

The Significance of Support in Prior Learning Assessment Pursuits

Benjamin Jimenez, Texas, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the findings of research conducted on adult learners' experiences with the portfolio process and the implications for practice. The portfolio form of prior learning assessment (PLA) provides the opportunity for adult learners to earn course credits based on their ability to demonstrate college-level learning that corresponds to respective course learning goals. The process of completing a portfolio for assessment requires a deep level of reflection and engagement on the learner's part. Viewing the portfolio process through the lens of the adult learner allows practitioners access to the additional takeaways those students experienced, as well as insights into the support and engagement required by facilitators throughout the endeavor.

Introduction

The foundation for this essay stems from the findings of research conducted on learners' perspectives on the portfolio process. Accordingly, the discussion and implications of those findings can inform practice. The essence of the portfolio process will be discussed, as well as other fundamental learning experiences as conveyed by the study's participants. Correspondingly, the argument offered here is that practitioners can build effective engagement strategies, support systems, and general interventions that help to buoy and guide the learners as they progress with their portfolios.

After a brief discussion of the research findings, a discussion on corresponding support strategies, interventions, areas for evaluation and assessment, etc. for the respective themes and subthemes is presented. For practitioners, there is emphasis on the importance of an ongoing process of utilizing historically and experientially sound practice in facilitation. In addition, when provided with the inherently valuable insights from learners as to what effective practice looks like, it only makes sense to incorporate appropriate methods in an attempt to meet those learners' needs. As this essay argues, at each step, the goal should be the creation of an intentional, practitioner-oriented perspective on viable and effective approaches to strengthening the learners' experiences with PLA through effective supporting practices.

Background of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine adult learners and their experiences developing portfolios that provide descriptions and evidence of their prior learning at the college level. A phenomenological approach provided the foundational research methodology. The theoretical framework for the proposed study was based on the concept of tacit knowledge, which is relevant to the process by which students uncover and demonstrate their prior knowledge. Experiential learning theories were used to interpret the participants' descriptions of their experiences with the portfolio process. In-depth phenomenological interviews allowed for the depth and breadth of experiential data from which themes emerged for analyzing participants' feedback on the new meaning-making uncovered via the portfolio process. By gaining access to insights into how the portfolio process was experienced from the learner's perspective, we can both inform and improve current PLA practices and add to the knowledge base of adult education (Jimenez, 2015a).

Research Design

This study utilized a three-tiered interview process with each of the nine participants. The three-tiered, semi-structured interview design provided the researcher and the participants the opportunity to progressively

uncover the learning and the process of constructing that new learning involved in portfolios. According to Seidman (2006), “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience,” which “... provides access to the context of people’s behavior ...” (pp. 9-10). The initial interview captured a brief life history from each participant, beginning at adulthood, and up to the point that student decided to pursue the portfolio process. The next interview explored each participant’s experiences with the portfolio process. The final interview focused on any new meaning-making and learning gained by the participants through their experiences with the portfolio development process (Jimenez, 2018).

Summary of Findings

Four main themes emerged, with each theme composed of additional subthemes. The first theme captures the participants’ *motivation(s)* for pursuing the portfolio process. The second theme depicts the participants’ experiences with the *elements of successful portfolios*. Third, the fundamental importance of *making connections* through the active reflective practice and inherent tacit learning involved in the portfolio process. The final theme captured the essence of the phenomenon as experienced and described by the participants: *validation* (Jimenez, 2015a). The outline below summarizes the four themes and respective subthemes from my research findings, which will be referenced throughout this essay.

