

1-1-2012

Authenticity for Assurance and Accountability: Reconnecting Standards and Qualities for PLA Competence and Course-Based Frameworks

Gretchen Wilbur

DePaul University, GWILBUR@depaul.edu

Catherine Marienau

DePaul University, CMARIENA@depaul.edu

Morry Fiddler

DePaul University

Recommended Citation

Wilbur, Gretchen, Marienau, Catherine, & Fiddler, Morry. (2012). Authenticity for assurance and accountability: reconnecting standards and qualities for PLA competence and course-based frameworks. *PLAIO: Prior Learning Assessment Inside Out*, 1 (2). Retrieved from <http://www.plaio.org/index.php/home/article/view/28/55>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School for New Learning at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in School for New Learning Competency-based Education Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu, MHESS8@depaul.edu.

Authenticity for Assurance and Accountability: Reconnecting Standards and Qualities for PLA Competence and Course-Based Frameworks

Gretchen Wilbur, Catherine Marienau and Morry Fiddler, DePaul University School for New Learning, Illinois, USA

Initiatives to promote quality assurance and accountability in higher education have spurred the current movement to define outcomes for college-level learning. This movement extends a 40-year journey in adult higher education to recognize and assess college-level learning that occurs outside of courses and is pursued within a variety of non-academic contexts. During the past four decades, innovative colleges and universities have experimented with competence-based or criterion-referenced education models (Mayhew, 1977) in response, in part, to the notion that adults do not learn in course-based packages under the awnings of the academy. Accompanying the outcomes assessment movement is of particular interest in competence-based education and assessment (Klein-Collins, 2012).

In just the past decade, for example, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) disseminated the second edition of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Policies, and Procedures* (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006). The American Association of Colleges and Universities identified essential learning outcomes for liberal education (AAC&U, 2007) and defined criteria to assess them on collaboratively-developed VALUE rubrics (Rhodes, 2010). More recently, the Lumina Foundation developed the Degree Qualifications Profile, delineating outcomes for knowledge, intellectual skills, civic learning and applied learning at three degree levels: associate, bachelor's and master's (Adelman, Ewell, Gaston, & Schneider, 2011). Most recently, CAEL, supported by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, investigated the state of competence-based education in the United States (Klein-Collins, 2012).

CAEL is not alone in its interest in rejuvenating and expanding competence-based models in higher education. In September 2012, the Lumina and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations hosted a convening meeting to explore approaches to developing, implementing and sustaining competence-based learning models, including system-wide initiatives. In conversation with the 50 participants at the meeting, representatives from the foundations sought to gain insights into competence-based approaches to inform various stakeholders – from institutions to policymakers to accrediting agencies. Competence-based models are seen as holding great potential for “cracking the credit hour” (Laitinen, 2012) and offering robust ways to recognize, measure and “credit” learning through various means and sources. These initiatives support and promote prior learning assessment (PLA). The emphasis on outcomes and competences (instead of the input model of courses) provides an opportunity for more authenticity in assessing adult learning that occurs outside of the academy, while still reflecting college-level learning standards. This potential precipitated the authors to participate in CAEL's project that focused on exploring competence frameworks that could be used for PLA for adult learners (CAEL, 2012). The intent was to enhance options for learners and institutions, not by excluding course-based/matched approaches to PLA but by including competence-based assessment.

This article reports the practice-based inquiry findings. It also includes a reexamination of institutional PLA practices and presents new learning regarding the robustness of a set of assessment qualities within the

contexts of the outcomes and competence-based movements. The findings are represented in themes that address Michelson's (2012) call for diminishing insider-outsider boundaries through multi-dimensionality. Consequently, for quality and accountability to be assured, the PLA process need not be limited by academic credentials, but instead the assessment of prior learning can legitimize multiple authorities whose voices, contexts and learning dimensions are valued. Overall, the new learning reconnected elements of PLA so that authentic assessment of learning drives credit worthiness.

The Project Design

This practice-based inquiry examined the perceptions of prior learning assessors participating in LearningCounts.org, CAEL's on-line PLA center, regarding the following questions: What are some reasons to consider alternatives to course-based assessment? and, What are some implications for the assessment of prior learning? The study followed a practice-based inquiry approach (Jarvis, 1999). Six assessors volunteered to participate in a community of practice to explore potential for expanding a course-based PLA system to include assessing competencies. Assessors participated in two webinars and one feedback session and were asked to assess prior learning portfolios.

