entities in the domain of a journey” (p. 206-207). Conceptual mapping provides the opportunity for features in the source domain to be considered as novel and meaningful correspondences in the target. To say that “love is a journey” invites a number of considerations: destinations as goal for those in love; dislocation of traveling and the changing feelings of lovers; impediments and diversions encountered on the journey; and, the uncertainties and difficulties in the relationship.

Kittay (1995) suggested that metaphor could constitute a “rearrangement of the furniture in our minds” and that “we need to know our way about the unfamiliar arrangement in order to determine the points of coincidence with our own scheme” (p. 110). The unfamiliar and the rearrangement can have dramatic and productive effects. For example, in developing organizational theory, Cornelissen (2005) noted that conceptual metaphor can introduce a “heuristic quality in opening up new and multiple ways of seeing, conceptualizing, and understanding organizational phenomena” (p. 753). Yet, for these outcomes to materialize, the invitation extended by the metaphor must be accepted. Acceptance depends on intelligibility, in cognitive terms, and the degree to

which source and target domains are separated.

Cornelissen (2004, 2006a, 2006b) considered that conceptual metaphors are only effective in stimulating re-consideration if a tension exists between within-domain similarity and between-domain distance. If within-domain similarity is too close – or between-domain distance too great – the metaphor is rejected as trite or overly challenging. In an empirical investigation of metaphors linking organizations with the arts, for example, Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) found that “the between-domains distance of a metaphor does not need to be particularly high ... a ‘close’ distance between a domain such as theatre or jazz and organizations may already lead to meaningful and effective metaphorical comparisons” (p. 375).

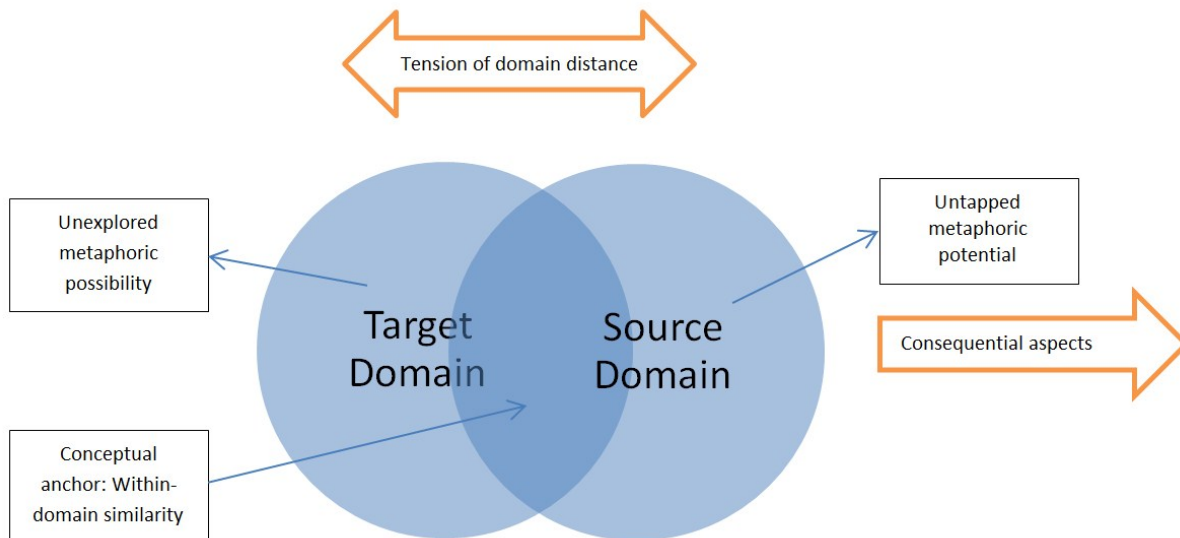


Figure 2. This diagram represents the distance, tension and equilibrium between source and target domains in a conceptual metaphor. Closer alignment diminishes the creative potential of the metaphoric contrast. Increased disparity, or conceptual distance, between source and target domains threatens metaphoric usefulness.

