

Effectively Engaging Marginalized Students in Prior Learning Assessment: A Case Study

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In recent years, scholars and university administrators have contemplated making higher education more open, accessible and inclusive, particularly for those whom the college environment has historically excluded and/or marginalized. As Rogers and Woznick (2015) noted, in 2010, "... President Obama ... vowed that America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates by the year 2020," making this push toward inclusiveness even more imperative in U.S. higher education (p. 49). Arguably, one solution for rapid degree completion is the adoption of more culturally-inclusive prior learning assessment (PLA) methods (referred to internationally as recognition of prior learning or RPL).¹ Recently, researchers have argued that use of PLA can be helpful to the learning process and increase student degree completion and retention (Klein-Collins, 2011). Additionally, research by Klein-Collins (2010) indicated that PLA is a successful means of increasing completion rates for less cost. However, the rate at which marginalized populations successfully use and complete PLAs varies greatly. This is especially true in educational or workplace settings, where diverse learners or workers' skills and knowledge are measured against often invisible rules set forth by dominant cultural groups (Shalem & Steinberg, 2002). These rules expressly or inadvertently determine the ways in which PLA validates knowledge, power and access. Empowerment of marginalized groups may not always be counted as authentic learning in such a seemingly rigid assessment system (Hamer, 2010, p. 105). In this paper, we will provide a few practical ways in which this discrepancy could be addressed.

Changing or challenging fundamental assumptions within PLA models cannot be done without accessing a more culturally-inclusive assessment of college-level learning. Recognition of prior learning, which is based on an increased need for more educational access, higher demands on shortening time-to-degree completion, and growing definitions of *real learning*, is replete with political and pedagogical pressures. Hamer (2010) suggested that learner, mentor and evaluator – all stakeholders in the identification and rendering of prior learning – are engaged in "identity work" (p. 112). That is, by bringing marginalized learners into Hargreaves' "learning system" (as cited in Hamer, 2010, p. 112-113), the PLA process carves an authentic pathway for the recognition of prior learning to forge new, validated identities. That process can engender an increase in self-esteem and confidence in learners who might not have ever seen themselves as holding legitimate knowledge in formal institutional settings, while simultaneously placing pressure on learners and evaluators to meet the modern labor market's demands. Hamer argued that these processes are especially important in countries where political practices have "locked down" access to formal education for specific populations (p. 101). We support Hamer's notion and contend that these barriers also exist for marginalized populations within U.S. culture, the members of which, historically, have had limited access to education and/or been underrepresented in college environments. Recognition of more diverse prior learning experiences has the potential to support the deconstruction of pre-existing socio-educational barriers currently present in our higher education system.

The use and integration of PLA in higher education has grown tremendously in recent years (Colardyn &

Bjornavold, 2004; Hawley, Otero, & Duchemin, 2010); however, much of this work has focused on traditionally-aged learners. The State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College (ESC), the location for this micro-study and one of the first U.S. institutions to adopt PLA, has been at the forefront of the PLA movement and experiential learning since the 1970s (Benke, Davis, & Travers, 2012; Hill, 2013). ESC's work with nontraditionally-aged students has helped expand this research to include adult students, whose experiential learning needs differ greatly. Adult students who pursue PLA have a tendency to finish their degrees at a much higher rate than those who do not pursue PLA. As Klein-Collins' (2010) CAEL (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning) report "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Learning Outcomes" suggested:

The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. (p. 7)

In response to these findings, many U.S. colleges and universities are investing heavily in PLA in order to meet new college completion expectations and the needs of adult learners returning to school. Research, longitudinal case studies, government and institutional policies, funding, and public and private sector programs have been created in order to recognize PLA and meet the current labor market's demands. In a 2014 talk, Department of Education Under Secretary Ted Mitchell pointed to the ways in which the department is trying to work more flexibly with institutions with "new experimental sites" (Fain, 2014, Clearing the Way section, para. 21). Among his examples in this speech were PLA use and experiential learning work being funded by the Lumina Foundation. The Lumina Foundation was the principal funder for the micro-study discussed in this paper. In 2012, ESC was awarded a \$500,000 grant to develop a framework for assessing learning acquired outside of the traditional academic setting as part of the SUNY REAL (Recognition of Experiential and Academic Learning) project. This micro-study is a direct extension of the larger SUNY REAL/ESC PLA efforts afforded by the Lumina grant.²

As part of this project, SUNY REAL team members were asked to develop micro-studies either with the Saylor Academy³ or at specific locations within ESC. This particular micro-study was focused on nontraditional adult students from one of ESC's seven regional centers, the Niagara Frontier Center (NFC), which is located in Western New York (WNY). To collect and construct their PLA portfolios, students and evaluators in this study utilized the Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF)⁴ (Travers et al., 2014). As two members of the academic team who developed the GLQF, we were able to facilitate this PLA study and discuss how the GLQF impacted its process; unexpectedly, we also collected interesting information about the ways that marginalized populations engage in the PLA process. One challenge PLA models face, as indicated in our research, is ensuring equitable assessments for diverse populations seeking college-level credit. As indicated earlier, PLA has the potential to increase access to and affordability of higher education through the credentialing of marginalized populations.

