

Dewey, Individuality and PLA Policy in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article argues that John Dewey's philosophy of progressive education offers, from a variety of perspectives, a strong rationale for the use of prior learning assessments in higher education. His philosophy also offers a foundation for implementation policies that can make use of contemporary formulations in the social sciences, such as activity theory, and procedures already evident and accepted in academia. These policies can also enable administrators and faculty to better appreciate "learning from experience" as an integral component of knowledge acquisition that is fully appropriate in formal educational settings, as well as informal or more worldly situations. As Dewey sees individualized learning experience as essential in sustaining a democratic society, we can recognize, by analogy, that it is also an important stimulus for the continued growth and development of American higher education.

Introduction

Michael Young (2006) has noted that an important purpose of prior learning assessment (PLA) is to help disadvantaged learners. This particular population is of interest, he pointed out, not for reasons of social justice, but from "economic forces" that seek to expand the labor force by acknowledging learning gained outside formal educational institutions and providing "fast-track routes for adults into higher education" (p. 321). However, the ways by which this knowledge is accredited is not a product of economic factors, but rather the assessor's underlying theory or philosophy of learning. Thus, while general interest in PLA may well be economic, the policy of PLA implementation, especially in higher education, is ultimately a reflection of some form of educational philosophy. Although a number of different theories have been applied to PLA (see in particular Andersson & Harris, 2006), very few scholars have explored the theoretical relevance to PLA of the specific ideas developed more than 100 years ago by John Dewey, America's premiere philosopher, much less their potential impact upon PLA policy. This article describes what Dewey has identified as the essential components of education in a democratic society; then it is argued that PLA, from a progressive perspective, could be a near-perfect expression of his ideas and the basis for developing new forms of PLA policies.

The Philosophy

Dewey's writings are often misunderstood. His major educational text, *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916), is often assumed to promote a form of education that prepares students to be good citizens; thus, Dewey is all too frequently associated with the theory and practice of citizen education. The underlying objective of citizen education is to determine and then require a specific curriculum that represents what every citizen must know in order to fully participate in a democratic society. Yet, a careful examination of Dewey's writings does not reveal any such agenda anywhere. Instead, in *Democracy and Education*, among other texts, he presents a progressive form of education that he argues will produce the kinds of self-reliant and productive citizens a truly democratic society should welcome and certainly needs.

A prescribed course of study in citizenship is not only absent from his writings, but it represents pretty much the opposite of what Dewey actually advocated. Democracy, he argued, depends upon a citizenry whose individual dispositions, interests, and aims are as fully developed as possible. Analogous to what is presented in Darwin's theory of evolution, society needs to have available as many diverse ideas as possible so as to improve the chances of finding the best ideas for growth and the best solutions for the inevitable unintended consequences of innovation and change (Tenner, 1997). As Caleb Crain (2016) observed, democratic societies, no matter how messy, "have a fairly good track record" (para. 6) for making better decisions than do orderly, but less flexible autocratic societies. In a similar vein, William Taylor (2006) has shown for collective problem-solving on the internet that "nobody is as smart as everybody" (p. C6). And in a broader context, Nobel Prize-winning economist Edmund Phelps (2013) has argued that a nation's economic success depends upon what he referred to as "mass flourishing" or social conditions that provide each citizen with the freedom and support to pursue his or her own interests. In other words, the more the unique potential of every citizen is strengthened, the more likely that a democratic nation will develop in positive and fruitful directions. In Dewey's (1916) words, "... society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth" (p. 305).

Not surprisingly then, Dewey argued strenuously against standardization or uniformity in schools, against external imposition of educational goals and aims not relevant to the student, and against discipline for its own sake (or the convenience of school administrators). "Thinking is as much an individual matter as is the digestion of food," Dewey (1916) wrote. He continued:

There are variations of point of view, of appeal of objects, and of mode of attack from person to person. When these variations are suppressed in the alleged interests of uniformity, and an attempt is made to have a single mold of method of study and recitation, mental confusion and artificiality inevitably result. Originality is gradually destroyed, confidence in one's own quality of mental operation is undermined, and a docile subjection to the opinion of others is inculcated (p. 302).

