

Theory-to-Practice

Adult Learners' Needs and Institutional Responses: A Quality Imperative for Prior Learning Assessment

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Abstract

Several factors, such as economics, accessibility, and changing work-force needs, have contributed to the expansion of the formal adult education system of higher education in the United States. This expansion has led to both the existence of various methods for awarding credit for previous learning and life experience and the demand for quality assurance practices to ensure that delivery is satisfactory. This paper focuses on several methods which have been employed in the U.S. to award credit for previous learning and life experience as well as associated current issues and concludes with some guidelines for the application of quality assurance practice to adult education programs.

Introduction

During the course of the last several decades, there have been major transformations in the field of adult education, which have resulted from the convergence of a number of external drivers such as the development of sophisticated internal computer-based instructional systems, increased demands for highly trained work place employees, and the need to respond to increased global competition.

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In the 1970s, in order to meet the emerging needs of business and industry and to insure the financial viability of institutions of higher education, colleges and universities turned their attention to the adult learner, often referred to as the “non-traditional” student. These individuals, ranging in age from 24 to 50 years of age, were often forced to upgrade their work-place skills in order to keep their jobs, through enrollment in traditional campus-based degree programs as well as continuing education programs. These non-traditional students represented a major market for higher education. In response to these opportunities, institutions started to expand their adult and continuing education programs. As a result, a great deal of attention was given to designing and offering programs to attract and meet the needs of this underserved population. These expanded activities were evidenced in all higher educational sectors.

Adult Education has evolved and expanded over the last fifty years. The shift from an industrial to an information-based economy created a need for retraining for new careers as technological advances ensued (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Finally, accessibility has resulted in the rapid expansion of adult education programs in colleges. Evidence of this growth is the rapid expansion of external degrees and courses offered by a large majority of higher educational institutions and an increase in the number of adult and non-traditional programs that have been established by institutions in addition to the development of off-campus and workplace site programs. The growth of these programs is becoming a major institutional driver in terms of financial resources, academic programming and outreach service.

To respond to these new challenges, planners at institutions of higher education are being required to rethink, and where necessary, restructure adult program offerings. It must be recognized that these same concerns continue at the current time and in many cases are expanding. The administration of quality programming and a consistent and accurate method of awarding credit for previous learning are deemed essential for a competitive program in adult education. These concerns are of particular importance when considered within the context of the recent emphasis on accountability and quality assurance.

Methods for Awarding Credit for Previous Learning and Life Experience

As noted, one of the most critical and often controversial aspects of adult education is associated with the award of credit for previous

learning and life experience. Several methodologies for awarding credit for this type of learning are used in the field of adult and continuing education and are referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines PLA as any knowledge-building or skills attainment that occurs prior to enrollment or outside of enrollment at a post-secondary institution, assessed for the purpose of awarding college credit (Zucker, Johnson, & Flint, 1999). CAEL defines experiential learning as “the skills, knowledge, and competencies that people acquire from their work experience, their volunteer activities, their avocations, their homemaking experience, and their independent reading” (p.8). According to CAEL, 95 percent of public institutions and 86 percent of private institutions participate in some form of PLA. While it is strictly voluntary on the part of an institution to award PLA credit, it does benefit students and ultimately results in a greater competitive advantage for an institution seeking to attract students.

In order to interpret and award credit for previous learning, various assessment methods are employed. While the methods will vary from institution to institution, the following represent the major approaches that are utilized: 1) Advanced Standing and Advanced Placement 2) College Level Examination Program (CLEP) 3) Portfolio Review and 4) American Council of Education Guidelines for Corporate/Certificate Training. In each case, it is critical that the assessment method be both valid and reliable.

Advanced Standing and Advanced Placement

One of the typical procedures for continuing education programs at institutions of higher education is awarding credit for previous academic work taken at other colleges and universities. In most cases, this is a routine function, especially when the institutions from which credits are being transferred are accredited and the grades are typically Cs or better. There are several formats for awarding credit from other universities or colleges. One method is that an institutional evaluator obtains course catalogues and matches courses on a course-by-course basis to determine course equivalency. This is one of the most widely used credit transfer processes. Another process, which is growing in popularity, is the development of articulation agreements between institutions that clearly specify what courses will be accepted under what conciliations. There are many examples of such agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions.