Figure 2 shows the degree of alignment between source (journey) and target (love) domains. These domains are cognitively anchored by an initial sense of similarity, which results from the metaphor selected and its cognitive processing. Target and source never completely overlap: love is not actually a journey. Instead, they maintain a dynamic equilibrium that keeps target and source close enough to generate new correspondences, distant enough to avoid triviality. Moving the source closer to the target may reveal previously untapped potential of the source (qualities of journeys) and the unexplored area of the target (new correspondences in love); however, there is an increasing resistance to that movement. In that creative tension – between meaningless distance and meaningless proximity – new insights materialize. The tension in metaphor is moderated by the degree of dissonance and provocation that the alignment creates; something, that diminishes as the metaphor becomes conventionally accepted and used.

Metaphor theorists Bowdle and Gentner suggested that while metaphors may initially have impact and regenerative properties, these fade as the metaphor slides into conventional language (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001). This decline in metaphor power is paralleled in the ways in which the metaphor is processed cognitively. In early stages, sense is made of the striking metaphor through active cross-domain mapping and comparison: cognitive processing is purposeful and dynamic. In later stages, the metaphor is recognized not as a dissonant juxtaposition but as a conventional way of speaking; cognitively, it is processed through categorization, with little cross-domain comparison taking place. Cognitively, the dissonance of the metaphor has been extinguished and it is now neither recognized nor processed as it once was. Interestingly,

Bowdle and Gentner suggested that one way of resuscitating a dying metaphor is to paraphrase it in terms of a direct comparison – to reconstruct it as a simile – when a “much richer analogy may be drawn. In essence, the simile form lays bare the original alignment from which the familiar expression was born” (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005, p. 213). When love has ceased to be a journey, a consideration of love as *being like* a journey might be more provocative and productive.

PLA and metaphor are linked because both assert that, despite the objective evidence to the contrary, *A is B*. In a literal world, such an assertion would be an error at best, a falsehood at worst. In a literary world, however, the claim might be accepted because it generates deeper and previously unrevealed qualities about what is being compared. When a PLA candidate produces a portfolio narrative that reflects on her experiences within the corporate world, she might give it the title “My Odyssey.” A PLA evaluator, looking at the discipline-generated description of “organizational behavior” might conclude that there is little appropriateness of fit. The candidate might be advised to rescript her narrative to more comprehensively fit her experience into the disciplinary template. From a literal perspective, there might be pressure to conform with, and thereby confirm, the authoritative disciplinary map. From a metaphoric perspective, however, the tensions between experiential and disciplinary maps often highlight *not* the “omissions” of the candidate, but the deficiencies of the disciplinary template.

Unlike validity, the usefulness of the metaphor is extinguished if too close an alignment is produced between the target and source. It is the tension that results in new understanding and changed meaning: conceptual metaphor is sustained, as is creative difference. PLA is invigorated if a tension is maintained through metaphoric, rather than literal, comparison. That tension, communicated and shared, is also at a disciplinary and institutional level, by allowing for a different insight into preexisting maps. Disciplinary maps can be safe havens for PLA evaluators, but disciplinary cartography can also be outdated and not reflect accumulated silt and new channels. The candidate’s experience is *not* the disciplinary template, just as “the map is not the territory.”

Prior Learning Assessment: Balancing Alignment and Regenerative Tension

Prior learning assessment is not a monolithic movement or a unified approach. It provides for a diversity of perspectives and motivations, both in the methodologies that it employs and the uses to which its products are put. Breier (2005) has recognized four differing orientations:

- *A technical/market orientation* focuses on the pragmatic advantages afforded to institutions and candidates when candidate prior experience is recast in terms of college-level equivalencies and analogs. This allows candidates to consolidate college-level equivalencies and use them for completing their college degrees in less time and at a lowered cost.
- *A critical/radical orientation* recognizes within candidate experience different ways of knowing that can be used to challenge institutions and allow them to consider broader perspectives of knowledge production. This approach is usually associated with related critical issues such as expanding learner inclusion, redressing prior histories of exclusion, social justice and learner empowerment.
- *A liberal/humanist orientation* considers reflection on prior experience to be a source of learner growth and transformational development. Prior experience is seen in terms of valuing personal experience, unique learning journeys, confronting change, learner transformation, and developing maturity in adult and life-long learners.
- *A disciplinary-specific orientation* recognizes the paradigmatic nature of existing mapped academic disciplines as symbolic and the product of canonic discourse and scripts. PLA becomes a way of comparing and contrasting disciplinary constructs and experience, often gained from communities of practice within which the discipline has a theoretical or nominal linkage. Different experience provides an opportunity for reconsidering and stimulating the academic discipline.