- I. Motivations for Pursuing the Portfolio Process
 - A. Save Time, Save Money
 - B. “My Turn”
 - C. Goal Completion
- II. Elements of Successful Portfolios
 - A. Self-Directed Learning
 - 1. Honesty with Self
 - 2. Avoidance of Procrastination
 - B. Expectations vs. Realities of the Portfolio Process
 - 1. Time Consuming
 - 2. Feedback Loop
 - C. Support
- III. Making Connections
 - A. Reflections on Learning
 - 1. Embedded Learning in the Portfolio Process
 - 2. Taking Stock
 - 3. Transferable Learning
 - B. Tacit-to-Explicit: Challenging, but Changing
- IV. Essence of the Phenomenon: Validation
 - A. Increased Confidence in Self
 - B. Sense of Achievement

The analysis of those findings resulted in themes associated with an increase in self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment or achievement, the creation of new meanings or new connections stemming from the reflection on prior learning, and the essence of the phenomenon, which was validation. For the purposes of the study, validation represented the learners’ descriptions of authentication they received from PLA assessors as proof that their prior learning was indeed college level, and therefore, justified the earning of course credit. In addition, findings on the types of support, feedback and structure of the process were also uncovered.

Implications for Support Related to Findings

The discussion below connects the aforementioned findings to respective types of support that correspond to the needs conveyed by the literature and the participants in the research study. The essential types of support and support systems categorized below as “effective practice” includes “motivations,” expectation setting (concerning time, the feedback loop, etc.), and self-directed learning; positive student outcomes, which addresses validation and increased self-esteem, and the reflection connection inherent in the PLA process; and finally external support systems, which includes peer support and support for PLA faculty and staff.

Effective practice. As a means of connecting the findings of the research with other current PLA practices, a recent *PLAIO* editorial demonstrated the need for such a bridge between the research and practices of PLA.

Our policies and procedures need to provide meaningful space for PLA credit in those curricula. Thus, we need a shift in the way we think about curricula: learning and skills gained outside of academia, or even outside of conventional training, should no longer be judged as second rate, or inherently limited, or an afterthought that has no true place in typical curricular pathways. Rather, meaningful curricula should be understood as integrations of learning taken from different settings and different situations.

Furthermore,

... Our policies must recognize that people have gained skills and knowledge that the experts (in and out of the university) may not yet have recognized as legitimate learning. Thus, PLA policy must find ways to identify and affirm such outsider knowledge and perspectives – new ways of thinking and learning – that are valuable and critical for pushing the conventional boundaries of a field. In this way, our policies need to acknowledge the potential of students as co-creators of knowledge, not solely as receivers of that which is already known by the experts. (Travers & Mandell, 2018)

The references to effective PLA policy relate to applying value and a sense of worth through the recognition of knowledge, skills and abilities, which enhances the connection between the learning with which students enter the program, and the supplemental concepts gained in formal academic settings. Accordingly, practitioners of PLA would be wise to review program and organizational policies to ensure this “co-creation model” is effectively implemented in order to maximize efforts for both educators and learners.

Motivations. Of the three subthemes that emerged from the “motivations” finding, the one that was most prevalent among the participants was the concept of saving time and money by virtue of successful completion of and credit-awarding for their portfolio submission(s) and assessment. Each of the participants expressed the importance of saving time and money as significant factors in his/her decision to attempt developing portfolios. This finding makes logical sense and certainly correlates with how the portfolio program was marketed to potential students.

Cassie¹ expressed:

The big problem for me has always been time; it's not ability or desire, it's been time. The thing that appealed to me the most was the ability to get credit for prior learning experiences because I had that; I had so much experience that I had learned ... through my working career.

Wallace mentioned,

I felt like it was going to take me years to finish. That's when I really looked at [the institution] and I went “That's perfect,” because I see everything I've done already, and then when I learned about the portfolio program I went “Wow! I can apply that – my applied knowledge – to get my degree much faster.” (Jimenez, 2015a)

It would behoove PLA programs to continue to market the cost saving and timesaving opportunities associated with that learning experience. Examples of actual student outcomes with respect to tuition and completion timelines would aid in demonstrating the authenticity of that potential savings.

Additionally, the subtheme of “my turn” ranked high among tallied participant responses. That subtheme centers on the idea that these adult learners held-off pursuing their own formal education in order to prioritize the pursuits of other people, whether that priority is that of a spouse/domestic partner, children or their larger familial units, etc. Now that it was “their turn” to pursue their educational goals, the portfolio process made those goals seem feasible.

