

Considering Prior Learning as a Valuable Pedagogy of Practice

By Laurien Alexandre¹

Much of the focus of the International Working Group on Community Change Education these past 18 months has been on examining pedagogies that encourage reflection, honor experience, and inspire change agency. One of the pedagogies most relevant to these goals is the inclusion of **experiential learning** at the core of the educational model which a number of IWG members discuss in their papers. However, one aspect of experiential learning that deserves more attention, especially when taking into account the wealth of experience that community organizers and change practitioners bring before entering higher education institutions as undergraduates or graduates, is *prior* learning, the knowledge and skills learners have acquired in workplaces and communities.

This paper explores the nature of prior learning both in the United States and internationally, it examines best practices and discusses the obstacles in gaining more acceptance at institutions of higher education.

What Is Prior Learning Assessment?

Prior Learning Assessment (also referred to as Recognition of Prior Learning, or Assessment of Prior Learning) is a flexible way of earning college credits for college-level knowledge that students have acquired outside a traditional college classroom. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is the mechanism for individuals to receive recognition within higher education for their prior learning. “It reflects the belief that adults can learn in a variety of contexts outside educational institutions, such as paid or unpaid work, and that this learning may be broadly equivalent to that gained formally in an educational institution” (Castle & Atwood: 61). The assessment, award, and transfer of credits for prior learning takes many forms and is complex because of “the need for transportability of credits, the increasing openness to extra-institutional learning, and the transfer and award of credit between dissimilar institutions”(Gambescia & Dagavarian: 38).

Common to all definitions of the assessment of prior learning is the notion that all learning should be recognized and accredited, irrespective of whether it occurred inside or outside formal education structures. This is especially relevant if one thinks, for example, of community organizers and activists, given what they learn in terms of the assessment of community needs, project management, coalition building and the like.

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“There is a growing awareness that learning from experience, gained in a variety of contexts including work, politics, and civil society, should be more substantially acknowledged and rewarded, especially in educational institutions” (Castle & Atwood: 61). This suggests that university-level learning can take place outside the university and this learning can be articulated and evidenced and should be formally recognized. Acceptance and assessment of prior learning is a sound academic practice that benefits adult learners in many ways.

At the undergraduate level, PLA is widely accepted in the United States. In fact, the origins of assessment of prior learning can be traced to the US, which has had a fairly longstanding recognition of learning beyond the classroom. By the early 1990s, more than 1,200 US colleges offered some form of assessment of prior learning (Trowler; 1996; 18). For many of these institutions, PLA is a complement to traditional classroom approaches, in that it allows for flexible earning of course credit for a range of students, particularly undergraduate adult students who seek efficiency and flexibility. PLA provides opportunity and access to students not traditionally served by higher education, and provides formats for learning opportunities that are convenient for students and accommodate their lifestyles. The essence of PLA practice in this regard is flexibility and serving adult learners.

For other institutions, PLA is embedded in a more robust adult-learner-centered ethos, which is a “pervasive perspective that influences the teaching and learning process” itself such that teaching/learning is student centered, active, experiential and built upon theories and philosophies of adult learning (Mancuso; 174). In that context, with its emphasis on learning experientially, and integrating theory and practice/work, programs use multiple modes of non-classroom based learning, such as internships, service learning, field study, individualized learning contracts, and prior learning assessment.

In some cases and places, PLA is seen as a way to address social inequalities since many marginalized peoples have been excluded from higher education and this is one mechanism to re-dress and level the playing field. By awarding credit for life/work-based learning, more individuals are able to take advantage of higher education recognition. (See this paper’s section on South Africa’s PLA).

In a politically astute critique, authors Armsby, Costley & Garnett argue “We propose that the field of work-based learning need not align itself with either the vocation/employer dimension, which is being funded and promoted at government and other powerful levels or the traditional academic culture that is skeptical about practical/pragmatic areas of higher education curriculum...Neither vocationalism nor knowledge hierarchy need be at the centre of work-based learning as a field of study” (382). They suggest it is a way to express agency against hegemonic powers and to be a source of intellectual freedom for change.

It is important to state at the outset that PLA does not refer to credit for the experience; rather, it is credit for the learning from the experience! Yet there is a continuum as discussed by Trowler (1996) in his “Angels in marble? Accrediting prior experiential learning in higher education.” On one end of the PL continuum is credit in a sort of **exchange model** of prior learning -- a skills notion of competence matched with

planned learning outcomes of an accredited program offered by an institution. These program-specified competencies can already be shown to be achieved through demonstrations such as tests or other evidence.

COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

On the other end of the PL continuum is what Trowler refers to as the **developmental model**, which has the additional and critical element of requiring the student to reflect on and evaluate their previous experience. Thus it includes the specific learning from the experience, the evidence to support the claims of learning, and extended reflective writing in which the student shows what s/he has learned and how it meets the criteria.

The developmental model is embedded in the teaching/learning approach that asserts that it is reflection that leads to knowledge generation. It is based on the work of David Kolb, an American educational theorist. Kolb's theory of experiential learning involves a cycle of four processes – concrete experience, reflection and observation of the experience, abstract concepts drawn from the experience, and active experimentation. All of these must be present for learning to occur.

In the context of PLA, Kolb's model means that students first discuss the concrete experience, then go beyond describing it to connecting knowledge with the experience. The second component is observation and reflection, in which students explain the acquired knowledge, provide examples and make connections with the knowledge as applied to new situations. The third part is conceptualization that requires students to provide evidence of comprehension in their documentation. Students have to articulate with understanding what this means. The fourth process requires students to demonstrate their ability to generalize learning to new situations and environments. Kolb has provided a systematic tool for faculty to assess students' prior learning and for students to demonstrate the knowledge they have obtained from life experience (Fenwick & Heffernan).

At the heart of these differences on the continuum are epistemological differences about how knowledge is acquired, how skills are measured, how learners are motivated and the like. Obviously, institutions that establish PLA components need to be clear about their own purposes and positioning on these issues. Higher education institutions need to establish clear guidelines about the assessment of that prior learning based on institutional mission and purpose – be it at undergraduate or graduate level, and be it more focused on vocationalism and/or focused on social equality. The next section of this report discusses the typology of prior learning.

Categories of Prior Learning

In Prior Learning Assessment, students demonstrate college-level knowledge. Students are typically asked to think about areas in their lives in which they have gained knowledge that satisfies college-level learning. There are a number of different types of prior learning, its assessment and the subsequent awarding of credit or advanced standing. Some, such as accepting transfer credit from other institutions, are such a common practice in higher education that they are rarely discussed in terms of the debate over prior learning.

There are five categories of PL, according to Gambescia & Dagavarian (40), which are described below.

1. *Awarding transfer or awarding of credit from a regionally accredited institution* – This is the most common type of prior learning credit award. Basically it is a transcript review of learning from another institution. Institutions accept in “good faith” with the understanding that courses may not be absolutely equivalent to their own but they are of equivalent value.

2. *Awarding transfer or awarding of credit for advanced standing from an accredited (but not regionally accredited) post-secondary institution* for formal documented learning at the college level. This is basically the same as the first, but often involves a non-regionally accredited institution such as a seminary, or a technical or professional school, etc. Since regional accreditation in the United States “certifies” that academic coursework meets a certain expectation, alternative types of accrediting bodies may have different standards and there may be great variance. So the credit-awarding institution often establishes additional requirements of documentation and assessment before awarding credit or advanced standing.

3. *Awarding of credits (or advanced standing) through course challenge exams sponsored by department.* This enables students to take an exam or other mode to advance more quickly to another level of learning. The department challenge exam is valid because it is designed by faculty who teach at the institution and who know what they want students to have learned through completion of a course.

4. *Awarding of credits (or advanced standing) by taking nationally recognized standardized exams* that assess content knowledge of college-level courses such as College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANES Subject Standardized Tests, Advanced Placement Exams (AP), etc. This is a very common approach in adult completion undergraduate programs. Students take these exams at scheduled, proctored sites and the scores are then used by the institution to indicate college-level course knowledge achievement.

5. *Awarding of credits (or advanced standing) for formal and well-documented training programs conducted by non-collegiate sponsors* such as tests, certification examinations or certificates that are recognized by, for example, the American Council of Education, for which the institution may choose to award credit or advanced standing. That decision is entirely based on the institution and is not required by any state or federal regulations.

6. *Awarding of credits (or advanced standing) from assessment of prior learning gained from work/life experience.* This often takes the form of a portfolio or experiential reflective essay or a set of documentations in which the student assesses his/her learning and demonstrates that it meets substantive college-level course learning.

