

Shifting Grounds: An Interview with Pamela Tate

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Pamela Tate has been the president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) since 1990, during which time she has led many national and international efforts to work with business, government, labor and postsecondary education to provide academic and employment opportunities for working adults. She has received honorary doctorates from SUNY Empire State College, DePaul University's School for New Learning, Thomas Edison State College and from St. Leo University. In 2013, Pamela Tate was awarded the President's Medal from Excelsior College in recognition of her continued dedication to expanding opportunities for adult learners. Among her numerous professional activities, she currently serves on the board of trustees of Excelsior College, and is a member of the Commission on Quality Assurance and Alternative Higher Education, formed in 2013 by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

Nan Travers: Can you describe some of the key trends that you see regarding the role of PLA and workforce development?

Pamela Tate: Workforce development has had a longtime focus on getting people into jobs immediately, instead of retraining and education, and instead of exploring how to take learning from a prior job and translate that learning to acquire a new job or demonstrate transferrable skills. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has been trying to help different industries use prior learning assessment to help individuals transition to new jobs.

Alan Mandell: Can you describe some examples of this kind of work?

P.T.: When the NUMMI [New United Motor Manufacturing Inc.] plant in California shut down, many of the manufacturing workers had been there for a long time. At that point, all of these workers had to find new jobs in other manufacturing areas or jobs in completely different industries. We had a team of staff who worked with the employees to help them define and describe the skills and knowledge they had been using in their jobs, what kinds of competencies they had gained on the job, and how to break these down into categories that would be understandable to new employers. We created a skills and competency map to help the workers and new employers understand what the workers knew and could do. We helped them create resumes or competency-based work histories. These were used by the workers to get re-employed in other industries in the vicinity. Some of the workers eventually decided that they needed formal credentials and to engage in new learning, so they attended a local higher education institution, but most individuals used this process to catalog current skills and competencies and moved to new settings to apply them.

Another example of how CAEL has used prior learning assessment in a workforce development partnership is when we partnered with the Indiana State Department of Workforce Development office that oversees the whole workforce development system in the state. The department made prior learning assessment a coverable expense within the Workforce Investment Act [WIA] after we pointed out that there is nothing in the 1998 WIA legislation that prohibits paying for prior learning assessment out of WIA funds. Prior to this, none of the

states understood that WIA funds could be used for PLA or had used it for that purpose.

N.T.: This seems to be a significant breakthrough.

P.T.: Yes: Why not save the workforce, the state and the taxpayers of Indiana money by allowing individuals to use WIA funds for college credits obtained through PLA if they wanted to go to a community college or a four-year college as part of their training and retraining? This would allow individuals to obtain credentials that were portable – credentials they could take with them to their next job. It took us about a year of work to rewrite the regulatory language and to help the Indiana State Department of Workforce Development write the advisory letter to their offices across the state to inform them that they could use WIA funds for PLA through either a college or a third party, such as LearningCounts. Now, all the workforce development career center offices across the state have the permission to pay for PLA through federal funds. And that *is* a big deal! Indiana is the first state to allow federal workforce funds to pay for PLA. This work is now being used to demonstrate to other state workforce investment systems that PLA is something that should be used for individuals who have significant college-level learning from prior work, but have no way to have that learning recognized.

A.M.: Does this mean that, in addition to LearningCounts, there are different institutions in Indiana that will offer individuals the ability to have their prior learning evaluated?

P.T.: Exactly. This wasn't designed just for LearningCounts, but for all institutions in the state that want to offer PLA opportunities to people and have the preparatory courses and assessments paid for by WIA funds. It's trying to get your nose under the tent of federal support.

A.M.: Where do you see the trends moving and what are the resulting tensions in using PLA for workforce development?

P.T.: There is more of a focus on recognizing competencies and prior learning for formal credentials than there was just five years ago. For example, when we worked in California, we worked for one of the workforce development boards, since they were interested in transferrable competencies. From that work, what seems to have evolved is a growing awareness among those in the public workforce development system that we are talking about something that is much bigger than just helping individuals get their next job, but that it takes all the learning that an individual has, not just for the next job, but for employability in the long term. That often involves new training and credentials, as well as transferring skills from one job to the next.