The six assessors evaluated two portfolios, each using four different assessment tools. Three tools were competence descriptions selected from Lumina, AAC&U and School for New Learning frameworks. The fourth tool used was a course description match from an accredited university selected by the assessor. A total of three portfolios from different universities were included in the sample representing the subject areas of fine arts, ethics/humanities and applied health/nursing. The authors developed a form to prompt assessors' comments on the quality of the portfolios as judged by competence and course match descriptions. Also on this form, the assessors were asked to comment on the usefulness of each assessment tool in making judgments. A qualitative analysis was conducted of assessor comments by clustering them in emergent categories and then establishing category attributes. These attributes were summarized as preliminary themes. In feedback sessions, a member-checking technique engaged assessors in analyzing attributes, clarifying intentionality and expanding the articulation of themes. In addition, responses were analyzed using reconstructive analysis (Carspecken, 1996) and interpretation of themes.

The findings from the CAEL inquiry project (described as "Themes" in the following section) prompted the authors to reflect on a significant issue that surfaced time and again: quality assurance, which cuts across any assessment approach. Given their years of practice in assessing learning from prior experience, the authors are profoundly familiar with the issue of quality and its many nuances. They questioned whether any new, substantive questions about quality are being raised in the competence-based arena.

For insight and guidance, the established practical knowledge-knowing base of assessment was used, in particular the work that DePaul University School for New Learning (1994) has done in articulating qualities of assessment – flexibility, clarity, empathy and integrity. These qualities, originally associated with describing elements of feedback in almost any context, may offer a means to integrate accountability with authenticity in the PLA process. Through this reflexive process, the intersection of qualities with assessment standards (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006) was framed as an innovative approach for competence-based and course-based assessment that advances quality assurance in prior learning assessment. The results of the inquiry process follow.

Themes: Findings from Practice-based Inquiry

An overarching theme of the practice-based inquiry was that specific, flexible and transparent assessment criteria were required for valid prior learning assessment and these characteristics transcended course-based and competence-based approaches, per se. Through assessor comments about the tools they used (competence and course descriptions) and in their comments about the portfolios, in this limited set of data was evidence that descriptive *criteria serve as a guide for students and for assessor*. All of the assessors reported that they were

able to interpret the criteria and apply them with relative ease to the student PLA portfolios. They all supported the importance of “transparency” of criteria. Thus, when specific, flexible and transparent criteria are present, there can be an intentional alignment between what evidence the student provides and what criteria the assessor evaluates.

A second theme identified *qualities of usable expressions of competence* (QUE) for PLA. These include *specificity*, *ease of use*, *clarity of standards* and *flexibility*. Competence statements with defined criteria provided *specificity* that enabled more accurate assessments since ambiguity and subjective interpretations were reduced. The *ease of use* helped assessors determine whether evidence was there or not there. The *clarity of the standard*, not just the criteria, assisted students and assessors with preparing and evaluating artifacts. While there needs to be clarity and specificity, there must also be *flexibility* within the standards and criteria – and their application in the hands of assessors – so that a degree of diversity in learning from experiences can be represented and not prescribed. For example, the learner-centered competence statement,

Can analyze a problem using two different ethical systems [framed by these criteria]:

1. Identifies and describes an ethical issue or problem;
2. Describes the distinctive assumptions of two different ethical systems;
3. Analyzes the problem by comparing and contrasting how these two different systems would apply to that particular ethical issue or problem. (School for New Learning, n.d., p. 5)

There is specificity and clarity within the statement and criteria, which enable ease of use for students and assessors, yet they are flexible enough to embrace a wide range of problems that can be analyzed using a variety of ethical systems.

A third theme concerned *revelation of students’ thought processes*. When clear and specific criteria guided portfolio development, the assessors said they could discern some of the students’ development of ideas and reflections on their learning processes. This enhanced the assessment of the portfolios because the connections that students were making between prior and new learning became more transparent, highlighting relationships and insights they made among experience, concepts and ideas. Consequently, the depth of their knowledge, application and perspective could be analyzed more precisely, yielding a more balanced review within the limitations of text-based assessments.