While each represents a different orientation, they collectively inform PLA process and outcome. Validity is an important consideration of each orientation, because those who engage in the PLA process require an

awareness of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of decisions that result from assessment outcomes. In a unified construct-based model of validation, the identified and relevant construct is located within the disciplinary domain, but just as importantly, it also examines the consequential aspects of relying on PLA outcomes. The process of seeking validity of PLA includes a clarification of the construct and its nomological network, and the degree to which this is represented in the candidate's experiential domain. Increased reasonableness and assurance hinges on moving toward a greater isomorphic overlap between the two; however, validity needs to focus on the degree of adequacy and appropriateness of consequential impact and results of the assessment.

Pursuing the logic of an objective-based methodology too assiduously will push PLA to interpret the candidate's narrative in terms of the authoritative scripts of prevailing disciplines. Increasingly, the reference for comparison between experience and academic credits awarded will be institutionally-generated course descriptions, subject matter expert's opinions and challenge tests that replicate conventional disciplinary understanding. All of this, however, neglects the unique experience of the candidate, her construction of knowledge, and subordinates her different-way-of-knowing to privileged scripts and discourses: the antithesis of what leads learners and institutions to embrace PLA. The validity model resonates with a technical/market and disciplinary-specific approach; however, pushed too far, it jars with the ethos of critical/radical and liberal/humanist approaches.

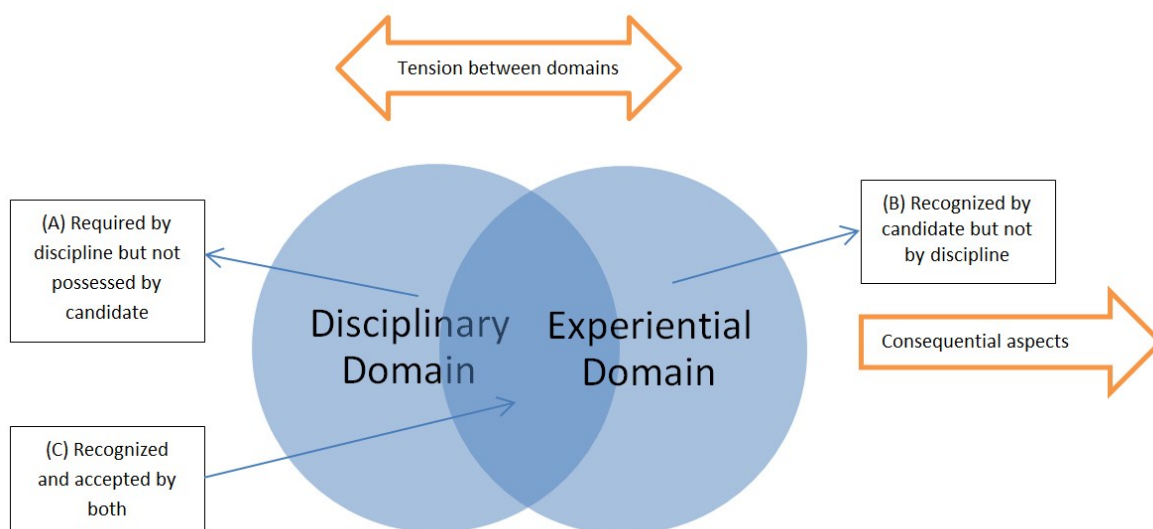


Figure 3. This diagram represents the comparison of experiential learning and disciplinary domain understanding in PLA. Construct-based validity logic will increase alignment, in which more of area “A” will be sought in the candidate’s claims and area “B” considered irrelevant. Metaphor-based logic will recognize the relevance of the comparison, but will not attempt to complete the alignment or reduce the between-domain tension.

Figure 3 suggests there are four validity opportunities that recognize and value a more artful PLA: in the disciplinary domain, experiential domain, measurement and comparison logic, and in recognizing the consequential aspects resulting from the assessment. This more artful non-literal approach to PLA is in line with critical/radical and liberal/humanist orientations. It also provide impetus to change in disciplinary-specific approaches although it might be seen as endangering a technical/market orientation that relies more heavily on external acceptance and confidence.

