

## Thinking about PLA and Competency-based Education: The PLAIO Advisory Board

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*We were excited to offer some of our PLAIO Advisory Board members an opportunity to share their reflections and pose their questions on competency-based education and its relationship to prior learning assessment (PLA)/recognition of prior learning (RPL). What follows is an edited version of two conversations. Thanks to everyone for their participation and their review of earlier drafts.*

### Conversation #1, July 9, 2020:

**Mary Beth Lakin**, director, Credit for Prior Learning Assessment Network, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (USA); **Tracey Little**, course coordinator, Academic Programming Delivery Division, The University of the West Indies Open Campus (Jamaica); **David Starr-Glass**, mentor, Center for International Education, SUNY Empire State College (Prague); **Christine Wihak**, retired/former director of PLAR, Thompson Rivers University - Open Learning and the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC), Thompson Rivers University (Canada); **Nan Travers** and **Alan Mandell**, co-editors.

**Nan Travers (N.T.):** Would you share some context around your understanding of and work in competency-based learning and competency-based education (CBL/CBE)? This will help provide us with a sense of things that you've done and thought about in the competency-based world. Our second question asks you to elaborate on the relationship between competency-based and prior learning assessments.

**David Starr-Glass (D.S.-G.):** Although I have no direct experience of competency-based educational systems either in the academic world or in the world of work, I have read the literature; I've also looked at some of the studies that have come out and am impressed by the idea. But I have also seen a lot of hype in this direction — that it is something of our time, and that it will revolutionize things; perhaps this is so. My concern is that in some cases, competencies are being treated as a checkoff list, while in other applications competencies are being demonstrated. There is variability in the ways competencies and competency-based education are being discussed and implemented. And there also is something like a COVID-19 “new normal” order of things that we must consider. I have a feeling that approaches like competency-based education are going to be seen as very interesting in the future.

**Christine Wihak (C.W.):** In Canada, for decades, the community college system has basically worked on competency-based systems. In some provinces, committees meet to discuss different programs that are offered at more than one institution and define the competencies that are associated with that credential. In some provinces like Ontario, for example, they have audits to make sure that all the competencies covered by individual courses are ticked off, so institutions have a choice about how they're going to package those competencies. It's not a requirement to have a standard set of courses: courses can vary quite a bit from institution to institution, but they have to map their contents from an individual course onto the overall competencies for the credential and across universities. This speaks to some of the work that my colleague Judy Harris identified on bodies of knowledge and knowledge structures in university programs. So, in nursing, for example, which is a university program here in Canada, and I think

also in the States, the competencies are very highly defined. But in a Bachelor of Arts, they're not so fully defined. Our university, for example, has developed broad statements of competencies of a graduate. Our own employer department [human resources] has a set of competencies that we use to assess candidates for university positions. But these are broad, generic competencies rather than the very specific kind of stuff that's in competency-based education.

**Mary Beth Lakin (M.B.L.):** I have to go back to the 1980s. I think this was the purest experience with competency-based learning for education, and this was actually done in the workplace in early childhood education focusing on teachers who did not have postsecondary credentials. It was called The Child Development Associate credential, or CDA. And in those days, that credential was not so much connected with higher education. It was recognized in the early childhood education community and throughout professional associations. I think they used the term “competency,” but it was more like what Christine was describing as “bodies of knowledge.” So, there were these big areas like classroom management and parent relationships — about six or seven standards — and those were broken up into different skill areas that you had to demonstrate if you were a candidate. Then you would have a team that would evaluate you for the credential. I was the director of the program and was one of the people on the team. You selected your team. Then you had to include a parent, and there were different ways in which the candidate had to show what she knew and what she could do. Candidates were observed in the classroom and there were interviews, so there were multiple types of assessments: it was very rich. I am really thinking about some of the things David said about competency-based education now, and the thing that I liked about the CDA was that to me it was very clear. You knew what you had to do. The language and the process were transparent. It made sense to anybody in the field who would be in different environments, and so it was translatable in a lot of different ways. I appreciated that because you knew what you had to do and if you were able to do it, you knew what it stood for. I think that a lot of the work that's going on now is really good work, but I think there's a whole lot of churning and transitioning, and there are so many different groups coming at it from different angles that it's hard to have a clear sense of what it is, how to show it, and how you're going to use it. So, thinking about today, I have had that one clear example through that one industry and for me, the question is: How would you look at this across different industries? I just don't think we're there yet. I still think that while the example I gave on early childhood wasn't perfect, there are a lot of good things about it.