In the US, most of these types of prior learning pose few problems for higher education institutions in that they rest in accredited institutions and lean more towards equivalency competencies. It is the learning from informal venues – workplaces, volunteerism and the like (especially as stated in #5 and #6), that are the most challenging for higher education. It is this last form of PL that stirs controversy, and the one which this report is

devoted to exploring.

COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

Standards for Prior Learning Assessment

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a US pioneer in the field of prior learning assessment, has taken the lead for over four decades in articulating the philosophical basis for PLA as well as developing a set of policies and procedures for performing it in an academically sound manner. Today, in response to the unique needs of adult learners, colleges nationwide conduct prior learning assessment and use the CAEL models as their guide to quality assurance.

CAEL has identified the Ten Standards for Assessing Experiential Learning, which are foundational and referenced by virtually all institutions that have PL systems. The standards are as follows (Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker: 2006):

- Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
- Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
- Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
- The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
- Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
- If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
- Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being

served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

Relatedly, the six US-based regional accrediting bodies have adopted guidelines addressing prior learning assessment. It would be valuable to see if the accrediting bodies in other countries have also established PLA guidelines. Typical of the US-based guidelines are those set forth by the Task Force for the North Central Association, and adopted by its Board of Trustees on June 22, 2000. These state:

- Make clear basic principles and values held by the institution regarding credit for prior learning
- Provide explicit guidelines as to what is considered college level learning
- Make clear that credit can be awarded only for demonstrated college-level learning, not for experience per se.
- Specify clearly and unambiguously the standards of acceptable performance in each academic area.
- Specify what form the claim for credit should take, e.g. course equivalent, competency list.
- Insure that evaluation of learning is undertaken by appropriately qualified persons.
- Indicate the appropriate form such as semester hours, course units, etc., the evaluator's credit recommendation should take.
- Specify which degree requirements may be met by prior learning.
- Specify how credit for prior learning will be recorded.
- Define and articulate roles and responsibilities of all persons connected with the assessment process.
- Develop procedures to monitor and assure fair and consistent treatment of students.
- Develop clearly stated assessment policies and descriptive information for students, faculty, administrators, and external sources.
- Include provisions for periodic re-evaluation of policies and procedures for assessing learning and awarding credit.
- Advise students that the institution cannot guarantee the transferability of prior learning credits to another institution.
- Develop evaluation procedures of overall prior learning assessment program to ensure quality (Task Force Report; 7).

Paucity of Research About PLA's

There is little empirical research on the impact of prior learning on learners and/or on higher education institutions. A more thorough review could be done that may produce richer documentation. Clearly, this is an area for future research by scholars and practitioners interested in supporting adult learning and the successful education of community organizers and other change agents.

Anecdotal or institution-specific information does exist, such as the following statement on the website of Thomas Edison State College, one of the institutions discussed later in this document. It reports that

“More than 90 percent of the PLA applicants are successful in their attempts to earn college credits. While this is about the same success rate as in traditional classroom study as reported by conventional colleges, Thomas Edison State College believes it represents a more impressive achievement because PLA students are directing their own course of education to a much greater extent.”

One substantive source of research on prior learning is a 1999 report produced by a consortium of seven Canadian colleges, *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (Aarts, Blower, et al: 1999). The 189-page report examines characteristics of PLA learners, identifies different types of PLA activities in Canadian institutions, analyzes the effects of PLA on students and the institutions, and compares the costs of credits achieved through PLA with those produced through traditional course delivery. Among the major findings (1999; ix):

- Adult learners do have educationally relevant, college-level prior learning that can be successfully assessed;
- The average course grades of PLA learners are as high or higher than those of traditional students in the same programs. PL students’ pass rates were higher. They took more courses than traditional students and graduated at a higher rate. And, their graduation grade point averages were slightly higher than traditional students;
- PL strengthened adult learners’ confidence and represented important efficiencies for part-time adult learners by shortening their programs, reducing course load, and reducing costs;
- A motivating factor behind support for PL at all institutions reviewed was a strong faculty-based commitment to adult learner;
- PLAs are an effective tool to market college programs to potential students over the age of 30 years;
- The delivery of PLA has not been economical for some institutions. The “new learner” who would not attend college if it were not for PLA may not have materialized to the extent originally anticipated;
- Early benefits from PLA within institutions diminished over time due to restructuring, attrition, budget cuts and emphasis on other reform initiatives;
- There is a need for greater public awareness of PL geared toward workplaces, occupational associations and sectoral organizations.