A fourth theme highlighted the importance of an evaluator’s expertise, or competence, with regard to the *judgment of credit worthiness*. In the case of the nursing portfolio, only the subject matter expert saw limitations in the student’s knowledge base. While the generalist determined that the student had addressed the criteria, it was the subject matter expert who was able to judge how well. Assessor knowledge in the area of competence or course outcomes is necessary for accurate prior learning assessment. Using the previous nursing and ethical systems examples as illustrations, generalists can assess analysis skills, but without competence in nursing protocols or ethical systems, they cannot reliably assess applications of these competencies to a particular issue or problem.

The themes are not proprietary to competence-based assessment. These characteristics can be found in well-crafted course outcomes and syllabi. Moreover, not all competence statements depict these characteristics. When these characteristics are evident, students can select or construct a competence or outcome statement that directly aligns with their prior experience, rather than embellishing prior learning to cover the multiple facets of a course. This is an advantage since most adults do not learn in course-based packages outside of school. A disadvantage is that very few university systems are set up to credit competencies in addition to courses. They have yet to design the technology or the policies to embrace different means of assessment to fit the context of the learning.

Qualities and Standards – Revisiting Prior Learning

The project themes supported the authors’ prior experiences and learning about assessment, including qualities

and standards. Findings reinforced that authentic assessment was an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and therefore the characteristics of PLA must honor diverse learning processes. To achieve this, criteria must be agreed upon and transparent. Also, criteria must be flexible for learners to engage in constructing meaning in authentic rather than prescribed ways. Revisiting this prior learning shed light on this project's findings: for authentic assessment, competence frameworks must allow the learner to construct or adapt competence statements and criteria. As such, a framework cannot be static or standardized, nor ignore institutional context.

Qualities for Assessing Learning

The qualities for giving assessment feedback that SNL developed almost 20 years ago include the characteristics identified in the current project. SNL offers a unique approach to learning for adults (24 years and older) through customized undergraduate and graduate programs in which students expand their knowledge and skills often through competence-based learning experiences and by connecting learning from experience through the practice of reflection to create new learning. The four qualities of assessment – clarity, flexibility, empathy, integrity – were constructed with formative assessment practices in mind to guide adult learners in integrating lived experiences outside of the university with new learning occurring while in school. These four qualities embrace the diversity embedded in students' experiential learning and self-directed inquiry.

The first quality, **Clarity**, stresses communicating clear expectations by articulating criteria for the demonstration of competence. These expectations must be communicated clearly, which is the other element of *clarity*. For formative assessment, clarity means providing clear and accessible feedback that is descriptive and helpful in defining students' accomplishments and communicating expectations. For summative assessment, clarity in criteria and clarity in communicating about those criteria provide transparency for student and faculty about how learning will be evaluated. At a program or systems level, clarity in accountability benchmarks enables shared analysis of ongoing improvement efforts.

The quality of **Flexibility** promotes assessment of learning through multiple forms of evidence. Multiple ways of knowing and learning are honored in demonstrating competence. Alternative sources of expertise are valued as students construct meaning grounded in the context of their experience. At a formative level, feedback encourages juxtaposition of multiple points of view to challenge deeper thinking about complexities of ideas and applications. Summative assessment honors diverse interpretations of content and various process applications, yet expects critical analysis and reflection of these. Flexibility at the systems level engages those closest to the targeted assessment to define and reframe multiple paths of inquiry.

Empathy, the third quality, embraces individual perspectives and the context of their learning. It respects the multiple voices that inform experience, reducing the privileged position of the academic authority. It recognizes and seeks to integrate the social, emotional and intellectual dimensions of learning. In formative assessment, a trusting relationship is built through which feedback is given constructively and with sufficient detail to surface students' perspectives and honor their efforts. Summative assessment validates the authentic voices in the context of their learning and balances the multi-dimensionality of the learning. For program assessment, empathy invites and integrates multiple perspectives, not privileging one over another, in collecting information and interpreting meaning.

The fourth quality of **Integrity** focuses on applying transparent criteria and indicators of quality in assessing learning in an honest, accurate and constructive manner. Integrity relies on informed expertise for assessment, and critically examines who and how the expert is identified. Membership in the academy is not a criterion for expertise. In formative assessment, feedback informs subsequent learning activities to guide learners to demonstrate the criteria to which they will be held accountable. For summative assessment, evaluation must be conducted by qualified assessors who directly assess the learning evidence as defined in the criteria. At the systems level, the expectations and standards of the college and the university must be met and assessment

processes and results monitored accordingly.