Shelley stated,

My youngest being in high school is just about to finish. My oldest one is going to be 21. It just seemed like a perfect time, and it really has been. I'm actually really grateful that I waited until now to do [portfolios], because I can be totally focused on it, and I'm really, really enjoying it, and so I think it all worked out the way it was supposed to.

Marshall noted,

I finally just had that feeling of OK, I'm ready now. I've gotten that vibe that it's time to go back – internal motivation kick. Also, I was in the army for four years so, all of my civilian friends and comrades had already done their degrees and what not, and I was like, OK I don't want to wait around forever to get done, so I'll do one [portfolio] now and another ... I took the detour from college, now I'll get back on track. (Jimenez, 2015a)

These motivations described by the participants relate to the assumptions of adult learners described by Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998):

1. The learner's needs are the catalyst for educational pursuits, 2. The learner's self-concept informs decisions on education, 3. The role of the learner's experiences in educational settings is important, 4. The learners demonstrate a readiness to learn, 5. The learners demonstrate an orientation to learning and, 6. Motivation to learn is primarily internal. (p. 4)

Setting realistic expectations. A second overarching thematic finding of *elements of successful portfolios* reflected that undertaking the portfolio process was just the initial step. Participants in the study relayed some of the details required for successful portfolio assessments based on their respective experiences with the process. The findings included avoiding procrastination (or perfectionism, which was deemed a derivative of procrastination); being honest with themselves regarding actual possibilities for earning course credits via portfolio; and being realistic regarding the volume of work involved in the portfolio process. (While the aforementioned carrot of saving time still persisted, the participants had to adjust to the specific needs and time involved in developing portfolios – which was often discussed as taking longer and being more involved than originally anticipated.) Specifically, participants discussed the effort to connect their prior learning to respective intended course or learning outcomes as more time consuming than planned.

In addition, the assessment process for portfolios focuses on the learners' ability to demonstrate their prior learning to an anonymous portfolio assessor. While receiving feedback from faculty and assessors during the portfolio process was found to be an overall positive outcome, the time involved in the review and subsequent feedback, and the anonymity of the portfolio assessors, proved to be a negative aspect of the portfolio process described by participants.

For example, Randi described her experience with the portfolio feedback process:

It seemed kind of like a long time because after you turn it in it's like you just kind of want to know if you get [credit] or not. You spend all that time and you're like, "I've got to wait a few weeks," or whatever it was before I know if I got credit or not, or if I actually have to take the class, or if I have to redo it, or whatever. So, it kind of made me anxious a little bit. I know you can't know instantly, but I kind of want to know.

Jolene furthered,

It was the best part because, you know, writing it, I think there was, for me, a sense of, you know, "Am I really doing this right? Do I really have the learning?" So, getting that reinforcement back from the evaluator, and they were good the ones I had, in terms of writing a fair amount of commentary, which made me feel like it wasn't just rubberstamped. (Jimenez, 2015a)

The experiences described above reflect the dual nature of the feedback process as it pertains to portfolios. While participants described the feedback they received as positive, the ambiguity of expectations coupled with the anonymity of the portfolio evaluators resulted in anxious experiences for participants (Jimenez, 2015a). Although my dissertation research focused on the portfolio form of PLA, the implications for providing resources, as well as effective and engaged support can and should be applied to all forms of PLA. If the point of PLA is to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate facets of their learning, our ability as practitioners to provide adequate and timely feedback, in addition to realistic expectations throughout the process (what will be done by whom and when), should be fundamental assessment and evaluation criteria for successful programs.

Self-directed learning. The majority of findings related to elements of successful portfolios reflect

characteristics of self-directed learning (SDL). According to Malcolm Knowles (1975), SDL is defined as “a process in which students take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes” (p. 18). In effect, the greater the ability to incorporate effective SDL in the portfolio process, the greater the likelihood of both completing a portfolio and earning course credit from the assessment of the completed portfolio(s).