Of course, he understood that students share a common body of facts or information and that working on educational problems collectively can be a fruitful way of encouraging individual expression. As he noted, "... there is no inherent opposition between working with others and working as an individual" (p. 302). Yet, while Dewey consistently stressed the importance of cultivating in school the astonishing diversity of our species, traditional institutions in his time (and continuing today as reflected, for example, in our obsession with standardized tests) seem determined to do just the opposite.

Standing against this trend, Empire State College of the State University of New York was designed very much along Deweyan lines (Bonnabeau, 1996; Jelly & Mandell, 2016). When it opened in 1971, it offered no classes at all. Each student was assigned a faculty mentor (Hall, 1977), and together they planned a unique plan of study that would lead to a college degree. Students determined their own goals, followed their own interests, and developed skills important to them professionally or personally. For each course of study, they engaged in what was called "guided independent study" – working, with the help of an assigned tutor, largely on their own. An individualized degree plan included not only what the student wanted to learn, but also what the student had already learned in the past – at other educational institutions, in work-mandated courses of study, or from their own personal, community, or work experiences. In practice, students sought credits from prior learning that complemented, strengthened, or diversified their degree plan.

Given the encouragement of individualized courses of study, requests for academic credits from prior experience tended also be highly individualized (e.g., see Elliott, 2016, p. 379). In helping students identify what they had learned as managers, case workers, athletes, construction workers, parents, community organizers,

musicians or artists, faculty's first priority was to understand what the student knew from his or her perspective. Once that was established, they could then determine whether his or her knowledge met the criteria of depth, breadth, and complexity associated with "college-level" learning, and if so, to determine an appropriate title. A student who worked in a factory and knew how to grind a small part to exact specification but had no idea what that part was used for, did not have the kind of knowledge one might expect at any level of formal education. On the other hand, the knowledge of a student responsible for the maintenance of all the machinery involved in a beer production factory, and who understood the purpose of every step in the chain of processing, was clearly seen as complex, detailed, and theoretical enough to merit college credit.

Knowledge was not matched to some list of available subject titles; instead titles were developed, often by the assessor, based upon the student's description of what she knew. If a bank president wanted to focus upon customer service as "the most important thing I learned" (during the time when bank hours were notoriously inconvenient), her knowledge might be shaped around the concept of "banking services" (in addition to what she knew about "bank management"). If an editor at a publishing company wanted to emphasize the absence of morality in a company publishing books on ethics, his knowledge would not be stretched into general knowledge of "ethics" nor would it be squeezed into "organizational behavior"; instead, it would be identified within the context in which it was learned. Unless the knowledge area was professional or technical, care was taken to avoid academic disciplinary titles if at all possible. In sum, the evaluator closely questioned those seeking "credits by evaluation" from their own particular vantage points and encouraged them to expand their descriptions outward from there. A parent of an autistic child, for example, knew autism from the perspective of a loving caregiver, which necessarily differs from that of a medical doctor, a psychologist, or a researcher. His or her range of knowledge was often immense – parents learn by reading, from attending support groups, by listening to physicians, and most of all by observing and responding to their own child. They have a deep knowledge of what might be typically taught in a course on autism – i.e., defining behaviors, symptom variations, hypothesized causes, types of treatment, likely prognosis, impact upon family, etc. – but that knowledge is understandably organized around their own unique situation (Coulter & Mandell, 2016).

This kind of learning – that which arises out of lived experience – is exactly what Dewey saw as the source of all knowledge. While many academics are uncomfortable with the idea of awarding college credit for knowledge that seemingly lacks disciplinary grounding, Dewey saw such an objection as groundless, since for him, disciplinary knowledge too was, at heart, an expression of human experience. As Eduard Lindeman (1926), a strong admirer of Dewey's, expressed it, "Subjects, we need to be reminded, are merely convenient labels for portions of knowledge to which specialists have given attention" (p. 173). When we privilege so-called "book learning" over experiential learning, we do so forgetting that the former is the result of endless research into questions tied directly to lived experience. In Dewey's (1916) words:

... [T]he bonds which connect the subject matter of school study with the habits and ideals of the social group are disguised and covered up. The ties are so loosened that it often appears as if there were none; as if subject matter existed simply as knowledge on its own independent behoof, and as if study were the mere act of mastering it for its own sake irrespective of any social value. (p. 181)

Thus, in progressive schools, Dewey argued, teachers must make available to their students educative experiences that enable them to discover on their own the impetus and purpose of the knowledge society deems important to learn. In this way, the knowledge gained is not superficially memorized, but is understood in a far more fundamental way through actual practice that leads spontaneously to theories (i.e., explanations) that the students themselves develop. And in testing the validity of these theories, students' "experiential" knowledge naturally expands as they gather new evidence, ask new questions, and rely upon experts and

written resources (and today also the internet) for additional information. As they learn by recapitulating prior human experience, they acquire in a natural way both an historical understanding and habits of critical inquiry that position them solidly in the present, armed with the intellectual flexibility needed to face an uncertain, ever-changing future.