Disciplinary Domain

Comparisons are best attempted if there is a considered understanding of what is being compared, the reasons

for the comparison, and the results and inferences that can reasonably be drawn from the process. In PLA, comparison is made between experiential learning acquired in a work setting and learning that is disciplinary defined and institutionally situated. In traditionally-oriented validity work, the assumption is that the knowledge base and constructs of interest lie within some disciplinary domain: the PLA candidate must convincingly demonstrate that she can enter that domain. In traditional validity work, constructs of interest may – or may not – have been examined to see the extent to which they are embedded in a wider nomological network of disciplinary theory. Effectiveness of PLA assessment – with positive implications for validity – is judged on the extent to which disciplinary constructs are represented in the candidate’s portfolio (area A, Figure 3) and the degree to which “construct contaminants” are eliminated (area B).

A significant part of PLA thought is that traditional learning, and academically-defined disciplines, privilege some discourses, and exclude or fail to recognize others (Harris, 2000a, 2000b). A narrowly-defined validation in PLA over-privileges existing disciplinary-defined domains, accepting them in an uncontested manner, and viewing them as the exclusive comparison-standard in arriving at judgment decisions. In this approach, standardized tests, challenge exams and existing course curricula have all been used to establish credibility in PLA (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007, pp. 39-45).

Viewed differently, however, these areas of non-fit (areas A and B in the diagram) are not seen as deficits, or “contamination,” but rather as parts of a conceptual map that has not been shared or adopted by the discipline and the PLA candidate. As in metaphoric comparisons, these areas suggest further dialogue and increased meaning. That dialogue should be something that *both* the PLA candidate *and* the discipline might consider. The candidate might, in light of the evaluation, consider her experience through the lens of the discipline; the discipline might consider what her experience adds to a richer, more inclusive understanding of the subject.

Experiential Domain

The PLA candidate, in her portfolio, develops an articulation of her reflection on experiential learning. But is this *really* her articulation or *really* her experience? A frequent issue in portfolio construction, and in its subsequent analysis, is the advised transcription of experience into language that is considered potentially useful in the PLA process. Articulation of experiential learning may be limited by a lack of writing skills or organizational ability (Stenlund, 2010), or by a lack of familiarity with disciplinary language and scripts that resonate with disciplinary-centered evaluators (Starr-Glass, 2002).

Yet, at its core, the candidate’s portfolio should represent her unique experience and authentic reflection, shaped – but not distorted – in seeking academic consideration or employment qualifications. Portfolio development may be coached, or mentored, providing the candidate with a structural opportunity for reflection and self-analysis (Brown, 2002; Conrad, 2008). Often this structure provides support and encouragement, new learning opportunities, a framework for reflection and self-assessment, and transformative learning possibilities in the PLA candidate (Stevens,

Gerber, & Hendra, 2010). However, as noted, there is always the danger that structure and resulting narration will be shaped to conform to institutional ideals, pre-conceived requirement standards, and projected impact in the assessment process. Such considerations are helpful in PLA; however, the candidate in writing her portfolio can often be “caught between diversity and standardization” (Sweygers, Soetewey, Meeus, Struyf, & Pieters, 2009), or selectively portray experiential learning to conform with an institutionally “preferred identity” (Hamer, 2010).

Again, there are issues of alignment and tension. The PLA practitioner, in her mentoring, might attempt to provide the candidate with an understanding of the process of objective-based validation. She may also try to focus on a more artful approach, making use of a different appreciation of comparison in which metaphoric fit and explicit simile can generate productive tensions and new consideration. These consequences of

comparison might not be limited to the early stages of the PLA portfolio. Their inclusion, explicit and explained, might provide innovative opportunities for not only the candidate but for the institution, and for the disciplinary domains that exist within it.

Measurement Logic

There are three interconnected strands of logic in traditional validity work: reducing random or biased error in the test instrument (reliability); increasing construct representation; and, decreasing construct contamination. The process moves toward the convergence of construct and instrument, and away from the differences that separate them. In metaphor work, by contrast, there is a suspension of literal meaning and a superimposition of a new perspective through which the old can be viewed differently. The logic is to balance tension, allowing it to produce a new understanding that is neither resident in the target nor the source, and which was unappreciated before the comparison was suggested.

The difference in the logic sets of objective-based validity and metaphor parallel the ideas that Bryson (1982) put forward about the differences between Western and Eastern art. In the West, the dominant way of making sense of a representation is through what he calls “the logic of the gaze” where a prolonged focus is used to elucidate meaning, relationship and connection. The gaze focuses on the whole, identifying individual components without losing the sense that an isolated detail is an element of a unified composition.