Relatedly, Brookfield (2013) wrote “to be truly self-directed is to be empowered – to decide what is most important to you, how you want to go about learning it, and when you’re done. The learning is done not to earn grades but because it has to be done if people are to lead meaningful lives” (p. 92). Given that SDL contexts can be somewhat void of facilitator intervention, the more intentional PLA practitioners are in respect to providing adequate resources, prompt and informative feedback and timely communication on an iterative basis, the greater the likelihood their students will be successful in their PLA undertakings. Also crucial here are ongoing efforts to solicit meaningful and ongoing feedback from learners themselves, which should continue to inform (and modify) PLA practices.

Additionally, faculty and staff tasked with creating and facilitating those PLA support services should evaluate the quality of those resources for applicability and relevance to the specific needs (as identified by both students and program facilitators). This iterative assessment will help to ensure that the support being offered addresses the needs of the student, and thus more effectively minimizes the barriers and obstacles to student PLA success.

Positive Student Outcomes. Especially important for adult learners is the fact that the more relevant the learning, the greater the impact and value of the learning outcomes. Portfolios can be a representative example of that relevance and applicability. Accordingly, as practitioners of PLA programs, an intentional approach to supporting the adult learners with tapping into those reservoirs of prior learning will only enhance the outcomes for both the students and the effectiveness of the program. Identifying effective ways to incorporate these practices in PLA programs takes time and effort. However, given the potential benefits of adopting the types of written and engaged reflection in PLA facilitation, it is worthwhile to undertake the ongoing and deliberate practice necessary to develop these learning-rich environments. Those supporting initiatives might include brainstorming, clustering or mind-mapping – the kinds of activities that foster and encourage critical thinking. Thus, for example, through engaged reflective practice of creating portfolios, those learners were able to reengage and recontextualize their prior learning as it pertained to respective course learning objectives. PLA practitioners should infuse examples, stories, exercises, and other examples of interventions that demonstrate the significant benefits of engaged and reflective practices. We need to seize any opportunity to engage our students where they are to more clearly provide an individualized and personalized road map for them to pursue in their PLA endeavors.

Validation. Overwhelmingly, a sense of validation was found to be the essence of this PLA process for the participants of my study. The participants described how the use of their prior learning toward current course credit requirements at the college level positively impacted how they viewed themselves, and how they viewed their prior learning as more meaningful in light of the portfolio process (Jimenez, 2015a).

Shelley explained,

Well, I think after I did the first one I started feeling the effects of building my self-esteem and putting that knowledge down on paper, that I really looked at it as if I did not get credits for it, I’m still really getting something valuable out of this ... I could see some value in doing this. Just even in my self-esteem.

Cassie stated,

If I can say it in one sentence, it’s that education is the light that chases away the shadows. Otherwise, you’re walking in the dark, and something is going to reach out and bite you, and you’re always walking with fear and trepidation because there are too many shadows. And that education just obliterates them, so you don’t have to walk in fear.

Gretchen noted,

The ability to recognize and feel confident that you have skills to contribute, skills to help you feel confident that you've not just been somebody floating around in the career world. It definitely is something that you can show yourself and who to others, that your experiences, your skills are worthy and meaningful. I think that might be kind of a good way to describe that ... you've then moved the portfolio forward and the professor's checked-off that you've got the learning; there's validation in that.

Wallace stated,

It validated, personally, the work that I did was good, but it also validated to me that what I had done for a profession for 20-plus years actually meant something. It actually translated into something and somebody else saw value in that ... I think it was an opportunity for me to really earn some validation for the things I had accomplished in my professional life over the years; that they amounted to something.

And, finally, Sandra echoed,

The portfolio process was validating for all that time you were out of school, because you're just, like, "Look I really did do something with that." So, the portfolio process, for someone who is [an adult learner] can be very validating of that time they spent outside of school and saying you actually did do stuff that was productive. You did learn things. You did gain skills outside of your specific job and so I think it can be very validating. (Jimenez, 2015a)

Increased self-esteem and confidence benefit adult learners in higher education settings. The realization that this type of validation exists as part of PLA should inform our practices, as well as provide a model for use in other adult learner-focused educational settings and programs (Jimenez, 2015a). Relatedly, in the evaluation process, subject matter experts provide an assessment of portfolios submitted for earning potential course credit. While that assessment typically represents the final phase of the portfolio process, my research findings "indicated a deeper sense of validation" (Jimenez, 2015a) gained as a result of the assessment for the majority of participants in the study. In addition, participants discussed their experiences with an increase in self-esteem and a deeper sense of accomplishment based on their participation in the portfolio process. While students may be successful in their respective PLA pursuits without that depth of reflection, the participants in my study resoundingly conveyed the lasting and substantive experiences of validation based on their engagement in the PLA process.