Based on the populations who joined this micro-study, we were able to evaluate whether the GLQF provided more inclusive approaches to the PLA process. Notably, in this micro-study, a relatively small population of NFC students was sampled (n=8); however, a high percentage of marginalized students were represented, including minority populations, women and students with disabilities (7:8). The three students who completed this version of the PLA process had marginalized backgrounds. By analyzing the results of this micro-study, we hope to comment on PLA inclusivity and suggest strategies for fostering growth of inclusivity in other PLA-related projects. At a time when equity, transferability and transparency are of great concern in higher education, understanding the criteria by which college-level learning is assessed – by whom and for whom – is paramount.

Defining “Marginalized Populations”

Contextualizing this micro-study and its goals must begin with defining the term “marginalized populations,” specifically as we use it within this paper. Simone (2012) employed García and Guerra’s definition of marginalized students as persons “... of low socio-economic status, and/or to students from families whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from that of their Caucasian peers” (p. 17). Brown (2006) wrote, “marginalization consists of not taking others into account on any number of valued outcomes, resulting in powerlessness, ignorance, poverty, illness, insecurity, and other manifestations of devaluation” (p. 361). Additionally, Freire and Macedo (1995) contended the marginalized, or the oppressed, are those minority groups that remain divided from dominant groups along lines of race, class, gender, language and ethnicity. The term “marginalization” suggests a complex set of interrelated factors that lead to a disenfranchisement from society, institutions or cultural narratives. Because the historical marginalization of certain populations results in ignorance of that population’s specific needs and experiences, members of these groups tend to feel left out of processes, including those processes within higher education. The term marginalized has been applied primarily to minority populations. We concur with Freire and Macedo’s suggestion that students with disabilities and women are also marginalized, hence the inclusion of those populations in this discussion. Therefore, the use of *marginalized* in this micro-study, versus *diverse* or *minority*, illustrates the attempt to address a broader contextualization for the term that extends beyond the concept of sensitivity and toward the recognition of diverse cultural knowledge and ways of acquiring it.

The PLA Movement’s Impact on Marginalized People

Research shows PLA pursuit is done by those already privileged in the system, and, as a result, marginalized populations tend to be underrepresented in the process (Hamer, 2010). Those seeking recognition for experiential learning must understand the socially constructed parameters dictating what is and is not considered college-level learning. Students must possess certain advanced critical and reflective skills to determine if their knowledge is college-level; at the same time, they must believe they possess valid learning (and communicative skills) that can withstand an evaluator’s scrutiny. How might marginalized learners, who may or may not have had access to developing these skills, organically recognize their own prior learning’s validity? Berglund and Andersson (2012) suggested that workplace learning (in itself not easily identified) is often the site of experiential knowledge relevant to PLA and, further, such workplace learning is often “trapped” (p. 82), either wholly contextualized by the workplace itself (and therefore not easily identified or translated back out) and/or trapped by employers who do not wish to empower employees in this manner. If students experience the devaluing of learning in this way, then how can they be expected to believe their learning would be validated in another setting, like that of higher education? Connecting the PLA movement with underserved cohorts and recognizing the role of historical memory as it relates to learning leads to an increasingly salient area of research.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to understand the research design and methods employed in this project, NFC’s student population first needs to be contextualized. As a geographically distributed campus, rather than a centrally-organized, residential one, ESC occupies a unique position within the SUNY system; it serves students in and out of New York on site, at a distance (at regional centers and units) and online. To illustrate this point, during the academic year 2013-2014, NFC served 1,639 students, or 8.4 percent of the overall student population (1,639:19,534); this population total, which was calculated using the geocoding of valid zip codes, includes all students served by ESC in the WNY region. Within the current data sets, not all students are classified as NFC students; some may be affiliated with the School for Graduate Studies (GRAD) and/or the Center for Distance Learning (CDL) (R. Wise, personal communication, May 12, 2015). Surveys were distributed for this project to all students in the region, not just those who attend NFC, as indicated by the Table.⁵

Table: Total ESC Student Population for AY 2013-2014 in WNY

Student Classifications	Count
NFC	945
CDL in WNY	476 (of 6,682 total students across the state)
GRAD in WNY	116 (of 1,630 total students across the state)
Totals	1,537