Standards for Assessing Learning

Revisiting the 10 standards for assessment of learning, prominent in CAEL's *Assessing Learning* (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006), provided insight on the project themes. The first five are academic standards for the assessment process; the second five are administrative standards for quality assurance. The five academic standards, summarized below, are most relevant for this inquiry and aligned with the emergent themes. Administrative standards have relevance at the systems level, but this was not the target of the inquiry.

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for *learning*, and not for *experience*.

When making the distinction between experience and learning, it is helpful to think of experience as an input and learning as an outcome. Because learning is a complex endeavor and happens differently for learners, it cannot be assumed that an experience yields learning. Moreover, learning is not the same for all those who share the experience. This is true also in controlled environments, such as the traditional classroom, where equal time on task does not produce equal results. Reflective analysis of experience can lead to learning, "but experience, by itself, is not an adequate yardstick for assessment" (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006, pp. 15-16).

2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.

While depth, breadth and complexity are cornerstones of higher-level learning, the specific standards and criteria are not fixed, and remain a source of ongoing discussion and debate within and across fields of study. The key to this standard is that assessing learning depends on agreeing on a set of standards and criteria and making them public to all relevant stakeholders. It is important to identify clearly where students are headed so that assessors know they have arrived.

3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not apart from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.

Assessment as a part of learning means that it guides and informs learning and provides feedback along the way. In this way, assessment is not an audit but rather a formative or summative measure of progress toward public standards and criteria. A fixed score or grade is an audit; a measurement provides descriptive evidence for how criteria have been met and how ongoing progress toward the standard can occur.

4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.

Appropriate experts must be the ones to determine whether formal or informal experience has met a competence level or is learning worthy of credit. Appropriateness of expertise combines two dimensions – content expertise and academic or credentialing expertise. These need not be found in the same person or even in a university role, but they must be used to make judgments about whether standards have been met.

5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.

The fifth and final academic standard connects characteristics of several other standards to determine the appropriateness of credit to the context in which it is awarded.

Provided that college credit is awarded only for learning that meets the criteria for higher-level learning (Standards I and II) in the judgment of qualified content and academic or credentialing experts (Standard IV), the adequacy of the program fit should be determined independently of the source of learning. (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006, p. 21)

Evidence of learning is essential to assess credit worthiness over and above the experiences that shaped that learning.

The emergent project themes, previously described, depict and reinforce the importance of the existing qualities and standards for assessing prior learning. Having *criteria serve as a guide for assessor and student* provides clarity for assessing agreed upon, public standards (CAEL Standard I) and crediting learning, not experience (CAEL Standard II). These guiding criteria also can balance flexibility with integrity, recognizing diversity of learning experiences within common outcomes for assessment. The *qualities of usable expressions of competence (QUE)* of *specificity, ease of use, clarity of standards* and *flexibility* are obviously connected with the qualities of clarity and flexibility and contribute to achieving CAEL Standard II, criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public. Increasing *capacity to reveal students' thought processes* suggests empathy in revealing learning through self-assessment. The importance of *judging creditability* aligns directly with CAEL Standards IV and V, determining credit worthiness by experts appropriate to the context of the learning.

Innovations in Intersections – The New Learning

Through looking at the connections among emergent themes, qualities and standards, the inquiry embarked on new learning. The intersections between qualities and standards may likely inform and extend specific practices for authentic assessment of PLA. Moreover, they may open the door for assessing competencies that are co-constructed by learners, teachers and mentors within various communities of discovery and inquiry. Not only might this chip away at the privileged positions of power held by the academy, but advance integrity and accountability, as well. Integrity, through honoring multi-dimensionality with accountability shared among experts, may potentially mediate academic resistance. How innovations can unfold through the intersections is described in this section.

The new learning from the practice-based inquiry is that the “qualities” offer depth and guidance for how the standards are put into practice to assess prior learning. This was found when the project’s emerging themes often landed within the intersection of qualities and standards. Depth can be described as multi-dimensionality; that is, the qualities direct the standards to legitimize multiple voices, multiple learning dimensions, multiple contexts and multiple authorities. The qualities also define characteristics that can guide assessors in the practice of judging evidence in ways that adhere to the standards. Since PLA is a feedback loop within a system, like formative assessment, the application of these qualities into the PLA process and system may well serve as guides for quality assurance and accountability.