Although the knowledge for which adults seek college credit is achieved by the same processes Dewey called for in schools, adult educators who guide such adults report that these students experience great difficulty in trying to “translate” their experience-based knowledge into the language of higher education (e.g., Briere, 2011; Hamer, 2010; Pitman & Vidovich, 2013). So used to “a diet of predigested materials” (Dewey, 1938, p. 46), that is, the “sediment of the experience of others” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 173), traditional university faculty, especially from the humanities and some social sciences, tend to regard “experience” as simple raw sensory data that has no higher meaning at all (see Dewey, 1916, p. 262-266, for a description of ancient Greek thought that has led to this viewpoint). Such experiences can be evaluated as learning, they argue, only if they are subjected to disciplined after-the-fact conscious reflection (see Coulter, 2002 for a more critical discussion of this position). In response, most universities that offer PLA reassure such critics through policy statements that academic credits are never awarded for life experience, but only for learning (e.g., Kamenetz, 2011, pp. 10-11). Thus, learning itself is not seen to occur in the experience itself but is created or “developed” through a process of subsequent self-reflection and, often, the creation of a portfolio under the enlightened guidance of a seasoned educator.

Scholars of experience, however, beg to differ. As far as they are concerned, the substance of what is learned occurs *during* the experience, not *from* it or only after reflection (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 203). While Dewey clearly appreciated the importance of conscious reflection, he did not see it as looking backwards in order to discover what had just been learned but as looking forward in order to consider the likely consequences of the new ideas the experience produced. For him, “every experience lives on in further experiences” (Dewey, 1938, p. 27), as participants actively interact with their physical and social environments, “... which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which subsequent experiences take place” (p. 39). If the experience is a meaningful one, the participant changes too, which is how Dewey can readily argue that every educative experience is by definition an act of learning (see Herman & Mandell, 2015 for a similar argument). The condition that provokes such learning was identified by Roberts (2012) after exploring a number of different forms of experiential learning, as exposure to, recognition of, and response to some form of “newness” (p. 115). As Martin Jay (2005) concluded in his sweeping intellectual history of the concept of experience, “experience in virtually all of its guises involves at least a potential learning process produced by an encounter with something new, an obstacle or a challenge that moves the subject beyond where it began” (p. 403).¹

If this philosophic consensus is accurate, it explains why many applicants for prior learning credit, particularly the very disadvantaged for whom this process is seen as especially valuable, find it so difficult, if not impossible, to separate their knowledge from the context in which it was acquired. Although reflection upon prior experiential learning is often touted as an educational, worthwhile, and even transformational experience in itself (e.g., Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010), many adults do not appreciate these benefits. All too often they are overwhelmed with what appears to be an entirely new learning demand which requires them to abandon the essence of their prior knowledge as they are forced to reconsider their own expertise in unfamiliar and ill-fitting contexts. Some report the task is so difficult that many applicants simply forsake the effort. From Peters (2006) we hear a plaintive description of a typical applicant: “You come with all your experiences and you’ve got to *unsift and funnel* it through [...] academia. ... I’m having to come out of my normal natural self [...] and *repackage myself* in order to pass through that process” (pp. 173-174). Pokorny

(2011) quoted Butterworth's complaints about the self-reflection phase:

... [T]he individual may feel understandably pleased to be given credit, and perhaps have more confidence as a result of this recognition, but in one very important respect they [sic] are no different after assessment than before: their understanding of their competence will not have been altered by the assessment process, for it has not been explored. (p. 113)