**C.W.:** You know, we had a very similar process here in Canada at that time when early childhood education became professionalized, and it became a requirement to have a CBE in Canada to work in government-licensed day care. Still, I think it's a sweeping generalization to say that CBE is being used especially when it's a move to professionalization or when there's a shortage in a particular area and they suddenly want to get people qualified as quickly as they can. But otherwise, it's my sense that they *don't* think it's worth the time to create and conduct competency-based assessments; it's just easier to just do micro-assessments or micro-gap-filling teaching.

**N.T.:** One of the things coming up here is that different approaches are being used when we talk about competency-based education. As David pointed out, one is where some institutions are constructing the attainment of competencies like a checkoff list. On the other hand, there has been a real movement [and I think it's what Mary Beth and Christine pointed out] to talk about the competencies that we can use to describe a body of knowledge or a body of action in terms of what somebody knows and what they can do. That's a very simple definition of competency. What I think we are really focusing on is a third movement in terms of looking at competencies as a way of having a universal language from people's experiences to what's happening in the classroom. In effect, you can translate people's work experience to competencies and, at the same time, translate what's expected in the classroom [or what people are learning in a classroom] to competencies, and you can then map the two sets of competencies. This leads us to the next question about the relationship between competency-based education and

PLA. Is there compatibility, or are these two different things?

**Alan Mandell (A.M.):** I just want to say something about this first question and try to bring together what different people have said. I believe that many of those who have been involved in the competency-based learning/education world have seen this work as revolutionary in the same way that the people in the 1970s and 1980s saw PLA as revolutionary. What they have in common is a claim that learning doesn't have to take place in formal contexts and, certainly in terms of higher education, that learning doesn't have to occur in a classroom. So, for me, the competency-based stuff — and I think Christine's point about professionalization and shortages seems just right — is also connected to the movement for "outcomes." That movement in higher education — the move from seat time and courses to outcomes — seems to be an interesting thread to consider. That is, if outcomes can be identified, and if people can show they've attained them, we have legitimized those skills and that learning, even though they're attained in an alternative way.

**M.B.L.:** To follow up with Alan's point and to think about my earlier example, I really saw the CBE and the PLA processes naturally bridged into that CDA example. It was an assessment that took place in the workplace, so it was industry-based and industry-recognized with a team of people with different perspectives who could see that person on the job and make assessments about it. It really captured all the prior experience and learning that was going on in that professional's life, as well as what was currently going on in the field, and would be a natural bridge. And it was and has been that [bridge] since then for community colleges and universities with early childhood programs. It allowed them to recognize the CDA credential as a set of "stackable" learnings/skills that would apply to a particular degree program.

**A.M.:** That's exactly what I meant: that those supporting this work saw it as part of a movement to recognize people's experiences and people's knowledge that had gone unrecognized before.

**M.B.L.:** Unfortunately, I think that for those involved in caregiving, even with new professional standards and professional associations, the field is still *not* given the respect that it deserves. In so many cases, people are still not earning family-sustaining wages, so I think that one of the things to say when you get to this question about CBE and competency-based learning is that in certain fields there's no equity; there are professional standards that people work toward and gain and are recognized within the field, but they are still *not* recognized socially, economically, or nationally. The situation may be different in other countries. I think the U.S. might be a poor example. As a whole, this country is behind regarding the recognition, the rewards, and the incentives that caregivers are given, whether they work with young children or with older adults. Yes, there is getting that credential, and there is getting it recognized, and then there is the question of what that means in terms of being able to live in a world that realizes our equity and inclusion goals.

**C.W.:** I understand that development. It's similar in Canada with the CBE movement that pushed for that credential. I think the idea was that they could also push for increased federal involvement in day care funding. When I was president of a daycare association back in the mid-'70s, the federal government was pushing in that direction.

**M.B.L.:** We had parallel experiences, Christine: a lot of advocacy, a lot of movement internally.

**C.W.:** What I think is happening here, and I imagine is going to happen even more in the U.S. with COVID, is that the value of those workers — the workers in the senior homes, the nursing homes, and long-term care homes — has suddenly been highlighted. We see how hugely underpaid and undervalued those people are for their work.

**N.T.:** With COVID-19, one of the things that we've had to define is what is "essential," and

redefining what is essential does get us to rethink what we “recognize.” So, we start to talk about the competencies that are needed to be successful in that kind of position, the knowledge that goes with it, and how we place [or don’t place] a value on that. What is it that we value? What is it that we recognize? Because that’s what divides what is considered or isn’t considered “legitimate” learning.