A new relationship among the five standards was also identified. CAEL Standard III, “[a]ssessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it,” frames the overarching goal for PLA. The following discussion describes how the intersection of the four qualities with CAEL Standard I, II, IV and V assures that the PLA process engages students in constructing new and meaningful learning from experience. The evidence of learning drives credit worthiness. In so doing, accountability in PLA processes and systems focuses on authentic learning deemed credit worthy, rather than creditability defining learning.

On the matrix that follows, the project themes are located within the intersections. The description of intersecting characteristics highlights multi-dimensionality and offers practical approaches for PLA. Cells are left open to invite readers to contribute and extend the new learning by expanding upon features for learning assessment and institutional accountability.

CAEL Standards for Assessing Learning	CAEL Standard III. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.				
	V Appropriate to credit context	Clarity about boundaries of what is assessable	Judgment of Creditability	Potential permeability of boundaries	
	IV Appropriate expertise		Judgment of Creditability	Shift in roles from evaluator to mediator of learning	
	II Agreed upon & public standards & criteria	Criteria as guide for Assessor & Student	Criteria as guide for Assessor & Student QUE: specificity, ease of use	QUE: flexibility Capacity to reveal thought processes	
	I Credit for learning, not Experience	Criteria as guide for Assessor & Student QUE: clarity of standard	Judgment of Creditability	Criteria as guide for Assessor & Student QUE: flexibility	
		Clarity	Integrity	Flexibility	Empathy
SNL Qualities for Assessment					

QUE = qualities of usable expressions of competence: specificity, ease of use, clarity of standards, flexibility

Figure 1: Intersection Matrix of Assessment Qualities and CAEL Standards

Intersections – Qualities with CAEL Standard I

The feature of having criteria serve as a guide for student and assessor is essential for prior learning assessment. If criteria are clear and flexible, then students are more likely to define learning from their experience in such a way that assessors can recognize it. Students are guided in describing, analyzing and evaluating their experiences in relation to the criteria of the competence or standard. Assessors are able to identify what was or was not evident in student essays or portfolios that indicate learning occurred from the experience. The quality of flexibility needs to be a feature of the criteria so that students and assessors can examine and evaluate diverse experiences and applications of the competence while asserting the learning that grew out of the experience.

The QUE – qualities of usable expressions of competence – provide further detail on the guiding criteria. In addition to the clarity and flexibility qualities described above, specificity and ease of use are features of special note. If competence statements are specific – that is, focused on measurable indicators – then assessors are able to use them to assess learning. Ease of use includes language and format, and assists in differentiating between expressions of experience and expressions of learning.

To award credit for learning and not experience, assessor expertise in the judgment of credibility is essential for the integrity of the process. In this project, a professional portfolio was reviewed by two assessors; it was

the one with relevant expertise who exposed internal contradictions to learning claims from the experience. With appropriate expertise, the assessment reflects the nuances of the field unknown to a generalist, ensuring integrity of the process and the credit decisions.

The project themes suggest that assessing students' portfolios to give credit for learning, not experience (CAEL Standard I) is aided by the qualities of clarity, integrity and flexibility. These qualities are likely to exist when criteria guide students and assessors; when these criteria are specific, clear, flexible and easy to use; and when assessors have the competence expertise to make judgments of credibility.

Intersections – Qualities and CAEL Standard II

The theme of criteria as a guide for assessor and student also plays an important role in the intersection between qualities and CAEL Standard II. In this case, clarity and integrity are qualities that ensure standards and criteria are agreed upon and made public. Clarity of criteria is necessary for shared agreement among assessors and credentialing bodies, and assists with transparency and accessibility for students. Agreement and transparency ensure integrity because the criteria are made public to all interested stakeholders, thus enabling accountability. The criteria that guide assessors represent a standard that has been vetted, and their judgments can be checked against this standard. Students know what learning is expected and can access feedback that aligns with the agreed upon standards.