Thus, what might appear to be a relatively simple translation request – using academic language to describe experiential learning – turns out in practice to expose the underlying assumption of various mutually exclusive dualities. At the simplest level, “experiential” learning is seen as different in kind from, and inferior to, “academic” (or schooled) knowledge. Educational psychologists use different words to make a similar (although perhaps less judgmental) distinction between “informal” and “formal” learning (King, 2010). A slightly different emphasis, which gives space for a more positive view of experiential learning, is offered by Wheelahan (2006) who distinguished between “developmental” and “credentialist” models of learning (p. 241) or the difference between the process of prior learning and the possession of current competence. A duality that puts experience in an even more positive light was identified by Harris (2006) who compared “authentic” with “inauthentic” learning (p. 8). Patrick Werquin moved away from whole categories of knowledge (Mandell & Travers, 2012). Focusing instead on measurement, he noted that the substance of experiential learning is assessed solely in terms of its “output” (what the student knows) whereas the substance of academic knowledge is evaluated only in terms of its “input” (what is taught). Indeed, with PLA, input – that is, consideration of when, where, how, and why the learning takes place – is generally prohibited (Stenlund, 2010). Moving even further away from knowledge comparisons, Wenger (1998) focused upon the different social situations in which learning takes place, referred to as “communities of practice.” Although these communities are theoretically not limited to two, the main objective in the PLA literature is to compare the academic world, on the one hand, to all other more mundane environments.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) famously exhorted against dualistic or what he called “either-or” thinking (pp. 17-23). His main point was that when a conflict is defined by dualities, it is all too easy to erroneously assume that in order to define one position, all that is needed is to eliminate all the key ingredients in the opposing position. (The argument against so-called “Obamacare” is a modern-day example). The problem is that the absence of features does not provide any guidance about what is or should be present; in other words, a simple “opposite” turns out to be empty of any significant content. The way forward, however, is not that “both sides are essential,”² but that any given position must be thoroughly and carefully studied and articulated in terms of what it is. As we have seen, Dewey resolved many of the dualities listed earlier by denying that there is a fundamental difference between experiential and academic knowledge in the first place. The latter is an accumulation and distillation of years of experiential knowledge organized in such a way that it enables scholarly experts to continuously correct and add to an ever-expanding chain of knowledge. Of course, Dewey's focus when making this argument was not upon PLA (which was nonexistent in his day); instead he proposed that the way people learn in real life should be imported into schools so that the individual needs, purposes and interests of each learner could be allowed, and encouraged, to develop. It can be easily argued that forcing students to learn through the lens of scholarly disciplines rather than through experience is roughly analogous to forcing credit-seeking adults to squeeze their experience-based expertise into disciplinary frameworks.

Relevant Contemporary Theories

Many adult educators, as eager as Dewey was to transcend the duality of progressive/traditional education, have also sought ways of resolving the seeming impasse that underlies the academic world's reluctance to recognize and accept learning outside academia. As yet, these efforts have not made much of an impact in

the academic world, but, as is discussed below, these concerns may be an important stimulus for the development of new PLA policy. While many of these efforts accept the duality of experiential and academic knowledge and search for ways of establishing, for example, “equivalences” (Davison, 1996), communicative actions (Sandberg, 2012), or third spaces in between (Naudé, 2013), other recent theories come much closer to that presented originally by Dewey. Integral to Wenger’s (1998) different communities of practice is the claim that learning and knowledge are the product of the entire situation (i.e., community) in which the learner resides. Referred to as “situated cognition” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; see also, Michelson, 2006), this concept is remarkably similar to Dewey’s description of an “experience.” Thus, the theory posits that differences between informal and formal learning reside in the different situations in which learning takes place rather than in the quality of the knowledge itself. The duality remains, but the shift in focus helps expose the relative poverty of the classroom experience as opposed to lived experience (also noted by Dewey), and promotes the idea that the basic learning process is the same in each situation.

While the “situation” of interest in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory, exactly as it was with Dewey, refers to the physical and social environments in which the learning takes place, another recent theory originally presented by Lakoff and Johnson (1999) reminds us of yet another ever-present context in human experience: the learner’s physical body. Referred to as “embodied cognition,” these theorists, echoing the footsteps of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argued that our physical bodies are seminal in shaping the structure of our knowledge and ways of thinking. (Although this theory considers the generic human body and therefore generic features of human thought, it is not difficult to imagine that individual differences between bodies and body images could play significant, although as yet not well studied, roles in shaping what any given person learns.) In sum, as much as learning is the result of critical interactions between mind and environment, it is also a significant outcome of interactions between mind and body. In both cases, we see a concept of learning or knowing that reconnects, or arguably eliminates, through the essential role of “interaction” the apparent divide between dissociated knowledge and the experiences that produce it.