Obstacles & Challenges – The institutional, the academic, the political

Higher education is replete with debates over whether prior learning can be as rigorous as course-based learning, whether assessment can be as valid, whether real learning occurs. The more traditional and hierarchical the university, and the more heavily faculty-centered (versus learner-centered), the less welcoming the institution will be to prior learning. Prior learning assessment programs are most frequently present in institutions that are: deeply focused on the adult learning, have an academic culture focusing on flexibility, engage adult-centered learning practices, and value learning from experience.

In an effort to explore the range of academic and institutional obstacles, this section

briefly touches on epistemological challenges, institutional challenges, academic culture challenges, and individual learner/assessor challenges.

To start with, the epistemological challenge resides in the debate over the source of knowledge and where it happens. In order for an institution and its faculty to value PLA, informal, work-based/life-based learning must be recognized. This challenges the notion that traditional higher education institutions have a monopoly on knowledge; it also challenges notions about how and where adults learn. This is almost akin to a primordial challenge because if one refuses to acknowledge the nature and power of learning outside of the formal classroom then no amount of standards and documentation will convince otherwise. “Awarding credit for a wide range of experiential learning greatly empowers the individual learner” and at the same time challenges the university monopoly as the provider of high status learning” (Armsby, Costley & Garnett; 370). At institutions where PLA is valued, there is a multi-dimensional view that learning comes through the academy, through work, and through personal life.

Whatever the epistemological debate, another challenge addresses the role of the university and its structures. Many current practices of higher education are ill-adapted to the needs of adult learners – such as flexibility in calendar, academic content, modes of instruction and the like. Taking PLA to the extreme would mean a “de-institutionalization of knowledge” and could be a radical break from traditional models of knowledge production held by universities and faculty. More and more universities do grant a degree of freedom within existing structures to recognize knowledge and learning that arises from work-based experience and that has been reflected upon by the practitioner-student. Typically, however, this means that PLA needs to be ‘codified’ and ‘captured’ in ways that are consistent with the norms of higher education, such as units, course-level objectives and the like.

Another related component of institutional challenge relates to the fact that universities receive tuition for student learning and -- if the learning takes place elsewhere -- the institution receives less tuition-generated income, which can have a negative impact on the university’s finances.

However, higher education is organized, another challenge is the power academic disciplines wield to construct knowledge and specify kinds of discourse. We become subjects of a particular discourse and validate learning though it because knowledge is understood within the same controlling disciplinary paradigm. This raises all sorts of challenges. As noted by Armsby, Costley & Garnett in one of their paper’s vignettes, “Some assessors, who are subject specialists, find it difficult to envisage how their theoretical subject knowledge looks in practice. They also have difficulty when the claim includes some of the subject knowledge, and not other elements of it” (373). Sometimes work-based learning is not easily recognizable through a subject discipline because it is more general often interdisciplinary learning, and is not subject to specific discipline credit. Academics often tend to consider and accredit that which is familiar through their subject-specific lens.

Another challenge to the acceptance of and recognition of PL has to do with culturally specific ways of text and judgment – where dominant conceptions of the right way to communicate in academia, for example, may not align with the student’s style or form of

learning. Everything from the students' choice of words to the assessors' personal and professional stance directly impact the recognition and awarding of credit. Assessment is a system based on interpretation of standards, and this always leaves open the question of whose standards and whose interpretation.

At the most radical end of the continuum, valuing Prior Learning Assessment, in the ways consistent with the discussion of the International Working Group, would confront many of these above-stated institutional challenges and traditional academic practices.

Examples from US and elsewhere

In the US, PLA became fairly well-established beginning in the 1970s and it has been recognized to different degrees around the world since the 1980s. This section of the report shares brief snapshots of some global approaches including South Africa, which is a relative newcomer.

A. UNITED STATES EXAMPLES

1. Community Colleges

Two-year community colleges (often vocational in orientation) typically serve adult students, often from first-to-enter-college families, and many who are disenfranchised from the educational system. Community colleges are also places where many community organizers and activists would likely find a receptive entrance to their higher education studies. For this population, prior learning is a valuable component for access and credit. Community colleges believe that adults are life-long learners who actively construct knowledge from experience; and therefore, assessment of prior learning for credit is an integral part of their educational process. Many community colleges have special courses that help guide students through the process of identifying, documenting and assessing their prior learning.

