Some colleges and universities use the course-match or the course-challenge model; other PLA/RPL models are built around a more open-ended process in which legitimate college-level learning does not have to fall within a pre-existing course template. What do you think are some of the strengths and limitations of each of these orientations to PLA/RPL?

Morry Fiddler of DePaul University's School for New Learning and the *PLAIO* board responds:

The question has several paths into landing on a judgment about these orientations. It leads me first to the notion that assessment is always done in a context. If the context is one in which there is an agreed upon, prescribed set of capabilities or body of knowledge (as may be the case with some certifications and, too, those "certified" capacities are bottled in courses), then it makes first line sense that a course-match or challenge model is probably the most direct and appropriate model for evaluating creditable learning.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the premise that as citizens of the world, we rarely, if ever, learn what we learn, or know what we know in organized course "packages." But we may well learn and know at levels of complexity that would fit at least most models or definitions of "higher level learning," a subset of which we call "college level." Thus, the context for the assessment shifts to the individual -- her life, her professional or community needs, her interests, etc. In such a context, the course-based model for credit becomes quite limiting.

However, it is between these two contexts that lies the vast majority of the academic culture, which means that we have the responsibility, if not always the authority, to determine what is creditable. Given a long course-centric history, it's little wonder that we have built our assessment models around the course unit. Do we locally, yet alone universally, have agreements on what constitutes college-level learning? Often -- usually -- we do not. Do we have sufficient agreement on bodies of knowledge or capabilities that are comparable to professional or other organized bodies of capacities that constitute "certifications"? Some faculty may say yes, others no; hence, once again, we have a spectrum of contexts in which assessment occurs.

There are other considerations to this question as well, a few of which may be best framed as questions. For example, to what extent are experiential learning and learning-from-experience integral elements of the curriculum so that PLA is simply an extension of the curricular philosophy; that is, to what extent is PLA a significant part of the curriculum, not apart from it? What is the meaning of "credit," and is there sufficient agreement such that we can award it without the boundaries of a course to tell us when credit has been earned? Or, what is the purpose of PLA in our programs or institutions; is it a marketing tool for the adult "target audience"? Is it a vehicle to engage people in reflective practices as the bridge from the events in their lives to what they may have learned from them? Is it a strategy for promoting social justice where inequities in opportunities have been institutionalized?

Thus, while the question of turning to a course-based or any other kind of assessment model may seem primarily an operational one (part of our particular institutional PLA/RPL strategy), I find that a little patience with the question turns up a whole landscape of thought about our values, intentions, beliefs and assumptions -- and about their alignment with what we want and claim to do.