**D.S.-G.:** That’s a very good point. In fact, it seems to me inevitable that over the next months or years, we’re going to be looking again at the sense of the value of certain work. And some workers will suddenly realize they are essential. They don’t realize that in their paychecks, but they realize that they make an essential contribution to our societies, our lives, and they are not rewarded for it. I think that brings us back to this whole idea — it is a big idea — of what education is fundamentally about and what value it provides. I think one of the other discussions that have already started [and are, I think, on the accelerator] is looking at what we might call “traditional” education or “alternative” educational models and trying to place a value on that. I think many people are going to really evaluate, quite literally, placing new value on education, on the credentials they get, and then how those credentials are accepted and rewarded in the workplace. As Alan said, PLA originally was considered totally disruptive and thus revolutionary and, in many ways, it remains totally disruptive. I think competency-based education also looks at itself as a very disruptive element within the educational system, but I think in the future that disruptive element is going to have to prove itself. What value does CBE or PLA contribute to the educational system? What value does it provide for the people, the learners who come? They’re spending their money trying to acquire something, trying to improve their lives, trying to increase their social mobility. What value did they get out of these education systems that are in place?

**A.M.:** I’ll just push a little on our questions: When all of you got involved in the PLA world, did you see the evaluation of prior learning as an effort to do something *different* than competency-based education? Do you see that these movements really are running parallel to one another, or that they’re different from one another in spirit and substance?

**D.S.-G.:** Again, I have little or no direct involvement with CBE, but it seems to me that there are in fact parallels between PLA and CBE. A lot of momentum is driven by things like engagement, things like equity, diversity, and trying to improve the experience of the student who’s involved in the workplace or is in higher education. They take different forms, but I think there is that sort of common cluster of attributes that does seem to run parallel, so I see both as complementary. As far as CBE is concerned, a more fundamental problem is defining what constitutes a competency. It seems to me that’s a problematic issue because, as far as I understand, the way in which these definitions are made is at a rather high level of how you order a set of skills and abilities within a set of knowledge.

**M.B.L.:** I’m thinking that what I experienced in the ‘70s and ‘80s was that the two were more aligned and overlapped with each other. What I understood as competency-based then is not the same as what’s going on now. There are differences now and what I’m seeing now speaks to what David was talking about. Today, CBE is more streamlined and more efficient in terms of the process. What came out is broader access to help people feel confident and competent. When I was doing this work early on, it was mostly with women who were first-generation [college students] who were teachers, social workers, or those working in human services. It really was a bridge and an opportunity. And it’s really important. There is a piece in competency-based education that makes things more equitable for folks. I think CBE now is a way of trying to be able to reach this kind of equity for larger numbers of people more efficiently and in a more streamlined and less expensive way.

**C.W.:** I don’t want to lose that last point because I think that’s an interesting issue here. I wonder about our common experience with the relationship between PLA and some of the

competency claims, and there may be a call for a kind of efficiency that certain competency-based models may offer that people didn't see as clearly in the PLA movement. A subtext is that you must have clear learning outcomes — agreed-upon learning standards — to which you have access, and those outcomes, as they appear in the community college system in Canada anyway, are essentially competencies. That is what David is talking about. That is the way it is used here.

**N.T.:** It's interesting because I would say that most institutions in the U.S. have students document their learning against predetermined learning outcomes. At our institution, SUNY Empire State College, we did *not* set up our system of assessment that way. This was something that's been unique with us, and while it does exist at other institutions, we are in the minority. We have said: "Let's evaluate what the student knows if this is college level, and then fit it into the curriculum, so it's not measured against any pre-existing knowledge, but rather recognizes that the student might have knowledge that we don't have already predetermined." It is a very different approach.

**Tracey Little (T.L.):** Our open campus university has been focusing on assessments, more toward competency-based learning, seen through the adoption of continuous assessments. We try to focus on the practice of marrying that theory into practice. And it is based on this that the students' competencies are measured.

**N.T.:** So, it's interesting: I think there's the pure course match PLA model [used by most institutions at least in the U.S.]; there's the model that more open-endedly focuses on what the student knows; and then Tracey is describing a kind of hybrid.