Today, a model that seems to incorporate many of the contextual components that constitute “experience” and that has also generated new thinking and research not only about education in general but also PLA is what is referred to as activity theory (AT). Remarkably consonant with Dewey’s philosophy, the original concept of AT is attributed to two Russian psychologists, Lev Vygotsky and Aleksei Leont’ev (roughly speaking, Dewey’s contemporaries) and further elaborated recently by Yrjö Engeström (e.g., 1999; 2015). Briefly, the theory identifies all the components of an educational “activity,” posits interactions among them all, and through analysis defines and conceptualizes learning in a variety of settings (see, e.g., Gedera & Williams, 2016). The key components of activity as seen in Figure 1 include the following:

- Subject.
- Object.
- Mediating artifact.

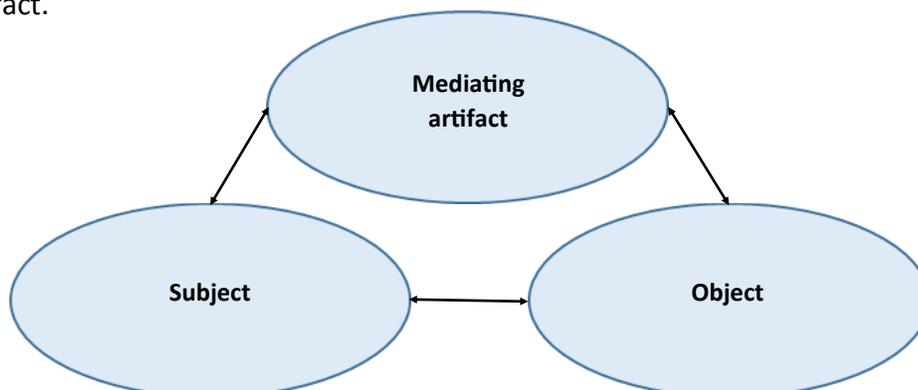


Figure 1
Source: Adapted from Mwalongo, 2016, p. 20.

Although Dewey did not explicitly identify specific components of a learning experience, the various items listed on the previous page are indisputably integral to his meaning, suggesting a very close correspondence between Dewey's notion of "experience" and the concept of "activity" in AT. Indeed, in Mayhew and Edwards' (1936/1965/2007) exhaustive description of Dewey's 1896-1903 lab school with its many illustrations of the learning activities students experienced in all grades into high school, careful consideration of virtually all these components can be found on almost every page. Even more than 30 years later, we find Dewey (1938) writing about some of what must be taken into account when creating educative experiences, or activities:

... [I]t is incumbent upon the educator the duty of instituting an ... intelligent and ... difficult kind of planning. He must survey the capacities and needs of the particular set of individuals with whom he is dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject-matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities. The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power. (p. 58)

Thus, AT not only encompasses the interactions important to the theories of situated and embodied cognition, but it makes evident the infinite number of various experiences that can be had through variations in one or more of the activity components listed earlier. Critical for Dewey, the theory also offers a way of conceptualizing and studying (through the "participant" variable) individual differences. AT has already served to stimulate useful research even in areas of higher education (e.g., Gedera, 2016; Li, 2016; Mwalongo, 2016). It also suggests ways of empirically exploring and validating the variables essential to Dewey's conceptualization of learning experiences, as well as, it almost goes without saying, to adult prior learning experiences for which academic credit is sought (see, e.g., other arguments for the relevance of AT to PLA in Wheelahan, 2006, and Naudé, 2016).³

Policy

During Dewey's lifetime, the relationship between philosophy and policy was obvious. As White (2013) expressed it, philosophy gave teachers a clearer and better understanding of what they should be about, and policies were developed to make that happen (p. 6). However, as he also pointed out, during the past few decades, control of educational policy, especially at the K-12 level, has slipped away from the individual institutions (and teachers) toward more centralized agencies (and politicians), where political and economic considerations, rather than philosophy, are key factors in its development. In the United States, a similar trend toward national control can be detected today not only in higher education (e.g., see Hiebert & Stigler, 2017) but also in the area of PLA (Chakroun, 2010; Sherman, Klein-Collins, & Palmer, 2012). However, even if increasingly influenced by national economic (e.g., Smith, 2013) and social concerns (e.g., Travers, 2016), most universities today still retain considerable autonomy in the development and implementation of educational policy. Thus, as can be seen in individual college mission statements (see Fish, 2008), colleges still tend to espouse goals that emphasize the importance of individualized learning and development for meeting and sustaining our democratic ideals.