As but one of thousands of examples, well-known Sinclair Community College, Ohio, has the Sinclair Community College Academic Credit Assessment information Centre, which helps students explore nontraditional ways to assess learning and earn credit for college courses, including AP program, CLEP, and DANTES, and portfolios. Note that this program reflects the full range of prior learning assessment categories mentioned previously in this paper.

2. Universities

There are literally hundreds of examples of a four-year colleges and universities that offer prior learning assessment for credit. This section briefly looks at a few examples of institutions where prior learning is embedded in undergraduate learning, as opposed to being an add-on to a traditional model. Some of the leaders in the field are DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL), Thomas Edison State College (New Jersey), and Empire State College (New York) and Antioch University (campuses in California, Washington, New Hampshire and Ohio).

DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL), established in 1972, has degree

programs based on a set of stipulated competencies. Students must demonstrate the learning they have acquired in relations to the learning outcomes articulated in the SNL competence framework before credit can be awarded. An example is SNL's Bachelor of Arts degree program, which is defined by 50 statements of competence. Taken together these statements describe the characteristics of a liberally educated adult prepared to engage in learning as a lifelong pursuit. In order to graduate, a student must demonstrate all 50 competencies. Each student works with a faculty mentor and an advisor to determine competencies already mastered through prior learning and to plan a program for learning the remaining competencies.

Students may fulfill competencies in a variety of ways, including demonstrating learning from previous work/school/community/personal experience, doing coursework in SNL or other accredited colleges, and undertaking independent learning projects including field study and individualized reading. In the required "Foundations of Adult Learning" course, students learn how to submit learning from experience for competencies. They complete a plan to achieve their learning and professional goals, and also begin work on a reflective portfolio.

Another example can be found at Thomas Edison State College, established in 1972, is one of New Jersey's 12 public institutions of higher education and one of the oldest schools in the country designed specifically for adults. As the College's website states, "The College provides flexible, high-quality, collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults and offers degree and certificate programs in more than 100 areas of study."

Typical of the approach outlined in this report, Thomas Edison State College firmly believes that college-level knowledge, no matter how it is earned, warrants credit. The institution notes, "We understand learning is a life-long endeavor, and that adults continue learning throughout their careers. Students draw on knowledge or skills gained from a wide variety of sources." Thomas Edison offers PLA at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Since March 2007, Thomas Edison permits graduate students to earn graduate credits through PLA for most courses" as opposed to the prior limit to six elective credits (Mancuso: 48).

At Thomas Edison, students typically demonstrate their college-level knowledge through a 12-week on-line PLA course, where faculty members guide students through the process of documenting their mastery of a subject. The assessment of course mastery is on a credit/no credit basis as there are no letter grades. The institution offers more than 70 online PLA courses. In addition, students can develop their own individualized PLA learning if they want to earn credit in subject areas where no standard PLA course currently exists. In its listing of the common ways Thomas Edison students earned credit through the PLA program to acquire college-level knowledge, Thomas Edison includes:

- Full or part-time jobs
- Prior independent reading and study
- Training programs or in-service courses
- Volunteer work
- Cultural and artistic pursuits
- Hobbies and recreational pastimes
- Community or religious activities

- Military service
- Travel study
- Organizational memberships

Antioch University is a multi-campus system of six campuses in four states – California, Washington, Ohio and New Hampshire. The system’s non-residential campuses serve adult learners and are highly focused on a student-focused approach to learning. As an example, Antioch Los Angeles’s BA Completion Program allows students to complete up to 45 units through PL, with 22 of those upper division and 22 lower division. During the students’ first or second quarter, they enroll in a half-day PL workshop during which they learn the standards, expectations, format and approach for the development of Prior Learning Proposals. Each proposal requires the student to indicate what they learned, the rationale for upper or lower division, the documentation that will be provided for the learning. Each proposal is reviewed by a content faculty as well as the Prior Learning Coordinator. Together they approve the proposal and indicate the number of credits that will be awarded (between 1-4 credits) based on breadth of learning. The student then enrolls for the PL units and can complete those any time during their residency in the program. According to the Prior Learning Coordinator, approximately 50% of all BA Completion students do one or more PLs. For many, they do PL to fulfill the program’s requirement for six units of non-classroom learning. Many others, however, pursue the maximum allowable.

