

PLA and Today's Workplace

By Theresa Hoffmann, PLA Consultant and former Director of Prior Learning at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC)

Introduction

The theory and practice of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is most often focused on the roles of higher education institutions and how PLA can benefit adult learners. But there is also an important role for the workplace in PLA. The workplace is, after all, where so many adults gain college-level knowledge outside of the classroom, and the workplace is usually where those same adults return after earning their degrees or higher level credentials.

In my fifteen years of experience as Director and faculty member of Prior Learning at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), the connection between PLA and the workplace grew increasingly apparent, with our own PLA movement fueled in large part by the needs of local employers and their employees.

This article will briefly discuss my own experience with employer interest in PLA, along with insights I gained over the years from students in PLA orientations, instructors, class participants and faculty evaluators' reports concerning the types of experiences and knowledge that are worthy of college-level credit.

Employer Interest in Prior Learning at UMUC

PLA at UMUC was much more than just a boutique offering for experienced adult workers – it also became a tool to serve the local business community. The reason is that so many of our local employers competed regularly for government contracts that require highly skilled and knowledgeable workers with college backgrounds or degrees. Employers wanting to qualify for these contracts – and also to fulfill their requirements once granted – led them to the doors of higher education to expedite the degree process and/or earn credits quickly in specific academic areas.

For example, I had experience with a company that was in danger of losing a large government technical contract if their employees did not earn their degrees within a two to three year window. The response from UMUC was a team effort that included a PLA orientation and on-site courses geared to meet the needs of the employers and students.

UMUC accepted transferable PLA credits from a variety of sources like standardized CLEP testing, ACE credits, DANTEs, ACT/PEP, course challenge exams and portfolio assessment. When given this information about PLA options, employers and individuals alike would often want to know the answer to one main question: What kind of experiences and occupations yield a knowledge base worthy of college credit?

Typical Occupations that Led To Knowledge Development

There are literally countless occupations that provide opportunities for individuals to gain college-level knowledge on the job. Much depends upon the individual experience.

When you look at UMUC's PLA students, typical occupations included:

- sales and marketing representatives
- managers in public and private corporations
- military and police occupations
- fire fighting
- writers, technical writing and editing
- public relations and journalism
- radio and television
- trainers
- computer applications, programming and design
- managers at all levels
- human resource personnel
- small business entrepreneurs
- finance and accounting
- construction managers
- healthcare administrators
- criminal justice
- psychology and behavioral sciences
- philosophy
- art, music, dance, theater
- paralegal
- biological and physical sciences
- sociology and anthropology
- history and government

Scenarios Demonstrating the Variety in Adult Learning Experiences Considered for College Level Credit

Our program helped thousands of students over the years assess their prior learning. Those students benefited from a wide range of learning events:

- professional and vocational experiences
- community/volunteer work
- personal pursuits and experiences
- educational events

In many cases, an individual student gains learning from more than one of these learning events.

Below I provide profiles of four students that I worked with who typify the kind of student that we assessed (some of the details have been modified to preserve confidentiality and privacy).

You will notice in these profiles that adult learners often have very complicated and busy lives. They balance multiple roles and often have learned expert level material that falls into different academic areas. For example, a student may have expertise in Small Business Management, Computer Systems and Technical Writing. There are times when the learning fell outside of traditional courses offered at our university and courses needed to be created by faculty experts to adequately reflect the student's knowledge.

Student 1: Learning through Management and Volunteering

Joan is a working single mother with 3 children. She has worked for over 10 years as a human resource manager for a large corporation and is responsible for the supervision of 20 staff members. Her duties include personnel training, budget management, EEO regulations, employee payroll and leave paperwork, personnel counseling and hiring and firing. In addition, she has served as the Election Campaign Manager for her local congressperson and would like to earn credits for her knowledge of how to run a campaign and the political process. Her other hobbies include the Garden Club, serving as the Secretary of the PTA and volunteering for her church's efforts on behalf of youth groups. Joan is working toward her degree in Human Resources Management and has 45 credits to date. Her minor is not declared and she has room in her electives. Through PLA, she earned credits in Human Resources courses, Management and Government and Politics.