**M.B.L.:** I'm going to wrap it back around, Nan, to something you said earlier about cross swapping. I'm thinking about somebody who is going through this experience now and says to us, if I bring my CBE credential to your competency-based program, I want you to cross swap that and award me the competencies. I don't want you to start me at the beginning of your competency-based program as if I didn't have the CBE in hand. I'd be really interested to see who's done a good job of integrating the two. So whatever competency-based program you've got set up, you already have considered what is industry-recognized and what translates into the college classroom. There are multiple examples of that beyond early childhood, but I think that kind of integration is important for the different parties involved because if we're not recognizing each other's kind of learning in training programs, for example, then we probably don't have good working relationships. We're not going to begin to sustain something like this until we've got that kind of understanding of each other's curriculum and the recognition of that curriculum. If I am an employer and going to send people to a competency-based program, yet I've already put in all this training, that training should equate to what's going on in that degree program. I would want that upfront. That's how I will know that all of this is a good investment.

**N.T.:** Very interesting, and in fact, one of the people, Leslie Seiferle, who is at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC), has defined the competencies needed for her program in culinary arts (see interview in this issue of *PLAIO*). Students can then demonstrate they have those competencies in three ways. If they have the documentation that they gained the competencies through prior knowledge and experience, then they can go that route. The second way is if they are currently employed and can demonstrate that they are using those competencies now, those can be documented while they're at work. And then the third way is through her own coursework at SLCC. I think this is a unique approach because she's got the definition of what people need to know, but then she's allowed people multiple ways of approaching the assessment of that knowledge/skills.

**A.M.:** Yes, and then I think this goes back to something David also raised, which has to do with the power of those who define competencies in the first place, the notion of expertise, the

question of the origins of those competencies, or whatever they're called, and who gets to name the experts who name the competencies.

**M.B.L.:** And I think that it's good to think about those experts and stakeholders, and those relationships because if there can be more cross-sector agreement, rather than everybody staying in their own little higher education/employer/community bucket, there can be more of that kind of cross work in cross recognition and a better understanding of the curriculum. I think that you know there's going to be more commitment to what we're talking about because a lot of times when we look at these sorts of credentials or this kind of assessment, we've got one part of the organization or one sector really invested, and the other stakeholders not. This is something we've got to work on.

**N.T.:** It is interesting because this discussion has me thinking about something that I was working toward quite a few years ago: using the idea of concept maps. My question at that time was whether it mattered who evaluates the learning. Is the assessment going to come out differently depending on who the evaluator is? This is such a small thing, but I took two faculty members — one from the business world and one from the psychology world — and asked them to do a concept map on creativity, and the maps they created looked completely different. This suggests that if a student were being assessed on her knowledge around creativity and you had a businessperson or person in psychology, you may or may *not* talk about the knowledge that exists for that particular student, but what those two faculty members assumed that knowledge should *be*. So, what if you took hundreds of faculty in a particular area and had them do the concept maps and then crossed those maps to create a “universal” map; if a student then did a concept map of her own knowledge, could you match up these two maps? So, we'd see the complexity of determining the point at which we define what goes into a particular course or grouping of courses. There are ways of including all different kinds of knowledge — really something like a continuum of knowledge.

**C.W.:** In effect, we can say have something like “equivalencies” but that may not be exact. We struggle with this in terms of what are we even trying to accomplish with this.

**D.S.-G.:** That's a very good point. Who defines the competencies is so important. You have different people making different determinations about creativity whether it is the businessperson or whether it's the psychologist, and each is coming up with their own ideas and their own constellation of bits and pieces. And what leads from that is the question of how universal these constructs, these competencies really are. If, for instance, in the world of work, it's very easy to define a set of competencies that may have instrumental value for the worker, the student, and the employer, but in another five or seven years, those competencies, those clusters, will be economically useless. They are being superseded by different ideas as to what constitutes work practice and so on. So, I think trying to define what these competencies are is a very critical and very difficult issue.

**C.W.:** The description of that culinary program highlights more than anything to me just how similar PLA is to competency-based education because that essentially would be considered what she's doing. I mean the only thing that may be unusual is that she *begins* with a set of culinary arts program competencies, so it's a new name, but it doesn't seem to me it's a new game. If we're looking at the broad level David talked about regarding the whole question of who defines the competencies, that's quite an issue, but if we're looking at the more micro level in terms of what you need to be able to do to become a competent chef, it must be the content experts.