An interesting example of PLA in professional programs is discussed in Mancuso’s “Prior Learning Assessment”, in which the author talks about nontraditional pharmacy doctoral programs. A survey addressed the issue of using PL across the spectrum of courses: Seven programs used experience to assess readiness for admissions; 16 used PLA to evaluate student requests for advanced standing in didactic courses and 15 used PLA to evaluate student requests for advanced standing for experiential courses (48). It should be noted here that Discussion and implementation of graduate-level prior learning have been far more limited than undergraduate PLA, which makes this example very interesting. It is likely that we will see more graduate-level PLA initiatives in the future. With master’s level degree program enrollments showing an older student population, many may seek academic programs that validate the experiences they bring.

Reform in graduate education is being discussed through the US prompted by global competition, need for graduate education to address more diverse student populations, and the like. These reform calls may prompt graduate institutions to think more seriously about PL. To think more fully about PL at graduate level, “we need to engage in an even more robust consideration of the ways good practice models link learning from experience to the goals of graduate education. One small step would be to reclaim the language portfolio assessment, a term that seems to capture more fully the opportunity for design, assessment and active participation in the learning experience” (Mancuso: 48).

B. AN INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE OF RELEVANCE – SOUTH AFRICA

One international example that may be of special interest for educators such as those

involved in the International Working Group on Community Change Education would be the case of South Africa. In that country, PLA “came in on the back of the political and social reconstruction and renewal process” (van Rooy; 77). Castle and Atwood suggest PL offered a “(deceptively simple, practical and apolitical) response to social and economic pressures for change.” In the mid-1990s, PLA was championed by unions and community activists as a way to assess the learning of qualified workers who had not had access to higher education. One outcome of the post-apartheid movement was the adoption by the education system that recognition was to be given to prior learning for all learners in the country.

Unlike the United States and England, PLA in South Africa has always had a strong social justice element. Section 2 of the 1995 South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 explicitly states that there are two sets of goals: social change, meaning redress and equity on the one hand, and individual and economic development on the other. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was set up “to develop, register and quality assure national standards for vocational, professional and academic qualifications”. South African higher education institutions are faced nationwide with the challenge of assessing learning that has been acquired in all sorts of non-formal and informal environments, workplaces, and from life experiences.

PLA was developed unevenly across South Africa’s higher education system and it had to address many of the aspects of the debate over its value and legitimacy referenced earlier in this report. There were those who felt under-prepared black students would have access to that this was a way to level the playing field; while others felt it diminished academic quality and undercut academic standards.

There are many different efforts in South Africa but at least one PLA scholar believes that the results thus far have been disappointing (78). One venture that might be worth exploring is a partnership between the Human Science Research Council, the University of Cape Town and Peninsula Technikon. The latter’s website offers prior learning as a menu option and states:

In the RPL process the emphasis is usually placed on learning that took place in the workplace and through experience gained on the job. There may also be a focus on learning through community activities, short courses or in-house training and through self-directed study. Such learning may be of great value, but may not be formally recognised. RPL provides an opportunity for you to identify this learning, have it assessed and have it formally acknowledged. At CPUT (Cape Peninsula University Technikon), RPL can only be done against qualifications offered by the University.

CPUT's commitment to broaden access to higher education

RPL is undertaken by CPUT in line with the principles of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It is undertaken within the context of the University's commitment to broaden access to higher education and increase the number of graduates. RPL can accelerate progress through learning programmes and contribute to the increased mobility of students across higher education institutions and other learning contexts.

Timing

RPL takes at least three months to process. As the applicant, you first need time to get together all the evidence you need to prepare for the assessment. Secondly, CPUT needs time to assess your application. Once approved, there are administrative procedures that the application must go through, before the successful RPL applicant can register as a student.

RPL Process

The RPL process requires the input of three parties:

The first party is you, the RPL applicant who wants recognition for work experience and knowledge.

The second party is the academic department and its assessors who evaluate your knowledge and skills against the part of a qualification (modules and subjects) for which you want recognition.

The third party is the University, confirming the assessment decision made.