The following methods for this project were employed: An email blast was sent to all the students who attend ESC in WNY; 15 students responded. After discussing what the project entailed with a member of the academic team, eight students agreed to participate in the pilot. One student withdrew from the program after a month, leaving seven students to complete the pilot. The seven students, all U.S. residents, were enrolled in a workshop-style blended course housed in the Moodle learning management system; they were instructed to complete tasks to help compile relevant information about their PLAs, provided with on- and offline information about the GLQF, and given space in the Mahara e-portfolio system to capture their learning for eventual college credit evaluation. Every two to three weeks, team members sent messages to students via email and Moodle asking about their progress and soliciting questions/feedback about the GLQF template and the PLA process. Throughout the micro-study, team members developed and distributed supplementary videos about using the GLQF to collect PLAs. Every three to four weeks, one researcher responded to students in Moodle and Mahara, while periodically setting up meetings (on- and offline) with students to discuss concerns, provide support and answer questions. Throughout this study, researchers conducted interviews with both students and evaluators in order to receive comments on which factors were impacting PLA completion among this nontraditional student sample. A discussion of what was learned from these comments and the other data is included in the sections below.

How Does Marginalization Apply to Prior Learning Assessment? Examples from the Micro-Study

The results of this NFC micro-study were interesting, but not surprising. Students who represented a marginalized background (e.g., socio-economic, gendered, linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic or otherwise) tended to use more support than their counterparts and, at least in this micro-study, were the only ones who persisted to the end and submitted PLAs. Research indicates that marginalized students tend to work better with more support and, if they build a solid relationship with their advisor or evaluator, tend to persist until the end of the process (Klein-Collins, 2014). To provide greater context, a summary of our field notes is included to illustrate some salient points in the micro-study.

NFC Micro-Study Field Notes: General Comments and Themes

As previously mentioned, this study originally comprised eight students: seven women and one man. Each of these students possessed a different socio-cultural background (they varied in race, socio-economic status, technology proficiency, disability status, gender and skill level). Though permissions allow for publication of the participants' full names, we have elected to use only first names to maintain a certain level of confidentiality. The participants in this project were Amy, Robin, Shelly, Elvie, Geraldine, Susan, Brian and Norma. At

the time of this writing, Amy, Robin and Norma had completed their PLAs or were in various stages of having them evaluated for credit.

After speaking with all of these students, some themes began to emerge about PLAs and the process. First, the students who took advantage of the online discussion forums, the GLQF academic team's mentoring support, and the GLQF/PLA digital guides were more successful than those who did not. Students who did not stay in regular contact with the academic team or failed to complete their PLA data collection exercises did not finish this project. This seems to indicate that engagement with faculty, staff, evaluators and advisors is an important part of a successful PLA process, whether or not the student has a marginalized background. All eight students initially participated in the study, although Shelly, Amy and Robin got off to a better start than the others. However, life experiences, personal activities and failure to stay in contact with advisors prevented some students from moving much beyond the initial phase of data collection.

Second, students who had past experience with PLAs tended to complete the GLQF version of the PLA more often than those who did not. For example, of the seven students who participated in this NFC micro-study, the three students who completed PLAs using the GLQF regularly engaged with each other in the Moodle course, as well as with the GLQF academic team. One can assume that as participants become more familiar with prior learning processes at ESC, they gain more confidence to learn the GLQF system; that is, previous experience with a PLA-type process is important for those who might take advantage of this new type of credentialing. Notably, all the students in this study possessed PLA familiarity, since the PLA is a highly marketed part of the ESC student experience. Submission of PLAs in both the ESC and GLQF models utilizes an e-portfolio system: The ESC model has its own platform, and the GLQF model uses Mahara. At the time of this study, only one student (Robin) had completed a PLA using the ESC model; however, a few students had taken college workshops on and/or read materials about the ESC model. Indoctrination in the ESC model made it difficult for some to adjust to this micro-study's proposed GLQF model; for instance, Robin reported that she had some difficulties adjusting to the GLQF model after working in the ESC model. Because the ESC model has many types of support and the GLQF does not, she indicated that understanding the submission process was a bit confusing.

Third, students' completion of PLAs had less to do with time spent on tasks within the Moodle online workshop and more with their contact with GLQF academic advisors and utilization of supporting reference materials. For example, some late-starting students (Norma and Elvie) were able to catch up and do a significant amount of work in the micro-study's course because they were in regular contact with their academic team advisor, one of the researchers. However, once students (Elvie, Shelly, Geraldine, Susan and Brian) stopped contacting their advisor, they were unsuccessful in completing the PLA process.