Reflection connection. This thematic finding addresses the process of connecting participants' prior tacit learning to the expected student learning outcomes associated with the respective courses for which they are seeking credit. That process is inherently reflective in nature. It requires learners to correlate their prior learning acquired outside academic settings to specific course learning objectives as provided by the institution. Participants in my research study showed that they had gained new insights, connections, and in some cases, new meaning/new learning because of that deep, intentional reflective practice.

The PLA process requires participants to translate tacit knowledge into explicit formats in order for it to be assessed. As my research indicated, the participants' experiences with portfolios resulted in a deeper understanding of their respective prior learning. A major conclusion of my study was that the deeply reflective nature of portfolios offered the participants the opportunity to construct new and valuable meaning from their prior learning, primarily from a tacit-knowledge reservoir. Accordingly, it makes sense that facilitators and other practitioners of PLA create significant opportunities for learners to practice that tacit-to-explicit conversion in their respective writing (Jimenez, 2015b). In practice, facilitators of PLA need to ensure they provide opportunities for students to engage in writing and critical thinking activities that simulate the demonstration of tacit knowledge. The greater the need for theoretical demonstration and understanding, the more important the practice of synthesizing information. Examples of this type of writing include argumentation exercises, position papers, and other assignments that focus on summary and analysis.

Findings in the literature refer to this type of unanticipated new meaning-making or new learning as a "back eddy" result of engaging in portfolio development. "Most, although not all, respondents experienced a back-eddy effect of realizing such unintended but nonetheless valued outcomes as self-actualization and an

increased depth of learning through reflection” (Peruniak & Powell, 2007, pp. 98-99). Lamoreaux (2005) found that participants’ experiences with prior learning assessment exemplified the open-minded investment in new meaning-making opportunities fundamental to transformational learning. She stated, “Trying on multiple perspectives is part of the substantive theory for fostering change related to PLA” (p. 134). Dirkx (1998) argued that for adult learners, “to be meaningful, what is learned has to be viewed as personally significant in some way; it must feel purposive and illuminate qualities and values of importance to the person or group” (p. 9).

Dirkx’s characterization fittingly describes experiences conveyed by the participants of my research concerning their work with portfolios.

Jolene stated:

The idea of being able to get some credit for my previous experience ... it just seemed like a cool way to get some credits, and I think even then that it felt like to me [the institution] was saying “We value you and, appreciate that some of your experience is actually equal to college credit.” I think that was meaningful to me in terms of feeling a certain level of respect. (Jimenez, 2015a)

Schön (1983) wrote that “... reflection can serve as a corrective to overlearning” and that, “through reflection ... [one] can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences ... and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience” (p. 61). This new meaning could then be applied to varying contexts through additional reflection and action.

While certainly connected to PLA pursuits, there are further-reaching benefits and potential for application of this type of learning outcome. Blinkhorn (1999) found that “... the portfolio process encourages reflection” and that “the learners were reflecting on their prior learning throughout the construction of their portfolios” (p. 154). Furthermore, “through reflection, the portfolio process allowed these learners to create meaning from their prior learning” (pp. 154-155). Angel (2008) concluded that portfolios were “... a context for reflection ... to promote a holistic perspective of their experience ...” (pp. 94). The overarching umbrella of effective self-directed learning is consistent with both the literature and participants’ feedback on it being a necessary component for effective PLA. The applications of the deep and iterative reflective practice corresponding to PLA initiatives can play a more substantial role than just use in those credit-earning contexts.

