



CAEL's Publication *Assessing Learning, Second Edition*, Integrates Current Considerations into PLA Principles and Standards

By Bernadette Dubs

Since 1974, CAEL has promoted access to lifelong learning opportunities for adult learners by working in partnership with higher education institutions, business and industry, labor, and government. A key focus over the years has been CAEL's work with college and university professionals to create an authoritative set of standards and principles for the assessment of adults' prior learning. One of CAEL's strategies is offering publications and workshops to communicate and demonstrate Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) standards, while assisting educators with implementation of PLA. This past June, CAEL released the second edition of a time-tested and well recognized PLA publication *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures*. (See www.cael.org/publications_cael_books.htm for more information on how to order.)

CAEL published the first edition of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures* in 1989. Urban Whitaker—experiential learning and career development expert and emeritus professor of International Relations at San Francisco State University—authored the book with the changing faces of postsecondary education in mind: an ever-increasing number of students 25 years and older with family and full-time job commitments. One pressing concern of the time was “institutions” which offered “credit for life experience” programs without adhering to any nationally-recognized assessments or standards. Non-traditional students wanting credit for learning they gained outside of the classroom would be enticed to pay for life experience credits that would not ultimately be recognized by accredited higher education institutions. CAEL worked with Urban Whitaker to create this publication to advance more rigorous methods of assessing learning and competence that adhered to recognized standards.

Seventeen years later, the landscape of higher education and adult learning has again changed dramatically. More and more institutions are offering credit for work-based learning, online learning, and non-credit-based learning. Also, more students who have family and full-time job commitments are attending higher education institutions, and an increasing number of adults are returning to school during retirement.

Authors Morry Fiddler and Catherine Marienau offer an updated version of *Assessing Learning* by integrating current assessment considerations into Whitaker's original framework and fundamental principles to reflect the face of today's higher education environment. As professors and faculty mentors at DePaul University's School for New Learning, Fiddler and 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. The second edition also provides an updated set of standards for the assessment of learning and the awarding of credit for learning gained from experience.

Fiddler and Marienau recently discussed with the *Forum and News* how the second edition differs from the first, what it has to offer educators in various occupations, and why this new look at PLA is needed today.

CAEL Forum and News: What are the major differences between the first edition and the second edition?

Marienau: Perhaps more than the first edition, we have posed issues that need to be resolved within the context of a given institution – things that colleges and universities need to address in order to build assessment programs, make them efficient, and continuously build quality into their processes. For example, institutions need to consider what kind of financial model will be put in place to support an assessment program or how to ensure that staff and faculty seek as well as receive professional development.

Fiddler: There is also an expanded introduction to concepts of learning from experience, some revision of the standards to reflect contemporary models of learning and effective administration of programs, a general updating of the detailed principles associated with the steps and standards of assessing learning, and a fresh look at some of the issues that individuals and programs are facing. For example, we have modified the standard that previously both grounded the standards in “college level” learning and went on to provide a definition for it.

Additionally, as Catherine just pointed out, we have modified one of the standards regarding the responsibility of institutions or programs to provide professional development activities to make ongoing professional development a shared responsibility between programs and personnel. We have also added a standard that highlights the role of assessment as “an integral part” of learning. The section on “issues” now recognizes the increased value placed on collaborative learning but also its implications for assessment, the growing presence of education delivered online, and the ever-present sensitivities to financial considerations.

CFN: What does the new edition of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures* have to offer educators in various settings?

Fiddler: The primary audience for the book is still educators in academic settings. However, the principles and the ideas behind them are clearly applicable to trainers in any number of organizations and for almost anyone who has some level of responsibility for helping others to learn.

The standards from the book that we have updated minimize specific reference to the college or university context, which is a shift from the previous version. For example, Standard II now reads: “Assessment *should* be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.” Whatever the setting is, those responsible for making evaluative judgments really need to take a step back first and arrive at their meaning of “the level of acceptable learning.” This then allows the standard to embrace professional standards, non-collegiate criteria, “local” expectations, as well a variety of possibilities for “college-level” itself.

Marienu: We think that this book may help to reduce some of the forced dichotomies between learning in college versus learning in the workplace and other settings. For example, in college contexts, most curricula both emphasize and “lead” with abstract ideas. In the workplace, there is a considerably stronger emphasis on starting with what is “practical.” While it is commonplace to say that we need both, we have offered at least a framework for thinking about learning and its assessment that allows for either starting point and does not diminish the value of one or the other dimension.

***CFN:** In your opinion, why is it important to have this new PLA resource today? What is going on in adult learning and higher education (and perhaps even the workplace) that makes a fresh look at PLA timely?*

Marienu: This resource is important and timely today because of matters of accountability—such as emphasis on outcomes of learning and return on investment—combined with the needs in the workplace (indeed the larger society) and of workers who know what they know and can do things well. This not only recognizes learners/workers for their competencies but may also provide incentives to develop more and contribute more. Also, PLA is becoming a worldwide initiative not only serving individuals but also helping to reform educational systems and support economic development of some countries.

Fiddler: PLA is a framework to examine and perhaps restructure relationships between institutions and students. Recognizing that we, as adults, learn in multiple ways and in the context of multiple responsibilities, but may not be able to articulate that learning well in ways that “look like” an educator’s expectations, pushes many questions about what we want that relationship to look like.

Therefore, while efficiencies and applicability of knowledge are visible trends in higher education, a fresh look at PLA can bring with it the possibilities of co-creating educational processes that serve students in those trends, in ways that extend beyond a given credit or particular assessment.

***CFN:** How have you incorporated Urban Whitaker’s principles of assessing learning into work-based learning and non-credit-based learning situations?*

Fiddler and Marienu: The standards and principles are intended to apply across learning settings. It is the decision points that may vary for educators and trainers depending on which learning setting they are in. Establishing and sustaining a quality assessment program requires attention to an ongoing “parade” of decisions—what standards will we apply? What credit model (for PLA) should we use? How much support for people developing evidence of their learning should we build in, including whether there should be contact between an assessor and the person being assessed prior to the moment of evaluation? How should credit by assessment be represented on transcripts or personnel files? There are many decision points to consider—all of which have alternatives that can be consistent with the standards.

CFN: What other new ideas and updates do you provide in the book?

Fiddler and Marienau: We emphasize even more that assessment is an integral part of the learning process by creating a new standard on this point. We also offer some distinction between experiential learning and learning from experience. To paraphrase from the book itself, experiential learning is usually associated with the nature of learning activities while learning from experience is the outcome of processes that strive to get at what meaning an experience—or set of experiences—holds. As PLA—and any rich discussion of assessment—has always highlighted, the distinctions lie in the difference between “inputs’ and ‘learning outcomes.”

CFN: How can this book enhance the assessment of learning for educators?

Fiddler: The book has a strong focus on learning from experience and it is the experience base of the educator that will determine what that educator is likely to learn. Some things in an educator’s practice will be reinforced, others challenged. In the least, educators will have some articulated principles by which to either measure their assessment practices, of which PLA is a subset, or to focus on for improvement.

Marienau: This book may prompt those educators who are experienced with PLA to examine assumptions and perspectives behind their practices; in the process, they may affirm, enhance, and/or extend what they know and do regarding PLA. For those unfamiliar with PLA, the book provides a schema for thinking and making decisions about PLA, and robust standards and principles to guide their practice.

For details on how to order this publication for you or our organization, see www.cael.org/publications_cael_books.htm.