Fourth, students who were more tech-savvy or were willing to reach out for technological support were better prepared to complete PLAs in this study than those who did not. In most cases, students who were in regular contact with their advisor did quite well; however, some students who were less comfortable with new technologies and/or felt uncomfortable asking for help had a significant amount of trouble in the study. This is a critical point of access. If the process itself – in this case the technology used – marginalizes a population, then is the process truly inclusive? Almost all micro-study participants said they had difficulties adjusting to the online e-portfolio PLA submission system housed in Mahara, and some had difficulties with the online workshop housed in Moodle. For example, Elvie was eager to turn in her PLAs, but found the submission process in Mahara confusing and difficult. By the time she asked for assistance, she already felt emotionally drained by the technology, and she did not complete or submit any of her PLAs for evaluation. Conversely, when Norma created and submitted her first PLA, she was in regular contact with her advisor, but she had

more difficulties when she attempted to complete her second PLA, since she was unsure how to create a new e-portfolio and did not ask for help. Instead of contacting her advisor, she attempted to create a new e-portfolio on her own. Unfortunately, she deleted her entire PLA in the e-portfolio system and had to redo it. She then notified her advisor, and the two worked through the submission process together. Technology may have been one of this study's largest obstacles, but students' regular contact with an advisor and willingness to ask for help when needed seemed to be other catalysts for the successful completion of their PLAs.

Fifth, the timing in the academic year for conducting such a project is critical. The project began in the spring term and ended in the summer term. Though most students were engaged in the spring, the study had a huge drop in participation when summer came along. Five students stopped responding to email and phone inquiries about their progress. Two students informed the academic team that they were traveling during the summer, while other students just stopped responding.

Each of these themes provided some interesting insights into the success rates of students and may have broader implications in other PLA studies. While a formal analysis of all the data sets collected for the ESC/SUNY REAL Lumina project is still pending, Travers et al. (2014) have already applied some of the themes mentioned in this micro-study to other ESC and Saylor studies associated with this grant project.

Case Study 1: Norma's Self-Evaluation of the GLQF PLA Process

In July 2014, Norma – a multilingual Latina, first-generation college student and community advocate in the WNY area – sat down with one of the researchers and explained her experiences with the GLQF PLA process. Although Norma participated in a number of conversations throughout the micro-study, in this interview she provided some of the most salient explanations about the role of PLA within marginalized populations. The interview questions and Norma's answers are presented below. Brackets indicate information added by the interviewer.

Question 1: What is your personal background?

Response: *"People tell me that you are a reflection of your environment and culture, and I believe that my experiences shaped me into the person I am today. My mom is disabled and was burned in a fire at the age of 9. She was a young mom – [she had her first child at the age of] 15 – and became addicted to drugs after my father was murdered when I was 12 years old. Neither my mom or dad reach[ed] high school; my dad had a third-grade education, and my mom [an] eighth-grade [education]. I was the first to finish high school in my family, and now I am the first person to go to college. My mom had seven kids, and we were [raised to believe] that we were not successful [by mainstream society's standards]. I had to take on responsibilities of raising my brothers and sisters very young. I heard Spanish but did not speak it regularly until age 19. I felt I wanted to establish a stronger connection to my culture. I had a son at the age of 15, but still finished high school. I have been through the welfare system, but I always knew that I would find something more in life. I did not want to settle. Using my high school degree, I worked as a dental assistant, nurse[s] aide, secretary and, now, as a case manager. I came back to school to get a bachelor's degree so that I would have more opportunities for me and my family."*

Question 2: As a person classified as "marginalized," how do you feel about the PLA process?

Response: *"I sometimes feel underestimated by the process overall [including the education system overall and the PLA process specifically], but I have realized that my strength comes from how I view myself. I constantly say, 'You can't tell me that I can't do it!' I see my strength come from my own culture, and my culture says I can do this!"*

Question 3: Do you see culture playing a role in the PLA process?

Response: *“I am confused by the process. Sometimes I felt it wasn’t created for someone like me. When I was writing my [PLA] paper on being a case manager, I constantly felt like, ‘Did I do enough?’ ‘Will my work be validated by others?’ When someone is doing something major, like an operation, I can see getting credit, but is my work enough? I can say that I discovered a lot about myself. This process has given me a better view of my abilities. I felt like I was probing myself to pull out information. If I did this process by myself, I don’t think I would have been successful. The support is what made the process doable.”*

Question 4: Do you see the GLQF process breaking down barriers in PLA?

Response: *“The process is easier. The PLA workshops currently at ESC seem easy, but when you really try and break them down, it is a bunch of gibberish. For example, if you are a painter, how do you put what you do in paper form? I felt the [GLQF] process allowed for more diverse responses. The [online workshop and GLQF questions] helped me to pull out information. [Email correspondence from Norma R. added here:] I was encouraged to create my own worksheet to understand the materials [I was collecting], and I was honored that the GLQF group used a version of my worksheet to revise questions and that they gave it to other students to use [which validated my experience with the process].”* (For more details about the GLQF pilot process, please review the section titled “Research Design and Methodology” in this paper.)