**A.M.:** One of the claims, at least of a portfolio model of prior learning that Nan described earlier, was that it was possible that a student could come to the PLA process with legitimate learning that was *not* predefined that the evaluator — the expert — might not have a quick “match”

in his or her head because the *student* had “new knowledge” that sat outside of that expert’s mental model. These new ways of being able to cook, new ways of being able to do a manufacturing process, new ways to think about community organizing, challenge the status quo. And, for me, that was part of the spirit of PLA: that the student’s distinctive knowledge could gain legitimacy through the process. One thing I wonder, and I think David asked this question earlier, has to do with the specificity of competencies, as well as their preset newness because the more they are both narrowly drawn and preset, the less room there is for the student’s individual knowledge, insights, and skills that may not have been imagined before.

**M.B.L.:** Legitimacy is an interesting word in thinking about Christine’s example of the chef. That chef could have legitimacy in one setting and not in another setting — maybe is highly competent in the world of work, and then must walk into that community college and then prove herself all over again and in some particular fashion. To me, it goes back to the importance of the relationships across work in education. Maybe there should be multiple assessors, or they should at least be aware of each other, and in many cases, they are both present in the community college setting.

**N.T.:** I think we just went full circle, and the circle was really important because we’ve come back to the big question of who defines the knowledge, who defines the competencies. What is the legitimacy around those determinations and how does that impact our students? Earlier we talked about equity, and I think we’d have to come back to that issue too. Both PLA and competency-based models claim to offer more access, transparency, and fairness. We can’t forget those principles that motivated our work in the first place. By bringing these two movements together, we continue to open opportunities to examine higher education with a critical lens toward more equitable institutions.

#### **Conversation #2, September 15, 2020:**

**Meredith Archer Hatch**, director of network relations, *Achieving the Dream, Inc.* (USA); **Leif Berglund**, senior lecturer, *Luleå University of Technology* (Sweden); **Nan Travers** and **Alan Mandell**, co-editors.

**Alan Mandell (A.M.):** Thanks, Meredith and Leif, for joining us for this conversation. We really look forward to your thoughts about this interconnection between competency-based education and PLA. It’s the second of our two board discussions. We are glad the four of us can talk.

**Meredith Hatch (M.H.):** I can start! Over the last decade in my job working with hundreds of community colleges and technical colleges throughout the United States, I have considered this topic. Different competency-based programs have been established to increase student success and accelerate time to credential, so that’s the lens that I look through when I consider the topic. In effect, how can we accelerate time to the credential and meet different learners’ needs?

**Nan Travers (N.T.):** And, Meredith, have you found success? What are the difficulties you have uncovered?

**M.H.:** I’ve seen success when there is a strong and comprehensive institutional approach and an understanding of the fundamentals of competency-based programs because they are different from the ways traditional programs are offered. It starts with that understanding, and that buy-in must be accompanied by comprehensive planning.

**A.M.:** Systematic planning is so important. It often takes significant energy and, as Meredith said, institutional commitment too. Thoughts on your end, Leif?

**Leif Berglund (L.B.):** It’s been quite a long time — actually since my Ph.D. studies — since I

looked at this specific topic, and it was mostly among institutions within the European Union — a lot of money was spent on developing what's considered "social cohesion." These were mostly programs and collaborations among schools and municipalities that were trying to use PLA as a tool for something like participant empowerment. Some of these programs were directed to young people to help them see what they knew, what they had learned, and especially the skills they had gained.

**A.M.:** Was this taking place at the national/country level?

**L.B.:** It was mostly in specific municipalities or regions — *many* projects were developing at the same time. We were looking at European social fund projects — some quite interesting — that included PLA. We followed and analyzed those that included this prior learning dimension.

**N.T.:** Were they asking these young people to document the competencies they had developed so that they could see that they actually had knowledge?

**L.B.:** Yes, I would say so. We determined that there were three different foci in these projects. One was directed toward secondary school course criteria; a second focused on finding employment. But the third, the one in which I got most interested, were those projects focused on empowering people — projects that focused on helping people gain more self-confidence on the road to education or work.

**M.H.:** I would add some additional experience that I've had working with institutions — and this work involved Nan — in trying to define a competency model specifically around *resiliency*.<sup>1</sup> One of the things defining the competency model was able to do among seven unique community colleges in several [U.S.] states with their employer partners, faculty, staff, and others at the institution was to create a space to have both a shared language and a shared understanding of specific learning and abilities. I just think that there's some *real power* there.