As with so many of the South African higher education institutions, the University of South Africa also identifies prior learning options and materials on its website, and states that the recognition of prior learning:

- evaluates and assesses your prior learning and skills against an approved national standard, and
- awards credits for unit standards, learning programmes, modules or subjects.

Learning that has taken place outside of formal education and training, regardless of where or when it was obtained, is valuable. RPL allows you to gain formal recognition for such learning and skills. You may have acquired skills or knowledge from training conducted while at work, experience you gained in the workplace, short courses or from community work in a relevant field. This learning will be measured against specified learning outcomes/syllabi and you may gain credit for this knowledge which may entitle you to: gain entrance to studies at UNISA, a subject credit or to fast track you to a higher qualification.

As one can see from this brief snapshot, both of the South African institution's approaches are more similar to the vocational approach (discussed earlier in this report) than the developmental reflective model. One South African scholar suggests that the acceptance and adoption of the notion of [recognition] of prior learning is poses enormous challenges an although "there is growing acceptance of the philosophical, andragogical and socio-economic arguments for Prior Learning" (van Rooy ; 81) much remains to be done to move PL into a practical and understandable process that has real value.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the value of prior learning for the education of community change agents is quite apparent. It is a pedagogical process that engages reflective practice and that honors experience. In the case of community organizers and change practitioners, this approach would recognize their real-world learning.

As further work is done on the definition of the field of "Community and Social Change

Studies”, and further discussion of the pedagogies most appropriate for the education of the next generation of people for social change, the assessment of prior learning deserves more attention.

APPENDIX A -- References

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Appendix B -- Further Reading of Classics in the Field

In addition to the references used for this report, the following texts include classic foundation works.

Colvin, J. *Earn College Credit for What You Know*. 4th Edition. CAEL.

This classic, now in a new edition offers the latest, most current information on prior learning assessment (PLA) for adult learners, professionals, evaluators, administrators, faculty, and training managers. Prior learning assessment is a valid, yet underused, process of evaluating and recognizing learning that helps adults to earn credit for knowledge acquired through work, training, volunteer and union activities, hobbies, and other life experiences.

Day, M. *Assessment for Prior Learning: A Practitioner's Guide*. (2002) Nelson Thomas Publishing

A valuable resource to anyone having to judge the level of experience of students and colleagues. Provides a sample diary as a guide to recording learning activities. A glossary of vocabulary associated with prior learning assessment helps the reader understand what is required. Includes well structured learning activities.

Evans, N. (ed.) (2002). *Experiential Learning Around the World: Employability and the Global Economy*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Book demonstrates that, with increased economic globalization, the way societies value non-traditional learning is changing. The assessment of adult and experiential learning (known as APEL) is bringing about significant shifts in post-secondary educational institutions which are becoming responsive to the employment, social and domestic circumstances of individuals. This comprehensive study explores the chronological and geographical expansion of APEL around the world. The authors describe and compare initiatives in their own countries, and their effectiveness at the levels of government, educational institutions, and employment. They highlight APEL's essential role in the adaptation of higher education to the competitive global market.

Fiddler, M., Marienau, C., and Whitaker, U (2006). *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures (Second Edition)* . Chicago, Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

Re-release of Whitaker's classic. Since CAEL first published Urban Whitaker's book, *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures*, in 1989, the landscape of higher education and adult learning has changed dramatically. While respecting the Whitaker framework and the fundamental principles, authors Morry Fiddler and Catherine Marienau have added important perspectives and contexts that bring the assessment of learning to new venues, including work-based learning and non-credit-based learning. This second edition provides an updated set of standards for the assessment of learning and the awarding of credit for learning gained from experience.

Gray, D., Bundell, S., Hay, D., and O'Neill, J. (2004). *Learning Through the Workplace: A Guide to Work-based Learning*. Nelson Thomes Publishing.

Offers an approach to providing information on learning theories and application, and how we measure learning and skills. This text considers how people learn, processes of learning, and learning resources. It is meant as a reference for those involved in the development, training, and assessing of people learning in a work-based environment.

Nyatanga, L., Gox, J., et al. (1997). *Good Practice in the Accreditation of Prior Learning*. Continuing International Publishing Group.

Starting with a discussion of the origins of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), this text proceeds to look at the variety of models through which candidates are able to offer testimony of their prior learning. It explores the theoretical principles first, then illustrates with case studies.