Question 5: Why, in your opinion, aren’t more marginalized people doing PLAs?

Response: *“I believe I have the experience, and I agree that everyone learns, but in [some communities] people believe that if you learn too much, something is wrong with you. I have tried to work beyond this idea and prove the value of learning to people in my community. People don’t do things because they don’t know about something. Some communities lack connections to education, don’t know about the opportunities for PLA, or [don’t] have the wisdom to consider doing it. In my work as a case manager, many clients tell me no one told them how to do this or that. You do what you know. I think, also, people tend to settle for the minimum standard. School is not easy, but I think people should take advantage of their opportunities. I think the best thing to do is reach out to this generation now, especially the younger groups, and explain to them this opportunity.”*

Question 6: What would you tell someone if they asked you about PLA and its benefits?

Response: *“I would say, it will help you take less time to complete your degree, it will give you more opportunity to express your knowledge, and it will give you credit for your life experiences.”*

Case Study 1: Interviewer Comments

The perspective Norma provided in this interview was very helpful and directly connected to research about marginalized experiences presented and analyzed earlier in this paper (e.g., impact of historical memory, validation of learning and lack of access to the submission of PLAs for marginalized peoples). Most interestingly, many of Norma’s comments reaffirmed findings in the Klein-Collins and Olsen’s (2014) study “Random Access: The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment.” Data in this study indicated that Latino students who complete PLAs tend to feel more empowered by the process than students from other marginalized populations do (Klein-Collins & Olsen, 2014). Their use of PLA is less dependent on ethnicity than it is on the process and who they interact with to receive credits (Klein-Collins, 2014; Klein-Collins & Olsen, 2014), as shown in Norma’s response to Question 3. This data also supports the themes that we uncovered in this micro-study, further validating the study’s results. Norma played an integral role in development and expansion of the GLQF. Not only did her comments throughout the process help shape and re-shape student support materials for this framework, but her insights also let us know more about how different people experience the learning process and view PLA as a viable credentialing option.

Case Study 2: Debra's Self-Evaluation of the GLQF PLA Process

Debra is a faculty member who served as the GLQF evaluator for Norma's PLA portfolio. On August 5, 2014, Debra sat down with one of the researchers and explained her experience with the GLQF PLA process.⁶ Having worked with Norma on two different PLAs, Debra's interview provided some interesting perspectives regarding the GLQF itself and how evaluators interact with marginalized peoples. The information below is a summary of her answers to the interview questions. Brackets indicate information added by the interviewer.

Question 1: What did you think about the GLQF process for PLA Evaluation?

Response: *"The prompts were very helpful. It would be better if the prompts were directly connected to the GLQF questions. I really like the question that challenges students to ask themselves, 'How would I teach this to someone else?' Norma was really able to pull information about her experiences in this question that I did not see from other questions in the prompts. Some questions elicit superficial responses, but others challenge you to get at the core of the learning and to reflect on what the student truly knows. I think if I could speak with the student during the process, the PLA would be even stronger.⁷ I think this [process] provides a more meaty response to PLA than I have previously experienced. I do think that technology and accessibility were two issues I encountered [and Norma did as well]. Mahara was a new system for me to learn, and I did not feel as comfortable using it [a circumstance that made submitting the report and reviewing Norma's PLA more difficult]."*

Debra's comments focus on the product as well as the process. Having the evaluator's involvement in the development, interview and write-up of Norma's work provided opportunities for much more holistic knowledge growth. An interaction and exchange took place, enabling both the learner (Norma) and the evaluator (Debra) to engage in an intellectual dialogue about the subject. One interesting question that arose during a subsequent conversation with Debra was whether or not to include elements of marginalization in the PLA evaluation process. Debra chose not to discuss Norma's marginalization identifiers (e.g., second-language skills, socio-economic status and cultural experiences) in her PLA and did not include them in her evaluator's report. Should she have? Would doing so have provided validation for a marginalized person, like Norma? Is it incumbent on evaluators (and mentors and instructors) to clarify where power structures, however deftly or carefully surfaced, can nonetheless re-inscribe the conditions under which marginalization will flourish? These questions, and others, could be answered in a more focused study on the inclusion of marginalized identifiers in PLA. As of this writing, no such study exists, and this case study surfaces the need for further investigation of these important issues.