**A.M.:** I think, Meredith, that this focus on something like resiliency is also connected with what Leif was describing in those Swedish projects. We should consider resiliency as a new kind of skill that seems like a prerequisite to good learning or the possibility of learning.

**M.H.:** Part of the shared understanding we developed is that everyone has different levels of resilience at different times — sometimes more and sometimes less. The way we live and act and navigate our way through the world — that was an important learning for us all too — is not all one level set of resiliency or adaptive capacity that you may have that stays in a straight line. It ebbs and flows.

**A.M.:** I just want us not to lose the connections between competency-based education and PLA. Are they the same? Are they compatible with each other? Do you see tensions between these two orientations? I'm so interested in what your experiences have led you to see.

**M.H.:** I do see them as fundamentally compatible because I think it's about considering the learning that must take place, the learning outcomes, and the desired competencies. I think in those ways a competency-based orientation and PLA are very compatible. In practice, some things don't quite mesh up, but when I think about it, the key is to make sure that our systems, processes, and attitudes really support student learning, whether it's PLA or competency-based education. The way we implement these methods is to be as seamless as possible for individuals to move through the process and reach their goals.

**N.T.:** In the U.S., we are floating two terms around: one being competency-based *education* and one being competency-based *learning*. Competency-based education tends to be thought of where there are well-spelled-out competencies and students are assessed based on those



competencies. Students are not given grades and they're not given credits, but rather the competencies they achieve are documented. I think competency-based learning is where more practice falls. And that is about identifying the competencies and building them into the learning process or through PLA, but your program may still be structured around courses and credits. You're just much clearer about what those competencies are that need to be addressed and measured. So, the two terms are being used to distinguish the difference between a program that's 100% competency-based and the goal of getting away from seat time, getting away from the designation of credit, and really making sure that you have a way to articulate what somebody knows. In this way, competency-based learning is much more of an embedded and integrated piece around competencies.

**A.M.:** As Nan knows, the competency-based orientation is newer to me than is the PLA approach, and I wonder if one of the differences is that in the competency model, those competencies are typically preset; someone has determined what the competencies are *before* any assessment takes place. That is, there is some process of understanding that “these” are indeed the competencies necessary to perform x or to know y. The competencies exist as a kind of framework, a grid within which an evaluation gets done. In at least some PLA models, the so-called “criteria for evaluating” may *not* preexist. I wonder if this is part of the difference we are discussing. Am I on the right track?

**N.T.:** I would say that what you are describing is the way that most people approach it. But I don't think that when you say something is “competency-based” it has to be that way. For just a second, let me take the question into [SUNY Empire State College's] environment. With our portfolio process, PLA is very individualized, and what we're trying to do is capture the individual's learning. And then we title and credit that learning by what we see for that individual. We have hundreds and hundreds of faculty who engage in this process, and one of my critiques of our process is that we don't have enough faculty training to have them really understand how to help students articulate that learning in such a way that it really reflects what the student knows. So, I think we could take a competency-based perspective and help faculty understand what competencies are so they can identify the competencies a student has gained. In that case, the competencies are *not* predetermined; the approach is a way of being able to see the learning in a describable way. That would be my counter to what you're saying, Alan.

**L.B.:** In the Swedish context, I would say that I don't find much evidence of “PLA true believers,” or those who accept this ideology purely. Much of the Swedish work is focused on employment and the ways to employment. It is very practical. In the Swedish context, assessment also has been based on upper secondary course criteria. Over the last 15 to 20 years, we have had some at the national level whose focus has been to develop broader criteria — they could almost be considered PLA believers who have tried to focus on what people know and the skills they have, and believe we should document some of this learning; we should make it much more visible. But this perspective is not at the heart of the PLA national discourse. PLA here is much more pragmatic and focused on trying to make people employable.

**A.M.:** I think this theme, Leif, about making the learning “visible” is remarkably interesting and helpful. It's about moving the learning away from the mysterious to something much clearer and more specific; it's aiming for specificity about what somebody knows and the learning that somebody has gained.

**N.T.:** To add to that, I think that the call to “transparency” also tries to address the question of equity, because when there aren't some commonalities and, going back to what Meredith said in terms of common beliefs and common language, if there isn't a common sense of how we start to identify that learning and have clarity around it, then each student is left to the interpretation of whoever is in power at that moment, and we just see uneven practice as a result. I think part of the competency movement has been about gaining more transparency around

what we're really trying to do and addressing student learning more equitably. However, as Leif reminded us, I do see some of this work moving toward an employment perspective in which identifying competencies becomes like a skills checkoff list versus really thinking about a person from a deeper level in terms of what somebody knows and what they can do, and how we can make that explicit.