The QUE depict the intersection of integrity, flexibility and empathy within CAEL Standard II. The specificity, ease of use and clarity of standards in expressions of competence aid in shared agreement and transparency. If language is clear and accessible, then assessors and students can address the intended competence requirements, and standards are known and less subject to misinterpretation. Judgments and feedback are aligned with the agreed upon standards and criteria. QUE offers the focus and flexibility for standards to be shared and inclusive of varied experiences. The assumption is that there is not one right way to meet the standard and so the criteria must offer clarity, yet flexibility for multiple approaches to represent learning from experience. To establish agreement, flexibility is required.

The capacity to reveal thought processes represents an intersection between empathy and understanding learning processes. When QUE exists, assessors are more likely to have a window into how learning grew out of experience because students' reflections are guided by clear and specific criteria. Assessors then have targeted evidence and a reflective context by which to interpret learning claims. This feature reflects empathy since assessors are more likely to consider how students express their learning without having a pre-conceived notion of what they should find to verify learning. Similarly, QUE connects the quality of empathy with shared and public standards since they are specific and easy to use. As a result, students know where they are headed without having to guess what the standard might be; they can learn from the feedback and judgments made by the assessors. By connecting assessment to learning and learning processes, assessors are more likely to see what is there and increase their accuracy of judgment.

The project themes seem to indicate that qualities of clarity, integrity, flexibility and empathy help establish agreement upon standards and criteria that are transparent and accessible (CAEL Standard II). Also, the qualities help reveal student thought processes, making known their level of learning discerned from experience. When this occurs, personal experience can be contextualized and evidence of new learning can be related to competence. As such, assessment becomes a part of the learning itself (CAEL Standard III).

Intersection – Qualities and CAEL Standard IV & V

The quality of integrity tightly connects with appropriate expertise (IV) and context (V) when determining credit worthiness. The project results highlighted this connection and the importance of relevant expertise. A competence expert found inconsistencies in learning claims that bypassed a generalist reviewer. Equally important is having relevant *context* expertise when making judgments of credibility; such integrity honors the

multi-dimensionality of learning within the experiential context. Assessors that are grounded in the context often have appropriate expertise to offer an informed assessment of learning claims. In this case, it is a non-academic that is a most relevant judge of credit worthiness because of their context expertise. Consequently, authentic assessment leads to judgments that align with the public and agreed upon standards of the field and credentialing authorities.

Guidelines for Reconnecting, Not Reinventing, Elements of PLA

Course-based and competence-based assessment can and should co-exist within the process and system of PLA. As a result of the analysis of the intersection among themes, qualities and standards, three guiding principles are presented that promote an integrated approach for quality assurance and accountability, recognizing the historical contributions of both course and competence assessment frameworks.

1. Assessment feedback is an integral part of learning, and similarly, PLA is a feedback loop within a system (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006).

As CAEL Standard III emphasizes, assessment is an integral part of the learning process. There is a loop through which ongoing feedback is used to spur learning. Assessment is not an end in itself but a vital part of the teaching and learning relationship, regardless of the context in which this occurs. This was reconfirmed within this project. By reconnecting to the qualities of assessment and intersecting them with standards, characteristics that can guide PLA are provided.

Moreover, the qualities enable PLA to improve as a process and a system. The development of clarity, integrity, empathy and flexibility in PLA enable an informed feedback loop within the assessment system. Applying the qualities as guides for PLA yields information about the effectiveness of the PLA process. For example, using clarity and flexibility as criteria will indicate how responsive the PLA system is to agreed upon standards and how inclusive the standards are to multidimensionality, e.g., multiple learning domains and relevance to multiple contexts. Using feedback about the PLA process itself can inform system accountability; that is, ongoing feedback about the system's evidence of integrity, empathy, clarity and flexibility can be used for continuous improvement and quality assurance.

2. There is a valued and (credit) worthy place for student-constructed competencies; a competence framework need not be fixed nor removed from context.

The current resurgence of competencies and outcomes frameworks, as showcased by Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (Adelman, Ewell, Gaston & Schneider, 2011) and AAC&U Learning Outcomes (2007), benefit PLA because they augment the ways in which students can express their learning. The frameworks advance the qualities of assessment because of the precision and clarity of the competence statements and criteria. Competence frameworks can give students flexibility while maintaining accountability to standards. Students "would not have to make their knowledge resemble academic knowledge; they would instead have to establish the efficacy of particular insightful, effective ways of doing things in particular sites of engagement" (Michelson, 2012, PLA as Epistemological Cross-Dressing section, para. 5). Students can construct their own competence statements with criteria that "establishes efficacy" for expressions of learning in the context of their experience. Consequently, a framework need not be fixed. Using standards of efficacy shared among competence experts, student constructed competencies can ensure integrity to higher level learning outcomes. In so doing, prior learning assessment supports student initiated inquiry and discovery without sacrificing quality or accountability. Competence frameworks can complement and extend course-based assessments.