Lessons Learned: Revisiting the NFC PLA Project Results

All in all, this micro-study highlights some of the positive impacts that PLA can have on marginalized students. Using Norma's comments as indicators, students from marginalized backgrounds experience the PLA process in different ways. The use of cultural experiences as a form of knowledge validation and strong connections to advisors and evaluators who are culturally sensitive to their needs seem to be critical to the success of marginalized students' use of PLA. Research seems to indicate that marginalized students who have access to PLA support and feel validated by their contact with advisors and evaluators tend to be more successful in college. For example, Hispanic students engaging in PLA earned degrees at a rate eight times higher than Hispanic students not pursuing PLA. Research also indicates that with an average of 13-24 PLA credits earned, time to completion dramatically decreased for black, non-Hispanic students by about 14.2 months (Klein-Collins & Olsen, 2014). The implications here for student loans and degree completion are obvious, with the CAEL study concluding that, by accelerating both time to completion and completion rates in general, students receiving credit for PLA had a higher success rate than peers who pursued credit only through enrolling in traditional courses.

Finally, students benefit regardless of whether they receive financial aid for the PLA process: In general, the

cost for prior learning assessment is far lower than tuition paid for college credit. As Tarlau (2014) has noted, those engaged in critical pedagogy – those engaged in identifying education’s limiting and freeing aspects – often dismiss or dilute the connections “... between radical educational practices and concrete examples of social change” (p. 372). If prior learning assessment is to be understood as a radical or experimental means by which the educational gap for underserved populations might be closed, then the assessment and the pedagogical processes therein must be understood as extensions of the promise of critical pedagogies. If traditional education serves to reify and reproduce social hierarchies informing oppressive strata, perhaps prior learning can be understood as a radicalized gesture wherein informal or tacit knowledge gained outside formalized educational paradigms can be made explicit in (and relevant to) the degree-development process.

Strategies for Creating Inclusive PLA Processes

As Norma’s interview highlighted, individuals already marginalized by higher education are often unaware of prior learning opportunities even when enrolled in college. If institutions’ leaders wish to engage marginalized students in the PLA process, at minimum, they will need to create multiple opportunities for students to learn how that process might be relevant to them and advance their academic and personal goals. This includes marketing materials in a variety of ways to reach diverse learners. As Leaker, Boyce and Klein-Collins stated in their 2014 presentation “Revolutionizing the Race: Equity, PLA, and Minority Student Success,” “current PLA marketing strategies may not always hit their mark” (slide 17). Ideally, institutions will concomitantly commit to practices that acknowledge multicultural perspectives. Student feedback from this micro-study seems to support the need for a revitalized, culturally-inclusive PLA pedagogy.

Based on what we have learned, the following are a few strategies that should be considered when creating an inclusive PLA process:

1. **Develop a safe environment in which students can exchange and develop PLAs:** It is imperative students feel comfortable and safe expressing their knowledge when speaking about their prior learning. Members of some populations, especially those who have been marginalized, tend to feel that their prior knowledge is underappreciated. Being culturally sensitive and understanding the differences between the ways diverse populations learn and acquire knowledge is critical if one wants to open the PLA process to marginalized populations fully.
2. **Ensure consistent, deliberate, and thorough advising and mentoring via collaborative practices:** Learners should be guided through all stages of the processes associated with assessment for prior learning. As noted, many members of marginalized populations might not feel comfortable speaking about their prior learning and knowledge. The advisor’s role, then, is to surface the possibility of pursuing assessment for prior learning early in the degree planning process. This practice not only validates student knowledge, but it also avoids unnecessary duplication or overlap between formal coursework and knowledge otherwise gained. This practice also has implications for resources perhaps better invested in the pursuit of other credentials, training and so forth. Lastly, consistent advising guides the complexities of various processes associated with pursuing assessment for prior learning, from identifying appropriate measurements of knowledge and providing guidance in surfacing areas of learning, to (depending on how the institution asks students to demonstrate learning) facilitating writing an essay to capture and describe this learning and mastering technologies such as e-portfolio tools.
3. **Empower students to get involved in the PLA process through data collection, feedback, and dissemination of their comments and results:** Once teachers develop a safe environment, they need to make sure they are using the information they are learning to address the points raised by their students. During this study, Amy said, “*I hope my input can be helpful to the future success of this process, and if I can do anything else to assist you further, please let me know.*” Giving voice to students during the PLA process, whether or not they gain credit, provides meaning and validation for their work. One of the best ways to

empower participants is to make it clear that their thoughts are heard and will be incorporated into a PLA project's future iterations. Many micro-study participants were excited to hear that they would receive formal recognition for their work (e.g., badges, certificates and inclusion in the literature written about this micro-study) at the completion of this project and that their comments would be used to improve the PLA process. Establishment of a rewards system is one more way to thank students and validate their prior knowledge and contributions.