Cassie stated:

I mean, that’s the whole thing about the portfolio process is, yes, there’s an output and you might get something out of it, but more importantly, there’s the reflection. I mean, even the chronology; I had forgotten how far I had come in my life. I had forgotten some major events in my life, and when I had to sit down and write it all out like that, I almost felt closer to myself ... yeah, it’s just like therapy. I mean, it’s like self-therapy because therapy is supposed to be about helping you through your issues. Well, so often we don’t ever work through them. We just scurry around them. Portfolio made you, even aside from the subject matter, made you [work through] that and that was a pretty awesome experience. (Jimenez, 2015a)

Wlodkowski (1999) stated that a “learning experience in an engaging format about a relevant topic is intrinsically motivating because it increases the range of conscious connections to those interests, applications, and purposes that are important to learners” (pp. 76-77). This individually generated desire to learn was found to be a catalyst to more than just the initial desire to pursue portfolios, but was also a driving factor in sustaining focus throughout the development of a portfolio. Similarly, Angel (2008) found that portfolios were used “as a motivational tool to facilitate learning” (p. 94). Accordingly, this information could prove integral to how prior learning assessment programs are developed, promoted and facilitated.

The literature cited above mirrors my research findings that explicitly providing realistic expectations of the time and work required provides a foundation for the learners to be successful with their portfolios. Since all PLA endeavors require reflective practice on the part of the learner, the more effective and engaged that active reflection is, the greater the likelihood of success in PLA undertakings.

As practitioners of PLA, the frequency, depth, and iterations of focused and intentional reflection opportunities we provide can only help to serve our learners in respect to: a) motivating their higher educational pursuits, b) demonstrating and conveying effectively the essential elements for success in PLA, c) aiding in their abilities to make connections to both current PLA outcomes and new meaning stemming from their respective prior learning, and d) increasing the likelihood of transformation, increased self-esteem, and a sense of validation directly connected to their value as learners and as members of our higher education communities.

This key component of PLA should not be taken for granted; rather, it should be intentionally cultivated to provide the richest and deepest mining of learners' vast reservoirs of prior learning. Accordingly, intentional practitioner focus on the deep and iterative reflective practices, which are critical for successful portfolio development, creates a richer learning context and greater scope and scale of applicability of the PLA process.

In conjunction with the potential for transformational learning experiences and a sense of validation, the reflection integral to the portfolio process should be a primary focus of facilitation. As Mezirow (1990) put it,

When learners suffer from tunnel vision, when they encounter troublesome issues, when they have difficulty in learning or lack motivation, they must be helped to become aware of the relationship of new data to what they already know ... and to understand why they see the new data as they do. This means that the educator must actively encourage reflective discourse through which learners can examine the justification for their meaning schemes and perspectives as well as focusing on the new data presented. (p. 200)

Adult learners entering or returning to higher education settings can experience barriers to success or progress in their respective endeavors. While those barriers can sometimes be of their own creation, it behooves faculty and staff to be prepared to identify when, where, and how those obstacles may impede learners' progress. More than that, the ability to address those student needs effectively and in a timely manner can readily increase the likelihood of success (retention, program completion, student satisfaction, etc.). This type of oversight and readiness for intervention is tethered to the intention that adult learners engage in PLA opportunities as early in their respective educational program as possible, so as to maximize their use and potential benefits. Accordingly, the seminars, workshops, courses, etc. that facilitate portfolio development should include a wide range of macro- and micro-focused support resources and services. The earlier and more readily those resources are marketed and utilized, the greater the likelihood students will engage in the support services.

External support systems. Portfolios are work-intensive and time-consuming projects. Accordingly, it makes sense that adult learners engaged in the portfolio process would benefit from multiple areas of support as they navigate and develop their work. In addition to the institutional resources for students pursuing PLA, and peer support, as well, participants in my research study also conveyed the significance of family, partner and/or professional supporting resources.

Wallace mentioned,

Talk to your family and say, "If it's a possibility, I'm going to need your help because I can't do this by myself." Without the support of my boss and my job, and without my family, it would have been very difficult for me to do it, too, because they gave me the emotional support and the time support to go do it.