PLA policy, of course, does not exist independently; it is necessarily consistent with the institution's stated mission. If, for example, the goal of the university is to inculcate in students a way of knowing that is separated (or divorced) from everyday experience,⁴ PLA will therefore be restricted to those situations in which a student has had easily identified "academic" experiences very like that offered in the university. A self-taught musician or artist, for example, might receive credit similar to that awarded in an existing performance or studio course. Consonant with the university's mission, the task of PLA must then fall upon faculty from relevant academic departments who will make sure that experiential knowledge claims match

current offerings, not only in content, but also in theory and level of abstraction. It is worth noting, however, that department (or faculty) goals are not always aligned with those of the administration. At one extreme, administrators may wish to increase enrollments through “liberal” PLA policies whereas faculty will interpret such initiatives as an attack on “standards.” At the other extreme, it is the administrators, especially when operating within a conservative political climate, who will want to adhere strongly to well-known traditional subjects areas while faculty, often stimulated by specific PLA requests, become frustrated by the limitations imposed by a strict disciplinary perspective. (For an interesting analysis of this conflict in modern day Britain, see White, 2013).

If, however, the university’s mission reflects a more progressive view, that is, if it seeks to encourage unique or individualized student academic growth, the development of PLA policy consistent with that perspective presents a more difficult challenge. When faculty *teach* from that perspective, they introduce relevant disciplinary knowledge as a way of expanding or building upon their students’ own concerns. But what is the faculty reference point when they are faced with a *fait accompli* – an already existing body of knowledge that the student has acquired on his or her own? How can one establish a fixed assessment policy when each student’s case is unique not only in substance but in circumstance? Is it possible to establish transcendent policies and procedures for PLA that can be easily applied to a potentially infinite number of knowledge claims?

A model that could serve as a useful analogy in developing PLA policy is the process by which faculty create novel, sometimes singular, courses of study, commonly problem-based, interdisciplinary, and absent a specific textbook, for example, a course that examines a current American presidential election. Good illustrations of this process abound in the description of Dewey’s lab school (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936/1965/2007) and summarized by Dewey (1938), and, at the college level, besides Empire State College, at such institutions as Goddard College (e.g., Davis, 1996) and Evergreen State College (n.d.). The most ambitious first step in creating a freestanding course of study is to determine, and detail, its content. (From an AT perspective, the activity components must be exhaustively described.) Next, the learning experiences taken as a whole must be evaluated in terms of existing educational criteria (e.g., depth, breadth, complexity, etc.). The final step is to succinctly summarize the course so as to attract enrollees while still providing an honest picture of its content and goals. When an evaluating body (e.g., a curriculum committee) then examines the proposed course, these three steps also serve as the basis of assessment. To the extent that such intellectual forays outside standard disciplinary offerings are an acceptable part of the college tradition, the process by which they are vetted might well be applicable to how knowledge claims from outside the academy might be similarly assessed.

Step 1: Establishing the content

- What are the parameters or structure of the learning experience as a whole? Here, activity theory (see Figure 1) offers a particularly useful scheme for identifying and characterizing the various parts of a learning experience. From an information delivery perspective, “structure” might also be viewed as “input” – comparable to how the required components of a typical course, i.e., the course syllabus, assigned readings, classroom discussion, exercises, planned activities assignments, define its subject matter.
- How much time has the claimant been engaged in this experience? This feature of claimed knowledge is somewhat akin to the length of a term and the number of weekly hours required for a specific course of study. However, for Dewey (1938), an additional consideration is the extent to which the passage of time reflects what he referred to as the “principle of continuity” (p. 28). How long has the learning experience remained dynamic (or in Dewey’s terms, “educative”)? In other words, how long was there a continuous stream of learning from one experience to the next?
- How does the claimant demonstrate his or her knowledge? Just as the various course activities are