There also is a greater recognition overall for the need to complete formal credentials, maybe because President Obama and leading foundations have placed an emphasis on it. I am not absolutely positive of what has shifted the discussion, but certainly a lot has shifted. An example of how it has changed is that there is a major focus on the part of state legislatures and governors in many states on obtaining formal credentials for the workforce. This may be a result of all the data provided by Tony Carnevale and the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce.¹ We see a huge push on postsecondary credentials on the part of the employers as well. Regardless, the ground has shifted.

N.T.: Up to this point in the United States, PLA is still focused on assessing learning for college credits rather than for formal recognition toward workplace certifications. Do you have a sense that there will be changes in this country in the ways that PLA can be used?

P.T.: Up to this point, we have been focused on changing regulations to allow Workforce Investment Act funds to be used toward PLA for college credits. However, last October, I attended the launch of the ACT Foundation, which is a new foundation that comes out of ACT's endowment. At the launch, 15 different industries were there, many of which are working on the issue of industry certification that is skill- and

competency-based and is not involved with higher education at all. Probably the one that is out there most visibly is the Manufacturing Institute of NAM (National Association of Manufacturers). They have developed the NAM Skills Certification System,² which is very much, I think, similar to work done in other countries. This system lays out the basic skills and competencies needed to move up a pyramid of certifications needed in NAM industries. These are industry-based certifications, not issued through higher education institutions.

There is a lot of interest at the foundation level for alternative routes to credentialing, while they also are interested in degree completion on the higher education side. The two things are growing up and expanding side by side. We are saying to both the industries and foundations we work with that we want to give the worker an option to have both industry certification *and* college credit. Wouldn't that make sense? What if they changed their job or faced any number of things that can happen in their lives? They could have a degree *and* a certification recognized by industry – that would be the best for the worker, wouldn't it?

N.T.: Many of the states have targeted advanced manufacturing in their TAACCCT [Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program] grants. Do you see some of this integration emerging from these projects?

P.T.: The TAACCCT grants are where some of this work is occurring. We are involved in about 12 of the consortia for TAACCCT, and in at least half of them, this same phenomenon is happening. Our role is to enable the colleges to identify the competencies necessary for working with the manufacturers and to link these competencies together with the curriculum in a meaningful way. In this manner, higher education can figure out how to integrate the advanced manufacturing competencies into their own programs and, at the same time, the industries can integrate the college program competencies into their industry frameworks.

A.M.: Do you find that the higher education institutions are interested in this kind of “integration”?

P.T.: They are, but often they don't understand what this is all about. One of the activities in which we're involved is providing assistance to faculty and administrators on these new directions and helping these institutions move forward. This often requires curricular changes to work effectively with industry certifications, and it requires industries to develop a competency-based model.

A.M.: Do you see a difference in approaches based on the types of institutions?

P.T.: Yes, on the technical side of the house, community colleges seem to have a greater awareness of how to break up courses into competencies and statements of learning outcomes and to work with industry in a collaborative fashion. However, for the rest of higher education institutions, I think there is a lot of real basic work that still needs to be done on what competency-based, industry-oriented education means and how it impacts curricular development. I do think, though, that this notion of assessing competencies, with an industry certification notion in mind, and pulling the two together is gaining a little traction, regardless of whether it is a four-year or a two-year institution. I see a huge growth in interest on these issues across all types of institutions.

N.T.: Even with the desire, do we have the expertise to make it happen?

P.T.: I would say no. I think we are in the early stages of that. That is why we want to do the competency-based work at 20 or 30 institutions and begin to train a cadre of faculty that understand how to bring those two things together. We have a Lumina grant to do this and we have the TAACCCT projects that we are involved in. Between these projects, we hope to move the capacity to integrate higher education and industry forward.

I think we are in a changing landscape, and I think right now, the concepts of prior learning assessment, competency-based assessment and workplace-learning assessment are all jumbled up in people's minds. I also

believe that the two will become more aligned. This is the real fundamental piece of work that has to be done.

Notes

- ¹ Publications from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce can be found at cew.georgetown.edu/publications.
- ² The publication, *Developing Skilled Workers*, can be accessed at <http://mydigitalrendition.com/publication/?i=187979>.