Gretchen noted,

My workplace definitely was supportive in the idea, "We know you're going to school ... as long as you give us enough heads-up [that] you need [time] off by a certain day." So I was able to do it on weekends, just do it after work, squeeze in a lunch hour if there was something I wanted to research or whatever.

Cassie stated,

It was a lot of conversations with my family because my family has suffered through this. We've all given up a lot so that I can do this. We've given up vacations. We've given up many, many things that we all used to do so that they are all lined up right behind me and making their own sacrifices so I can go to school. I can see the end ... the portfolio was what tipped the scales for me to make the decision

to jump and, my family was like “We’re behind you.” (Jimenez, 2015a)

While the levels of external support varied, the fact that it was commonly cited by participants in my study as a significant benefit in their respective portfolio development process, reflects its importance. In order to aid the learner in seeking relevant external support, practitioners should dedicate time for expectation setting for both the respective PLA endeavor and the impacts of pursuing PLA. Those efforts would benefit the learner tremendously. The more transparent we as practitioners can be about the time and efforts involved in successful PLA, the more effectively our students can proactively convey their support needs to their nonacademic world. The types of support will vary for each individual, but it is of no less importance to ensure we have accurately conveyed the significant role that support plays in PLA.

Peer support. In their book on high-impact e-portfolio practice, Eynon and Gambino (2017) noted the importance of faculty feedback to the success of portfolio development. Faculty feedback should be “frequent and targeted,” and it was found that “high levels of faculty feedback correlated with deeper engagement” (p. 68). While the importance of iterative and focused feedback from faculty and staff were addressed earlier in this essay, Eynon and Gambino (2017) suggested another viable and informative feedback source: peer or team-based collaboration. Realizing that the portfolio development process and many forms of PLA are self-directed endeavors, there are opportunities for the learners to connect with others who are also pursuing PLA opportunities. By creating a collaborative team environment to elicit relevant feedback from peers, students can become more aware of assumptions or biases in their thinking and approaches. Such an environment can provide “a context for testing, refining, and ultimately deepening understanding that then informs individual reflection and analysis” (p. 69).

This type of peer-to-peer support provides another layer of support, but also a significant perspective shift, in that the feedback provided is from others who share the same goals, which is to earn credit via PLA. This egalitarian feedback offers significant insights from an audience that knows the process and corresponding challenges inherent in the PLA processes. This more well-rounded approach to providing tangible insights throughout the PLA process serves the students’ needs more effectively, while also supplementing the deep and rich feedback that should be provided by faculty and staff.

Support for PLA faculty and staff. While most of the support systems covered in this essay are related to student services, peer support and resources, it would be shortsighted not to include ways to support faculty in their PLA facilitation efforts. Eynon and Gambino (2017) provided seven tips for effective professional faculty development connected to e-portfolios.

Focus on pedagogy: Technology and other resources are important, but pedagogy is crucial (knowing how to facilitate PLA efforts effectively is fundamental to success).

Form a partnership: Work with the respective faculty development resources at your institution to inform your practice and increase your exposure, experience, and expertise inasmuch as portfolio facilitation is concerned.

Build faculty leadership: Create interventions and interactions that rely on faculty insight [intentionally eliciting feedback from other PLA faculty on an iterative basis]. This collaborative approach can “energize powerful professional development” (p. 76).

Design for sustained engagement: “Changes in practice take time” (p. 76); portfolio pedagogy can be particularly challenging.

Model integrative e-portfolio pedagogy: Assist faculty in experiencing the strategies you want to nurture.

Connect with and across departments: “Respect discipline structures, but don’t be limited by them” (p. 76).

Support faculty engagement: Recognize and reward faculty focus on PLA innovation (p. 76).

Although the authors’ focus is on e-portfolios, the support and feedback provided by the respective institutions are just as applicable in other PLA settings (e.g., portfolio seminars, exam-based facilitation, etc.). Additionally, the seven tips provide significant room for respective programs to adjust the specifics of the faculty support resources as needed and on an iterative basis. The assessment and evaluation of the relevance of support for faculty is critical to ensure a high quality and sustainable program.