expected to result in some kind of measurable performance at the end, i.e., “output,” the prior learning assessor will want to know what exactly the claimant can actually do. While course knowledge is often measured by pencil-and-paper tests (which arguably measure knowing “about” rather than knowing “how to”), the university also offers a variety of other ways of demonstrating knowledge. Music and art students display works of art; athletes, dancers and actors, videos of physical movements; teachers and interns, portfolios of various documents; writers and journalists, specimens of creative work or published articles. A measurement of success such as a first-place award in a national archery competition, a high position in a business organization, acceptance to a juried exhibition, and so forth, is also typically sufficient.

Step 2. Determining “college level” attributes

The main questions to resolve here are whether the knowledge is college level, and if so, whether it is introductory or advanced, “liberal” or “professional.” Entire articles (indeed books) have been written on these aspects of college-level knowledge. Key here is for assessors to be cognizant of the qualities and knowledge expectations across the college’s *entire* curriculum, not their own particular area of expertise. It is also important to remember that college credit is awarded in courses for “C” performance; therefore, a substantive claim of college-level learning does not have to be perfect or complete.⁵

Step 3. Describing the claim

The creation of an acceptable (and persuasive) course description may be the most contentious area in PLA assessment, and one that demands serious consideration. The underlying concern is whether it should be the claimant or the assessor who creates and submits the final statement of knowledge for the official college record (Travers et al., 2011). As discussed earlier, the expectation that the claimant be capable of translating (or abstracting) their real-life learning experience into written academic language seems to be the largest barrier they face when requesting academic credits. A visual artist or musician may show through their performance both technical and aesthetic competence without having acquired a sophisticated way of articulating it. Since such verbal proficiency is typically what students learn over several years of college study, is it fair to expect, much less demand, that level of proficiency early in their academic career, particularly when the substance of the knowledge claimed may sometimes be foreign or new to academia (e.g., Coulter, 1996)? “Maternal knowledge” is an interesting case in point. While it is a very common body of knowledge, the academic language that describes it has been painstakingly developed by only a handful of feminist philosophers (see Coulter, 2001). If we make the impossible demand that undergraduates already have in hand a graduate-level command of language and structural analysis, those who most need this opportunity to accelerate their quest for a college degree may be least able to comply. As a result, the assessor will be denied access to new ways of thinking and/or new forms of knowledge that a university might otherwise welcome (see Travers, 2016). One resolution to this dilemma, admittedly not one everyone will embrace, is to assume that claimants will acquire acceptable levels of academic expression as part of their upcoming college courses, so that at the time of the assessment, all that ought to matter is the quality of the claimant’s learning experiences (as determined through an activity analysis), leaving the final translation – the “course description” – solely in the hands of the assessor.

Together, these suggested steps, borrowed from policies and procedures supporting the development of unique courses of study by *faculty*, offer tools of assessment that can be similarly applied to individualized areas of knowledge claimed by *students*. The underlying objective of such procedures is to promote and support curricular diversity, a goal that also permeates Dewey’s philosophy and progressive thought. The value of faculty-initiated curricular diversity ranges from the individual level by expanding options in order to meet unique student interests and needs – to the institutional level by updating university offerings to match the

continuous development of new knowledge -- to the societal level by providing as wide a variety of knowledge and competences as possible to sustain and strengthen its democratic values. It does not require much imagination to discern how these same values obtain when considering a progressive and individualized approach to PLA.

Summary

To review, it is worth stating again that the reason students have difficulty separating their knowledge from the experiences in which they acquired that knowledge is that from a number of vantage points beginning with Dewey and continuing on to activity theory today, they are essentially inseparable. If one can accept that position, then current policies for the award of college credit are based upon faulty assumptions about the unique (and elevated) nature of college-level learning (see Michelson, 2006; Starr-Glass, 2002). Indeed, a view of academic learning that is distilled into abstract categories is actually a distorted view of academic disciplines – and not incidentally an inaccurate description of many university disciplines typically ignored in the scholarly literature on prior learning assessment, such as in the arts, empirical sciences, athletics, community service, communication arts, and countless professional areas. Learning by doing, learning as activity, learning as experience – all these occur and are routinely accredited in academia for students majoring in music, radio and TV, political science, counseling, visual arts, construction, and so forth.⁶ This erroneous distinction between “academic” and “experiential” knowledge (which reminds us of Dewey’s either-or discussion) may also be the primary reason why the curricular advantages of PLA for the student and the institution have not been sufficiently recognized, much less welcomed.