**A.M.:** Meredith and Leif, do you think that this way of thinking, this way of approaching learning in terms of competency-based education, has poignancy for us today given the experience of COVID-19 and given other changes in work and education?

**M.H.:** Absolutely. Now months into a global pandemic, I think we absolutely are seeing that it is critical for individuals to be offered different ways to demonstrate their competencies, particularly as they may find themselves needing to gain additional levels of education to either find a new kind of career or move to a different level so that they remain employable in their current career path. I just think it's extraordinarily important for us to consider many different models of how individuals can access higher education and the speed at which they need to gain different levels of credentials. We know that in the United States, with so many people at home with their families — with many people in their own homes — it becomes even more important to have asynchronous learning opportunities and diverse ways to demonstrate prior learning, so I think there's a huge application that is being made in many places. It's a major opportunity to strengthen access to competency-based education and PLA for so many individuals.

**A.M.:** The theme of “access” is so valuable here. It also makes a connection to one of the early promises of adult higher education: the promotion of access. So, your point, Meredith, is crucial: We are thinking about other avenues to access — to inviting people in who may not have been welcome before.

**M.B.:** Yes; time and cost remain extraordinarily important, too.

**N.T.:** One thing I have seen in the whole movement here in the United States is that the competency-based learning education movement has been another way to approach prior learning assessment. If the student has the knowledge, can we have that student *demonstrate* that knowledge so they don't have to repeat the learning and we can document it? So, in thinking about where we are today, we've seen so many students who have not been able to continue their education. In the United States, one out of six adults has some college and no degree. COVID has now caused even more severe interruptions. Altogether, we have many people who have knowledge and skills that are undocumented. Our question becomes something like: How do we merge these two approaches and think about a way to capture learning so those students do *not* go undocumented? I think we're in an education crisis because we don't have these mechanisms in place and widespread, which means there are going to be thousands of people who were partway there and just didn't make it all the way.

**A.M.:** Leif, are any of these considerations relevant in the Swedish context?

**L.B.:** Yes. I think we are social beings! From my own experience, but also what I hear from students in the university, is that when we don't meet face-to-face, people lose their motivation. And this has contributed to the marginalizing effects of COVID. Some people who were already on the edge are moving even farther from the center; they're even more marginalized than they were. Meeting people is a way to include people. It's trickier on Zoom or using some other virtual application. Hopefully, this will pass. But there is another thing at work here that I want to mention. Maybe we've been bragging a little too much about this, but in Swedish society, we often talk about equality. Now, however, we also see tendencies — shootings and gang problems, for example — often among people who have not been integrated into this society at all. Here is what I am thinking: I was involved in the validation process at the university, and we

talked about how people could get credit for courses done in other universities and other countries, and there *are* formal processes to address this, but I have met an attitude of suspicion, a *visible* suspicion when people are not going at their courses *in Sweden*. We have national authorities to which you can send your diplomas from other countries and get those assessed, but I think there's a general suspicion that when people are trying to validate their skills and transfer their credits, they are not putting in the time that a student should be expected to. It's like you must go through *all* the steps, many people think; you can't take a jump. I think that attitude is really a pity because it doesn't help people right now and doesn't consider the use of sound and valuable assessment of skills and learning that exist.

**A.M.:** That's a fascinating example, Leif, and it suggests to me that it's even more significant for our models of assessing — using the word Nan used earlier — to be more *transparent*, to be clearer because if they're seen as arbitrary or idiosyncratic in some way, they lose legitimacy and then people can say they are based on nothing. What you're alerting us to is the need to be even more *public*, more explicit about the criteria, about the models of evaluation we use, so that there isn't a question about these judgments because the criteria used to make the judgments are right out there for people to look at and evaluate themselves.

**L.B.:** I think you're right, Alan.

**N.T.:** We do have our last question that we want to get to: Do you have any specific suggestions about how higher education, industry, and other policymaking bodies might take advantage of the possibility of CBE and PLA to address issues of degree completion and workforce development, and overall, to address questions of access, inclusion, and equity in education and at work? It's a big question, but where would you suggest we go from here?