4. **Understand the role of power dynamics in the PLA process:** All institutional affiliates must recognize the complexity of this process at all levels. Recognition of prior learning effectively asks a learner to translate his or her lived experiences and knowledge into competencies approved by those within higher education. As an extension of the higher education system, PLA assessors must be aware of the power conferred upon them by the academy's formalized standards. Hamer (2010) suggested that evaluators are often charged with "diagnosing" a learner's ability to demonstrate competence (p. 112). Academic terminology, schools of thought, ways of thinking and speaking, and writing styles all play key roles in determining what is and is not considered academic. Learners must be anchored to a process, but the ways in which diverse populations interpret this exchange varies greatly. Learners are often unable to present their experiences and are unclear about academic expectations (Hamer, 2010), and drawing them into the process signals respect and validation. If assessors are unaware of these power struggles over students' knowledge and how their assessment plays into the "worth" of students' prior experience, they may alienate populations unintentionally. Students, therefore, should be included in the assessment process and provided justifications for what "counts" and why. Being aware of and culturally sensitive to the power dynamics of the PLA process has the potential to increase various groups' access and inclusion.
5. **Develop evaluator training that encourages culturally-inclusive PLA approaches:** Institutions' leaders should be developing and implementing culturally-inclusive PLA processes in order to meet the needs of diverse populations attending college. They can adopt inclusive practices by engaging in what Anderson et al. (2014) refer to as "multi-disciplinary faculty learning communities" (p. 16). Key to this approach is culturally-inclusive faculty development, which focus on strategies to enhance and heighten awareness of cultural diversity as it pertains to critical pedagogies, teaching and learning. In this micro-study, one student commented that practices associated with culturally-inclusive pedagogy help "negotiate the transition from ideology to praxis" ("student," personal communication, 2014). This pivotal point is one on which student learning, via the PLA process, can be better understood. If understanding or describing learning is a multi-directional inquiry – that is, from praxis to theory and back again – then the underserved or marginalized student might not recognize the very nuances on which his or her tacit learning is predicated. For inclusivity to inform recognition and evaluation of prior learning, evaluators need to be skilled in culturally-inclusive communication strategies. Acknowledging that the educator/evaluator and the learner are "conversation partners" (Hamer, 2010, p. 114), and that power operates within this relationship of conferring and translating meaning, allows deliberately inclusive and responsible practices to emerge. Evaluators must be trained to acknowledge the inherent power imbalance in their relationship with learners and to hone highly developed concomitant, cross-cultural communication strategies for empowering and validating potentially marginalized learners during the assessment process. If evaluators do not recognize that learning may be different within one population versus another, or that one population may need more support than another, then they may further disenfranchise learners. As Norma's comments indicated, the relationships between students, evaluators and advisors are critical pieces in the validation process of PLAs. Acknowledging the importance of this aspect of the process relies on evaluators' willingness to foster circumstances in which learners can develop confidence and agency (Hamer, 2010). How we approach, acknowledge, validate and challenge this dynamic is the key to liberating prior learning assessment from the trap of overly standardizing how knowledge can be acquired.
6. **Allow for adaptability and growth:** This suggestion ties back to the first point. Evaluators may have

certain academic parameters in mind when assessing PLAs; students may not always know those parameters, but they still have prior knowledge worth credentialing. If a student has more practical than theoretical knowledge, does that status make the related PLA credit more or less college level? Different types of participants, new perspectives, and open conversation about PLA pedagogies' current strengths and weaknesses all contribute to the PLA process' evolution. To allow for growth and change over time is important. That way, we can serve all students in a more inclusive, holistic way.

The Future of PLA and the Marginalized

In light of new pressures on college completion rates, time to completion, skyrocketing student loans, and the extent to which access is granted to all students, we have attempted to highlight some of the socio-educational factors impacting marginalized learners. Our view is that this work has much to offer higher education and those researchers specifically interested in the application of cultural inclusivity to broader educational concepts of marginalization, PLA and engaged learning. This study's timeliness aligns with federal policies seeking to increase opportunities for diverse student populations and broadly test the PLA process' efficacy.⁸ The fact that the federal government is poised to waive some of the institutional burden for assuring regulatory compliance for receipt of financial aid in order to test the potential and efficacy of PLA signals the edge of a shift in traditional postsecondary education and the ivory tower to the validation of knowledge, from wherever and whenever, at the college level. That said, formal degrees undeniably stand as the accepted standards by and through which a learner is validated (Berglund & Andersson, 2012), and that, by definition, recognition of learning outside of the academy has the potential to challenge these standards and the implied power structures therein. The existence of these so-called standards signals a partial challenge, at least, to the liberating claims of recognition of prior learning, and it is not without historical precedent to note that those in power are often quite reluctant to share it. Here, PLA can (and should) be understood as access, as skill and empowerment to pursue, and as validation and confidence. We must acknowledge the role assessment plays in terms of the learner's identity formation. As Norma's words suggest, the formation of new knowledge or the validation of knowledge gained through experiences might place a learner in direct conflict with her or his lived identities (Hamer, 2010). Sensitivity to cultural and political contexts in terms of identity might also imply understanding a learner's fraught relationship to formal education. To ignore these factors could, we believe, miss the opportunity to advance prior learning's rich potential as it aligns with degree attainment and, ultimately, employment.