In his book on creating courses for adults, St. Clair (2015) addressed questions of effective resources that can

apply to both educators and learners: “How does the content relate to the intended goals of the course?” (p. 109); “What are the requirements for the content to be in a specific sequence?”; “How will the resources support learning?” (p. 110). Additionally, and of significance to educators and practitioners of PLA, the following questions need to be addressed: “Who should identify and collect resources?” for faculty use, and most importantly, “How – and how easily – can learners access the resources?” (St. Clair, 2015, p. 110). This two-way approach helps to ensure the resources utilized are relevant and applicable for facilitation efforts and aiding the learner in the PLA process.

Closing Thoughts

PLA offers learners unique opportunities to earn credit and demonstrate learning. In addition to the potential for earning course credits, the literature reviewed and findings of my own research suggest that the application of students’ prior learning is relevant to a considerably wider range of contexts. Specifically, the participants’ responses suggest that successful portfolios provided them concrete proof that they could succeed in higher education. Hence, the learning they experienced throughout the portfolio process was personally meaningful and they now recognized that they had the knowledge to apply that new learning to different contexts (Jimenez, 2015a).

As discussed throughout this essay, there is a strong correlation between characteristics and theoretical groundings of adult learning theory and effective PLA practices. Retention, program completion, professional work applications, and general lifelong learning validation notwithstanding, PLA provides participants the potential to have motivational experiences in respect to their sense of ability to succeed in higher education. The fact that the content of portfolios is a demonstration of the lived acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities of that adult learner only strengthens that sense of motivation.

Practitioners of this rewarding student-centered phenomenon and institutions that promote it bear a special responsibility: We would better serve our learners, and the field and practice of PLA, through an iterative and sustained focus on supporting them throughout their learning and demonstration endeavors. The motivation in our learners to seek out formal educational opportunities has been organically stoked; it is incumbent on us to help keep that fire lit.

Note

¹ Pseudonyms were used for the study participant names.

References

- Angel, J. P. (2008). *Learning portfolios: A phenomenological study of student portfolio development at a community college* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Central Essentials; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (304383940)
- Blinkhorn, K. W. (1999). *Prior learning assessment: An investigation of nonsponsored learning for college credits* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (304556439)
- Brookfield, S. D. (2013). *Powerful techniques for teaching adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Dirkx, J. M. (1998). Transformative learning theory in the practice of adult education: An overview. *PAAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 7(1998), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=17475>
- Eynon, B., & Gambino, L. M. (2017). *High-impact ePortfolio practice: A catalyst for student, faculty, and institutional learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Jimenez, B. A. (2015a). *A phenomenological study of adult learners' experiences with the portfolio form of prior learning assessment* (Doctoral dissertation). Texas State University, San Marcos, TX. Retrieved from <https://ecommons.txstate.edu/handle/10877/5540>
- Jimenez, B. A. (2015b). Phenomenological research findings on adult learners’ experiences with the portfolio process. *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference 2015*. Manhattan, KS: AERC. Retrieved from <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/28>
- Jimenez, B. A. (2018, June). Expanding on phenomenological research findings on adult learners’ experiences with the portfolio process. *Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference 2018*. Victoria, BC Canada: AERC. Retrieved from <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2018/papers/47>
- Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and instructors*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Cambridge Adult Education.

- Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (5th ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Co.
- Lamoreaux, A. J. (2005). *Adult learners' experience of change related to prior learning assessment* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (305396019)
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Peruniak, G., & Powell, R. (2007, Spring). Back eddies of learning in the recognition of prior Learning: A case study. *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education*, 33(1), 83-106. Retrieved from <https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/cjuce-rcepu/index.php/cjuce-rcepu/article/view/19946>
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- St. Clair, R. (2015). *Creating courses for adults: Design for learning*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Travers, N. L., & Mandell, A. (2018). PLA Policies: A Commitment to Principles in a Time of Change [Editorial]. *PLA Inside Out: An International Journal on Theory, Research and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment*, 2018(6), 1-3. Retrieved from <https://www.plaio.org/index.php/home/article/view/150/172>
- Wlodkowski, R. J. (1999). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.