3. Intersection of qualities and standards leads PLA to multi-dimensionality, legitimizing multiple voices, multiple learning dimensions/modalities, multiple contexts and multiple authorities.

Just as adults do not learn in course-based packages, one set of competencies or assessment processes does not meet the call for multi-dimensionality. Institutional integrity and accountability can be promoted by clear precision distinguishing type and level of learning as called for in current initiatives. Integrity will not be advanced through one-size fits all, but rather through legitimizing multiple perspectives and contexts. Flexibility

and empathy may be starting points for systems level change. Both advocate for multiple ways of knowing and multiple authorities to judge learning, thus diversifying what is valued currently. Empathy is the willingness to consider these perspectives and to grow into seeing that multi-dimensionality enriches learning and assessment. Actually, greater clarity and deeper thinking often come out of this diversity. Flexibility is the openness to make multiple voices viable. In using resources currently available, system infrastructures can accurately and descriptively represent many types of standards and criteria, many voices and authorities. Institutional change is coming with accountability initiatives. If clarity and flexibility within standards were to drive this change process, then system improvements may likely reflect integrity and empathy; that is, embrace the diversity within learning, assessment and context.

As noted at the beginning of this article, the “insertion of the assessment of competences into practices in higher education” (Edwards & Knight, 1995, p. 10) enjoys a long history. Yet debates continue about quality control in competence-based assessment. Advocates recognize that greater clarity and consistency in the language of competence-based education and assessment would help advance the movement. Given that assessment of prior learning is integral to any conversation (whether local, regional or national) about competence-based education, the intersection matrix is offered as a vehicle for collaborative inquiry and ongoing innovations. The results of this practice-based inquiry are a reminder that reinventing PLA is not needed, but rather reconnecting elements can expand and deepen PLA to include authentic course-based and competence-based assessment. Readers are invited to add and expand upon features that manifest in the intersections, contributing to the reflexive discourse about approaches for quality assurance and institutional accountability.

References

- Adelman, C., Ewell, P., Gaston, P., & Schneider, C. (2011). *The degree qualifications profile*. Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc.
- American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). (2007). *College learning for the new global century*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Carspecken, P. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2012). *William and Flora Hewlett foundation final report: Expanding competency-based frameworks in postsecondary education*. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult & Experiential Learning.
- Edwards, A., & Knight, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Assessing competence in higher education*. London, UK: Kogan Page.
- Fiddler, M., Marienau, C., & Whitaker, U. (2006). *Assessing learning: Standards, principles, and procedures* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Klein-Collins, R. (2012). *Competency-based degree programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary credentials for measurable student learning and performance*. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult & Experiential Learning.
- Jarvis, P. (1999). *The practitioner-researcher: Developing theory from practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Laitinen, A. (2012). *Cracking the credit hour*. Retrieved from www.Newamerica.net
- Mayhew, L. (1977). *Legacy of the seventies: Experiment, economy, equality, and expediency in American higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Michelson, E. (2012). Inside/out: A meditation on cross-dressing and prior learning assessment. *PLA Inside Out: An International Journal on Theory, Research and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment*, 1(1). Retrieved from <http://www.plaio.org/index.php/home/article/view/15>
- Rhodes, T. (Ed.). (2010). *Assessing outcomes and improving achievement: Tips and tools for using rubrics*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- School for New Learning (SNL). (1994). *Qualities and principles for assessing learning at SNL*. Chicago, IL: DePaul University School for New Learning. Retrieved from http://snl.depaul.edu/WebMedia/StudentResources/assessment_principles.doc
- School for New Learning (SNL). (n.d.). *Competence criteria for assessment*. Chicago, IL: DePaul University School for New Learning. Retrieved from http://snl.depaul.edu/WebMedia/StudentResources/competences_and_criteria.doc