Student 2: Learning from the Family Business and through Hobbies

Mary has lived in South America with her parents since she was 10 years old. They owned a horse and cattle farm where she learned all aspects of the business of buying, caring for and selling livestock. She worked with her parents on the farm until they retired and then took it over. In addition to animal husbandry credits, she wanted to earn credit in small business management. She had 30 credits and was working toward her online degree in Small Business Management. Mary can document each step of the process of starting the business, hiring and firing employees, product management, marketing, financial management and accounting. In addition to the business background, she has developed a hobby of participating in Mayan archeological digs ever since many artifacts were discovered on her property. Mary became very interested in the Mayan culture and learned as much as possible about their language. She was curious to see if there were any similarities to her own language. Through PLA, Mary earned credit in Small Business Management, and since she had room in her minor and electives, faculty created credit-bearing courses for her in Mayan linguistics.

Student 3: Learning by Doing

Robert's background in computers began when he was young. He enjoyed taking them apart and rebuilding them to see if it all worked. Robert gained most of his training from the Army overseas, working with computer programming and designing systems. Presently he works for a government agency as a Systems Analyst. His tasks include project management from beginning to end, troubleshooting and analysis, and designing hardware and software systems. In addition to his computer expertise, he has written technical manuals for military use and designed web-based systems using web applications such as JavaScript, HTML, and Lotus Notes. Robert has earned 60 credits and his A.A. in Computer Applications through his local community college. Robert's goal is to earn a degree in Information Systems Management. He was able to apply his computer knowledge to upper level credits in courses such as Systems Analysis and Design, Project Management and Technical Writing.

Student 4: Learning by Serving the Community

Working on the city police force for 9 years, John has been exposed to intense training and experiences that provided him with the opportunity to learn about issues in criminal justice. His knowledge includes an understanding of the criminal justice system, juvenile delinquency, drug use and abuse, victimization, teamwork, the cycle of violence, the prison system, and survival procedures. John's friend had a rough time in his youth and he wanted to help others to avoid the pitfalls. As a result, he volunteered for the Big Brother Program that allows him to spend time with a needy child or teen. John is working toward a degree in Criminal Justice and has accumulated 55 credits toward his degree. As a result of PLA, he earned credits in Juvenile Delinquency, Drugs and Crime, Psychology of Criminal Behavior, and Criminal Courts.

Scope of College Credit Earned

In order to earn credit, students had to document their learning in a portfolio that was reviewed by an appropriate faculty expert. Most credits were received in Business Management, Computer Sciences, Criminal Justice, Communications, and Behavioral Sciences. In addition, credits were earned in the Arts and Humanities, Math, Science, Fire Science, Paralegal Studies, Health Administration, among others. What made this award-winning PLA program successful was the dedicated, creative staff and supportive environment for PLA that accommodated various unique student backgrounds. This program allowed opportunities for part-time students to select from a broad range of academic areas that best covered their knowledge and apply PLA credits flexibly throughout their curriculum. For example, faculty evaluators assessed and awarded credit for learning gained from experience in specialized areas like Mayan Anthropology and Linguistics, Poultry Science and Horse Farm Management.

Although higher education institutions typically award most prior learning credit at the lower levels, PLA credits at UMUC were most often earned at the upper level (junior and senior). In addition, faculty assessors expressed the potential for graduate credit in PLA. In a powerful comment on one student's evaluation, for example, a Government and Politics faculty member stated that the student had demonstrated graduate level theoretical understanding and that the student's practical experience about politics and lobbying was really impressive.

Summary

When students want to know what learning from experiences can earn college credit, it is very common for them to be unaware of the extent of their learning. Most people have not had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences – those gained in the workplace and elsewhere – and to discover their knowledge base. The PLA process provides a venue for students to see themselves as experiential learners, and gives them the academic confidence they need to continue with their studies. It further helps them move more quickly to achieving the degrees and credentials that will benefit their careers and their employers.

Theresa Hoffmann has devised a number of techniques to help students earn credit for life learning. She will be presenting "Defining College-Level Learning" at CAEL's pre-conference workshop this fall. The related workbook will also be available. If you are interested in more information, visit CAEL's website: http://www.cael.org/conference_pre_conference_events.htm