In Eastern art, the dominant approach is what Bryson (1982) terms the “logic of the glance,” which “finds in itself no counterpart to the enduring, motionless and august logic of architectural form, since all it can take in is the fragment, the collage” (p. 122). The glance peripherally detects fragments and possibilities that suggest an emergent similarity that will fade if subjected to focused and critical scrutiny. The glance suggests composition and relationships, but these are tentative: a future glance might capture different arrangements, or convey different moods.

The logic of the gaze and the logic of the glance are not in competition. They afford alternative ways of making sense: of seeing credible similarity between subject and its representation, of making connections that transcend the literal presentation. Validity gravitates toward the logic of the gaze: metaphor inevitably invites the logic of the glance. In PLA assessment, the logic is somewhere between, preserving a balance of perspective that neither eliminates possible knowledge discovery by too much gazing nor produces idiosyncratic “image-ination.” The PLA challenge is to avoid the myopic gaze while not privileging the visionary glance. The opportunities lie in neither defending myopia nor vision, but in recognizing that somewhere between them is to be found the possibility of increased validity.

Consequential Aspects

Currently, validity is understood in terms of the use to which assessment results are put and the social and equity impacts that result from the assessment process. Kane (2008) argued that “an evaluation of social consequences can add a major dimension to validation by identifying systematic errors that might otherwise go unnoticed” (p. 30). He has also noted previously that “it will be useful to distinguish between interpretive arguments that lead only to descriptions and interpretive arguments that advocate certain actions ... and to recognize the differences in the kinds of evidence needed to validate these different interpretive arguments” (p. 338).

For validity to be advanced, a deeper understanding of consequential outcomes needs to be explored, as do the reactions, comments and academic experiences of PLA candidates. From a unified validity perspective, low assessment measures “should not occur because the assessment is missing something relevant to the focal construct that, if present, would have permitted the affected persons to display their competence ... [or] occur because the measurement contains something irrelevant that interferes with the affected person’s demonstration of competence” (Messick, 1995, p. 746). The myopic focus on similarity and equivalence might be more productively replaced by a broader measurement of the results of PLA, including how credit recognition has

furthered the academic progress of the candidate or brought about the inclusion and diversity that is often a significant objective of PLA. In other words, many might consider that the mission and vision of PLA is directed at least as much towards its “consequential aspects” as it is to narrowly defined understandings of equivalency. PLA assessment can be stultified by a lack of institutional awareness, or commitment, to broader consequences. In such cases, PLA “acts as a technical exercise and an assessment tool ... [and has] created a system of exclusion, normalization and governing” (Andersson & Guo, 2009, p. 436).

In her extensive review of validity issues in PLA, Stenlund (2010) noted that “universities often lack a real commitment to tackling the issue of widening access and that a change in organizational culture might be needed for PLA to be successful” (p. 793). Evaluating the impact, and consequences of assessment results, requires more careful theoretical consideration and empirical study. It requires inclusion of the social and equity concerns of all stakeholders in the process: PLA candidates, disciplinary communities of knowledge, institutions of higher learning, and their accrediting agencies and constituent publics. Evaluating impact needs to address the subsequent academic success, or otherwise, of PLA candidates through longitudinal studies that assess the impact and consequences of accepting PLA assessments. It needs to more carefully appreciate the experiences of PLA candidates, their perceptions and their reactions as they move through the process and as they continue along their educational pathways. Lastly, evaluating impact needs to review the long-term changes and accommodations of institutions and their disciplinary units through contact with those working in PLA and the different perspectives that they bring to the college.

Conclusion and After Thoughts

Prior learning assessment explores ways of learning and kinds of knowledge that differ from those traditionally produced within the educational establishment. Appreciating the commonalities between candidate experiences and disciplinary maps confirms and consolidates understandings, and results in the award of credits to the candidate. Differences between presented experience and assumed standards can also produce utility for the individual, and for institutionally-based communities of disciplinary learning. Perceived through the comparison of metaphor, the PLA candidate can come to a better understanding of the disciplinary domain, while disciplinary subject matter experts can gain an appreciation of what might be lacking in their maps of discipline expectations. To prompt disciplinary reconsideration, PLA must be seen as a core element in the institution’s mission, not a limited or marginalized peripheral activity.

