

## The New Portfolio Assessment

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It wasn't that long ago when many nontraditional educators fought to gain acceptance of portfolio assessment when the traditionalists saw this as merely granting credit for what was listed on a resume, despite our boisterous emphasizing that the portfolio assessment process focused on the learning or the knowledge, not the experience!

My earliest involvement with portfolio assessment saw students presenting three-ring binders comprised of papers, letters, documents, photos and other items for examination. Now, portfolios are typically submitted and assessed electronically, using software originally designed for submission and evaluation of assignments for online courses. This is a great step forward for student and institution convenience. Today's portfolios are especially concerned with addressing a set of learning outcomes, so much so that we've almost de-emphasized the learning process, the reflective story behind the learning, and how – or if – the knowledge was or can be applied. In an effort to be consistent, in an effort to ensure consistency and quality, we're just looking at the "knowledge" to see if it appropriately articulates institutionally-created learning outcomes.

Is it just enough to say that you've read a lot, and thus have gained the knowledge? Perhaps credit by examination is better suited for measuring this learning, but portfolio assessment should have some significance here. Within the portfolio, one is encouraged to reflect on learning and should be able to describe one or more "aha" moments when the learning took place – something like the moment when you learned to hit a baseball, ride a bicycle, had an insight about your child or recognized the unfairness of a work situation – an emotional connection to the learning! You can describe it. You can connect it to your life. More than that, the portfolio process is not just about what you know, as opposed to what you do. It also is about who you are. The knowledge you have is in some way directly connected to how you think about yourself.

It almost seems that, today, the very notion of "experiential" learning has gone out of vogue. Did our understanding of it change? Why the hesitancy? Why the suspiciousness? Who made that decision? It seems to me that for the last few years, the PLA (prior learning assessment) movement has become primarily focused on satisfying preset learning outcomes and has moved away from the "experiential" that may not so easily fit those prescriptions.

Part of this situation is linked to how we define "experiential." Is this experiential realm about some active, hands-on learning, or is it about what we might think of as individualized independent study? Another part of the situation is directly connected to how we define "prior." When we talk about "prior learning," are we talking about learning that took place over a period of time, perhaps over a period of 20 years? Or are we referring to something that occurred at any point "prior" to the start of a student's assessment process?

And what about the new kid on the block? Open educational resources and general access to voluminous

information on the Internet have made it possible for anyone to learn anything, anytime. Are the realities of access to such a vast array of knowledge something well-suited for what has historically been part of the portfolio assessment process? Or, is there a need to identify a variation of our taken-for-granted assessment tools in order to respond to an entirely new learning landscape?

From my vantage point, the key is that we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that our assessment processes, whatever they are, must lead to the same result: the recognition of course-equivalent learning (the model we use at my institution) and the award of credit. It seems to me that this is an especially good time to clarify what we are doing because of the U.S. government's interest in the idea of financial aid for PLA. Might it be that there is no difference between knowledge acquired through open, independent study courses (courses for which a student is enrolled in the present) and knowledge acquired in a "hands-on" experiential environment and described and documented in a portfolio? The same learning outcomes still need to be addressed, but likely with a different slant echoed in a student's portfolio narrative and a different pool of evidence to support the learning.

Of course, there will be differences in what each student brings to the process. For one student, years of training and repeated utilization of particular skills and knowledge express themselves in that student knowing what, how, when, where and why to do something. For another student, knowledge is acquired as a result of intellectual curiosity and through reading and research. This second student may have no sense of specifically how to apply the knowledge, but has gained a strong understanding of the knowledge nonetheless.

In the first student's portfolio there will be samples of his or her work. There will be photos, descriptions and personal stories taken from memory – an incorporation of the brain *and* the heart. There will be a strong underlying sense of "experience was a good teacher."

In the second student's case, there is no doubt he or she, too, will be able to articulate knowledge gained and will be able to provide a sense of how this was learned. Both will be able to address the outcomes of what was learned. Both will provide a sense of what they know; how, when, where and why it was learned, and how they can best support/document their learning.

By coincidence, I've heard that the frequency of plagiarism in the PLA/portfolio process has increased. Perhaps this is because all too many students are now of the belief that portfolio assessment is really about "writing a research paper" on a given topic. Even some of our PLA mentors/evaluators seem to be rather vague about what to expect from their students.

But, too many so-called authorities have been heard to say that PLA is " ... about the knowledge, not how it was acquired." I'd argue that the more appropriate statement is: " ... credit the knowledge no matter how it was acquired!" We still want to recognize the learning process for two important reasons:

1. PLA, specifically portfolio assessment, is reflective. Within the process, the student is asked to look back on accomplishments, competencies and learning experiences to describe them, analyze them and steer them toward earning credit.
2. There is usually a link between the likelihood of gaining any body of knowledge and the experience (the learning process itself) to which that student connects it.

As for PLA review by a subject matter expert, the assessment decision still rests somewhere between "I know it when I see it" and "sticking to the very minute details of a rubric." Accrediting agencies across the country

want to see connections made between experiential learning and learning outcomes – thus, the focus on the minute details. Seasoned portfolio reviewers can make a decision about a portfolio fairly quickly without noting every little detail, but a rubric requires that boxes be checked, and that learning fall within fairly pre-set criteria.

So what have we learned from more than 30 years of prior learning assessment? Have our concepts changed? If yes, how so? If no, do they need to?

In many instances, the subject matter expert assesses the portfolio against the same criteria that would be in place had the learning happened in a classroom-based course. Must every learning outcome be articulated in a satisfactory manner in order to award credit? That would depend on grading processes, rubrics and other guidelines that are in place in your institution's evaluation process. If it were a classroom-based course, and the student missed two of the 15 assignments, would you award credit based on the merit of the submitted work? And even in a classroom setting, might a student have learned something different than what you, as the instructor, expected at the start? How can our tools of assessment acknowledge and honor what that student has learned?