**M.H.:** My answer is inspired by the Achieving the Dream statement on equity<sup>2</sup> that focuses on each student receiving the supports needed to be successful. There's a huge opportunity through well-implemented programs (and their mission, processes, and structures) that will allow for PLA and competency-based education because, as an industry of schools and workplaces, we could be using all sorts of different models where PLA and competency-based education are foundational and fundamental in decreasing individuals' time to credential and in demonstrating competencies previously acquired. That's really important to where we are and the needs of individuals and societies.

**A.M.:** Thanks so much, Meredith, so much. Is there a Leif Berglund fantasy here as well?

**L.B.:** I speak with my colleagues on our regular commute to the university; we often talk about the significance of our focus on higher education and even on our contribution to the *inflation* of higher education. I'm just not that sure that *more* higher education, *more* credentials, is the solution for humankind. I also see that this focus tends to be creating gaps. In Sweden, for example, we talk a lot about men being left behind because only about 40% of university students now are male. I'm *not* speaking against higher education, but I wonder what we are looking for and what we see as the solution for society as a whole. I'm wondering about how to create a society that keeps people together and, at the same time, makes everyone count. I think that PLA and competency-based need to value *different kinds* of skills. In general, we don't do that in society. I really think that's what the debates should be about.

**A.M.:** That's so important, Leif, because I think it raises the questions of what a "solution" for humankind looks like, *whether* we are participating in this, *how* we are participating in this, and whether we are creating *more* problems in our so-called "solutions." It might be that this is the most powerful question we can ask ourselves. It ties us to the critical issue of social change at some deep level: Are the tools we are championing leading us in a direction that is committed to the better good of the whole? It's just unbelievably hard.

**N.T.:** I think, Leif, your question and the direction in which you are leading are well taken. If we think about your example regarding women and concerns about access to education — there was so much effort there. Could it be that the table has turned? It's as if we forgot the men in our effort to bring women into education. It's an example of how much has changed. I keep going back to where some of our efforts lie, but I also want to bring us back to COVID and how it has created this huge magnifying glass. We thought that certain things that we were concerned about were going to take a century to even get to, and now everything is bigger and accelerated and on fire. I'm thinking of the image of a ray of sun coming through a magnifying glass and being able to concentrate on our efforts and turn up the heat. I think we need to spend a lot more time on the whole question about what we are really trying to do here. That's not the question I'm hearing being asked out there.

**M.H.:** It's the most important question.

**N.T.:** I'm struck by how divided things are [in the United States] right now, and how it's eating away at the fabric of what our country has been built on. I mean, it's just the anger, and at its root, I think it's about how different people have not been noticed ... and not just gone unnoticed and unrecognized for what they know and can do, but how they have been treated. And that goes from both the Black Lives Matter movement all the way to your conservative underdogs who are, right now, feeling disempowered. So, we have all this anxiety and anger and hurt being unleashed. When we think about the experiment of the United States, about what America was about, I think we're coming undone, and this needs to be connected with the question about what we are really trying to do and accomplish as educators. I'm hoping that a discussion about that would also help us get at some of the other questions that have emerged in our discussion. Well, you certainly have opened my thinking for the day!

**L.B.:** I think the older you get and the more you're thinking about and researching, it's very interesting, the extent to which we're focused on *structures* and on changing those structures. I'm with the British social thinker Anthony Giddens who tells us that it's *people* who change those structures. And the more I think about it, the differences are at the individual level, and maybe at the level of small groups and small communities. You have to talk about change in those realms; you have to change people; we have to be doing good with other people. Especially in Sweden, I think there's been a lot of talk about the "good life" and people looking for such a good life, and travel has been a part of that life. But COVID pointed out that we have to put a *limit* on that. And people have been irritated about the situation, but I think that the main issue and the main sort of thing that we must think about is: What is my purpose in life? We need to ask about how we can help the next fellow because we can't just focus on ourselves. That will *not* help. We must start at that basic line. But I hate to say, right now, it's not looking good. At the same time, I think PLA is a particularly good method to lift people up and empower them in many different areas. And, for many people, we can't forget that PLA is also about employment — it's a way to become a part of society and to support yourself.

**M.H.:** I think this has been a great conversation, and I'll continue thinking about Leif's question about solutions for society as a whole. That's so critical to how each one of us moves forward in our own work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the Northeast Resiliency Consortium (NRC) Resiliency Competency Model at <https://www.achievingthedream.org/resource/14892/northeast-resiliency-consortium-nrc-resiliency-competency-model>.

<sup>2</sup> Achieving the Dream Equity Statement: <https://www.achievingthedream.org/equity-statement>.