Therefore, as this study indicates, a successful implementation of culturally-inclusive PLA measures should:

- develop safe spaces for students to learn, collaborate and grow their PLAs
- solicit and use students' feedback before, during, and after the project to measure effectiveness and to validate their contributions
- create measures to determine the specific needs of students completing PLAs
- utilize participant data to develop participant-centered initiatives and programming
- disseminate results.

We all must recognize that PLA is institutionalized; however, student experiences emerge from lived experiences, and tacit knowledge tends to be culturally specific. The question is whether different populations should look at PLA in different ways; we would vehemently say yes, but this solution would require a shift in thinking. Future research on the assessment of prior learning should address two separate, but intimately connected threads. The first is a deeper interrogation of power relations between learners, mentors or advisors, and evaluators. How can we as faculty, evaluators and advisors consider ourselves through the eyes of the learners with whom we interact? If we resist self-reflexive practice, how can we otherwise ensure that we are best serving the needs of disenfranchised students with respect to assessment for prior learning?

Related to an examination of power structures, future researchers of PLA should more deeply interrogate the true focus of learning, and address the question, “Is higher education measuring the success rates of academic assimilation, or should it be measuring the multicultural epistemic framework learners use to demonstrate knowledge acquisition?” While the answer to this question is unclear, we believe that deliberate, thoughtful multicultural inclusion in the processes by which prior learning is assessed will support higher rates of retention, persistence and completion among those who have been historically marginalized.

Notes

- ¹ Researchers are paying concurrent attention to completion rates, mounting student debt and gainful employment. Although beyond the scope of this paper, how the macro regulatory context impacts and informs prior learning assessment cannot be dismissed. For example, a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article noted college and university presidents pushing back on the Department of Education’s “rating system” for college graduates (Kelderman, 2014). While the U.S. Department of Education encourages prospective student to “be a part of the conversation” in cultivating strategies to combat rising college costs, college and university presidents fear that the proposed ranking system, presumably intended to help students use specific metrics to make informed decisions about comparing the “value” of one college to another, will inadvertently disadvantage institutions that historically serve marginalized and underserved populations.
- ² See the *Global Learning Qualifications Framework Booklet-PLA Summit* (Travers et al., 2014): The SUNY REAL project was developed under the Open SUNY initiative as a conceptual effort to provide PLA services across SUNY. Although not an entity in itself, SUNY REAL provides a focus on special projects and grants supporting PLA efforts across the system. SUNY Empire State College has led many of these endeavors, including the Lumina Foundation grant that developed the Global Learning Qualifications Framework. The Lumina Foundation grant was for two years (September 2012–December 2014), with the goal to develop a comprehensive framework for assessing learning acquired outside the traditional academic environment, especially learning gained through open educational resources. The first year of the project included extensive research on different frameworks describing expectations of learning and/or degrees in higher education from around the world. These findings were compiled and developed into a framework. The second year of the project focused on using the framework with students (both within an institution and from OER sources) to assess their college-level learning (p. 3).
- ³ More information about the Saylor Academy can be accessed at <http://www.saylor.org>.
- ⁴ Details of the Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF) are available at <http://www.esc.edu/suny-real/global-learning-qualifications-framework/>.
- ⁵ We sent a number of mass emails to students. Some included graduate and CDL students, while others did not. As a result, this may have impacted the findings and skewed our results toward a more NFC-centric audience than a regional focus, as we first intended. If the same student population had been solicited during the entire academic year (2013-2014), we might have collected more information.
- ⁶ Faculty evaluators were given an evaluation template that provided the prompts shared with students. The evaluation template provided a simple rubric: No Evidence of Learning, Partial Evidence of Learning or Evidence of Learning. In addition, each section had a place for comments and to add any questions evaluators asked students. The evaluator was given the completed template from the student submission to review.
- ⁷ Debra advised Norma on the creation of the latter’s second PLA, which helped Norma develop a better e-portfolio.
- ⁸ In July 2014, the federal government issued an invitation to postsecondary institutions to participate

in institutionally-based experiments and receive Title IV funding (financial aid) based on these initiatives. The “Experimental Sites Initiative” acknowledges that many students come to higher education with a vast amount of skills and knowledge, and that completion rates are higher among students who can successfully demonstrate that this prior learning meets the “academic requirements” of a postsecondary degree. This experiment would allow for financial aid to be used for expenses incurred for assessment, including living expenses and test or portfolio fees, and support the often extensive amount of time required to prepare materials for evaluation. Current regulation stipulates that only activities appended to institutional instruction can be covered by financial aid, leaving actions supporting the prior learning process invisible to or entirely outside of the formal degree path funded by Title IV.

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