No doubt, for those who attend college in order to be a scholar or to acquire advanced professional knowledge, the requirement that knowledge be expressed in formal language, abstractly, and from a particular point of view, may make very good sense; but for the vast majority who attend college in order to become productive members of our democratic society, recognition of what they have already learned should not be so restricted. Instead of forcing adults to demonstrate what certain scholars would like to see, the policy should be to allow applicants to fully describe the learning experiences that led to the knowledge they claim without any prior conceptions of how that knowledge should appear. On the basis of Dewey’s philosophy and the theorizing of others, we can require that the policy be guided by two overriding assumptions: first, that the actual experience of the applicant – in all of its permutations – is critically important for determining the breadth, depth, and complexity of the knowledge claimed, and secondly, that the knowledge claimed will no doubt be unique to that individual.

Without question, establishing the validity and reliability of these assessments is an important challenge, especially when claiming college-level learning (Stenlund, 2012). But this is also an issue for college courses that are taught. The answer to this problem does not necessarily lie in trying to “elevate” experiential knowledge by also adding additional readings, e.g., a biography of a composer, a history of the sport, but rather in requiring the student to more carefully analyze the components of the experience itself, e.g., the structure of musical composition they are learning to play, variations in ways pitches can be thrown in baseball. And activity theory may be especially helpful for this kind of analysis. As Eames (2016) wrote, AT is a “promising lens” for understanding “... the complexity of the educational process and the nature of teacher work [...] that is built up over time and experience and is seen to be unique to each teacher” (p. 169). If we but change the words “teaching work” and “teacher” to “student learning” and “student,” do we not have a nearly perfect description of how and what adults learn in real life?

In an open and free society that encourages its citizens to follow their own dreams, adults can and do learn quite successfully without a college education. That learning, just as Dewey and other philosophers saw and

some social scientists also appreciate, is shaped not just by each individual's own dispositions, needs, interests, and purposes, but is an intimate part of the very experiences through which that learning was acquired. That no two people can completely share the same experiences means that no two people will ever completely share the same knowledge. But, differences among people in their understandings, points of view, and areas of expertise, should not be regarded as some kind of weakness that needs to be overcome by the imposition of standardization. As Dewey argued, the very opposite is true. It is diversity that makes a society strong, successful, and sustainable. The mission of educational institutions could do no worse than to embrace policies that nourish individual student interests and aims (just as they try to meet their individual needs). And no better place to begin could be in the area of PLA that not only exemplifies Dewey's ideas about the learning process, but also his ideas about a democratic society. Welcoming the diverse knowledge adults can bring to our so-called ivory towers will not only help adults acquire more easily the coveted college degree the world increasingly demands, but it will also serve to open faculty minds to new modes of knowing and encourage our universities to embrace a more comprehensive meaning of knowledge.

Notes

- ¹ As a student of animal learning, the author observed many years ago that perceptual learning, even with rats, requires some kind of "surprise" or novelty. A comparable requirement is seen in Mezirow's (1990) theory of transformative learning that requires, in his words, a "trigger," that is, an unusual or unexpected event.
- ² A conclusion drawn erroneously by Alfred L. Hall-Quest, the editor of *Experience and Education* in his Editorial Forward (Dewey, 1938, p. 10).
- ³ Omitted from discussion here is yet another theoretical approach that can be applied to PLA, namely "complexity theory" as proposed by Fenwick (2006). It is, in fact, highly compatible with the complexities made obvious by AT, but it gives a bigger role to the assessor or teacher and the different set of attributes that they bring to the situation. Dewey was certainly attentive to the demands upon teachers, but did not emphasize that they too were highly diverse individuals.
- ⁴ A goal that underlies the vision of a university as an "ivory tower."
- ⁵ Arguably, a painting or musical performance that shows technical proficiency but also "a lack of talent" is still worthy of college credit.
- ⁶ Perhaps it was because Empire State College involved *all* faculty regardless of disciplinary affiliation in the PLA process that it was able to maintain its liberal approach to accrediting student experiential knowledge.

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