- *Validity is a critical and pervasive issue in PLA.* More research and empirical studies are required to consider claims for validity through a unified construct-based model. These efforts might more profitably address not only what is being compared, but the reasonableness and appropriateness of the consequential actions and resulting decision. Simplistic, and deficient, validation models that ignore the complexities of consequential aspects – inclusion, diversity, power and privilege – can skew the process into a replication of look-alike course equivalents and challenge exams, in a myopic quest for alignment. Validity often appears to be connected with technical/market orientations toward PLA. However, validity – in terms of credibility and external agreement – is critical for all who engage in PLA, irrespective of their preferred or espoused philosophies.
- *Consequential impacts for multiple stakeholders.* Validity will continue to be an aspect of PLA that requires consideration; indeed, it will undoubtedly become more important in the future. Validity is connected with reliability, but whereas reliability depends on the reduction of error associated in measuring “something,” validity relates to the nature of that “something.” Validity work tries to balance the consequential impact for all PLA stakeholders: those who engage in the assessment process, and those who rely on the outcomes for decision-making. These impacts – decisions and actions taken – will confront institutions as much as PLA practitioners and candidates. There are multiple stakeholders, each with different concerns and agendas. Balancing their interest, and satisfying their concerns, can only be accomplished if PLA is better understood, conducted transparently, amenable to reflective adaptation, and capable of engaging effectively with the educational institution and its disciplinary units.
- *PLA is irreducible to a single orientation.* All of the different aspects of PLA – technical/market, radical/

critical, liberal/humanist and disciplinary-specific – have to be kept in mind in validity work. Some institutions and individual PLA practitioner have a preferred orientation; however, PLA as a process is too rich and too important to be reduced to a single dimension. It should not become a narrow technical exercise of checking appropriate boxes. While there is pragmatic comfort in focusing on such narrow definitions of PLA, the “validity” measure that they commonly support is partial and problematic. Equally, PLA cannot be hijacked as a critical/radical vehicle that overextends the limits and credibility of metaphor at the expense of the candidate’s academic future, employment or her authentic legitimacy as an individual.

- *Internal tension is to be expected and valued.* Tension, which might be experienced initially as jarring contradiction or intractable paradox, should be accepted. The objective is not to prematurely reduce tension in an attempt to conform to a narrowly-defined concept of validity, based on criterion or construct preference. Neither is it to introduce unnecessary fuzziness and vague comparison through the over-reaching use of metaphor. The object is to see the multi-varied nature of comparative logics and to establish an equilibrium that respects their virtues, limitations and synergisms. The object is to see contradiction and difference in the learner, who brings different experiences and different understanding to the assessment process. Tension is inherent and productive. The dynamics of the PLA process tend to reduce this tension to produce agreement and consensus; however, the premature elimination of tension is unwise. It is better to appreciate the reasons for the tension in partial alignments, and to recognize that internal tensions within the PLA process can be the source of new understanding, increase awareness and creative innovation.
- *PLA assessment requires openness, collaboration and shared consideration.* Disciplinary-based understandings can only be challenged and invigorated by PLA if the process of assessment is developed within a team setting, in which dialogue and exchange can be allowed to exist. Rather than being cast in the role of “subject matter experts,” disciplinary scholars should be allowed the time and resources to work in portfolio development and assessment, thus exposing them to the possibility of productive difference and dissimilarity. In PLA work, benefits exist for disciplines to re-search – to look again with fresh eyes and cleared minds – themselves; however, the degree to which PLA might contribute positively to this process is undoubtedly disciplinary specific. In some institutions, PLA is a peripheral activity; in others, it resonates with an educational outlook that values openness, flexibility and inclusion. Centers for PLA should not be isolated places of technical analysis, but places for exploring assessment as part of institutional goals. Dedicated PLA units, integrated into the broader collegiate community, can provide creativity, innovation, and constructive rethinking and serve as centers for faculty development.
- *Uncovering the unexpected, not confirming the status quo.* PLA profits from being understood as an artful consideration of learner experience, rather than a confirmation of disciplinary-based and institutionally-legitimized knowledge. The undertaking is not to find what we expect to find, but to discover what we might not be looking for. Through that discovery – shared and considered – there may be possibilities for regeneration within the academy, especially in a time of growing diversity, expanding experience and defensive boundary drawing. The disciplinary community of learning, through the PLA process, can access and explore issues that might be useful in their commitment to knowledge expansion. Similarly, PLA candidates exposed to a process that balances reasonableness and appropriateness with innovation and difference might be able to make better continuing and subsequent use of that process in the ongoing transformations within the college or workplace (Starr-Glass, 2012).

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