Another method for receiving advanced placement credit is through high school courses seen as beyond the high school honors level. Upon successful completion of the course and standardized examination, the students are awarded college-level credit. Further advanced standing or advanced placement credit is normally awarded to students who are able to challenge a course offered at a post-secondary institution. The advanced standing exam is often the “final examination” (or another suitable examination selected by the academic department) from the particular course for which the student wants to obtain credit. The institution sets the required score needed in order to earn credit but the score most likely coincides with the “C” grade equivalency. Fees for this type of prior learning assessment are usually nominal, ranging from as low as \$30 per examination to a one-credit equivalency fee. This type of procedure for awarding credit has a major advantage since it is directly matched to the desired program’s curriculum and it is possible to compare the applicant’s performance with current and past students. The strong content validity of this process is an important attribute. However, it must be recognized that such tests are typically instructor or department developed and may lack many technical test construction standards.

College Level Examination Program (CLEP)

The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) is a standardized exam that assesses previous learning. CLEP examinations consist of both a general exam as well as subject-specific exams. The general examination is equivalent to knowledge obtained in the first two years of college. The subject-specific exam assesses knowledge of a specific subject for a wide variety of undergraduate courses. Currently, in the U.S., 2,900 universities and colleges grant credit for CLEP examinations (*About CLEP*, n.d.). These institutions require a minimum level of proficiency on the examinations in order to award credit. The American Council on Education (ACE) recommends granting credit for scores of 50 or higher. One advantage to the institution is that these tests are professionally developed and the results are widely used and accepted.

Portfolio Review

Portfolio review is a widely recognized means of evaluating learning in the field of education. In adult learning, portfolio development is both a means of evaluating learning and a means to assess prior, often

experiential, learning. A portfolio review process to assess prior learning involves inviting the learner to become reflective and critical about her or his own previous learning experiences. The process requires that the student document skills and knowledge learned as part of work experience and allows them to present acquired knowledge in a logical, organized way that creates a process of self-reflection. The construction of a portfolio requires that a student go through four separate but related steps: 1) identifying the learning, 2) expressing the learning in terms of college-level curriculum and competencies, 3) relating it to overall educational and career objectives, and 4) compiling the evidence or demonstrating the competence (Mandell & Michelson, 1990). Institutions will differ in the methods they use to create the portfolio, but it is necessary that every student participating in the portfolio process follow a set of guidelines. Some institutions offer portfolio development workshops or classes while others provide guidelines for self-instruction. Portfolios must be structured in such a way that students distinguish between learning and experience, articulate their knowledge and its utilization, and establish the connection between theory and practice.

The portfolio process is an important part of an institution's systematic approach to supporting adults and their quest to complete their education. It both recognizes that adult students have already acquired knowledge through their life and work experiences, and provides an effective marketing tool. In addition, the preparer is asked to provide evidence of relevant work activity such as papers, awards, completed projects, and certificates. A rich set of descriptive materials is required to enable the reviewer to gain a full understanding of the applicant's knowledge and skill levels. Although widely used, it is different from the use of examinations to determine levels of academic competencies. The assessment of a student's portfolio requires a substantial effort by one or more faculty. Each portfolio is unique, and the evidence must be linked to the expected course or program outcomes. In many cases, particularly in the liberal arts, this is a challenging task and often the anticipated course or program learning outcomes are ambiguous or, in some cases not adequately stated.

American Council on Education Guidelines for Corporate/Certificate Training

The American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) assists both students and

institutions by providing guidelines for awarding college-level credit for formal educational programs and courses offered by organizations for their employees, members, or customers (*American Council on Education College Credit Recommendation Service*, n.d.). Credit is applied in a number of ways: to replace a required course, as a general elective, or to waive a prerequisite. A number of national education organizations officially endorse the ACE guidelines for the application of credit. These include the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). The *ACE National Guide to College Credit* states that the most important basis for making credit recommendations is learning outcomes (American Council on Education, 2004). Other factors that must also be considered include that the content and rigor of each course is at the postsecondary level; that the course has a prescribed program of instruction; that instructors are selected on the basis of their qualifications, including formal education and experience to teach the subject matter; and that the appropriate procedures are used for evaluation.

In order for ACE to evaluate the courses offered through an organization, the following information must be submitted: a detailed course syllabus, all instructional materials used for the course, the suggested qualifications of the participants, the qualifications and resumes of the instructional staff, evaluative methods, and the duration of the course. A panel of at least three subject matter experts who are selected from educational institutions, professional and educational associations, and accrediting agencies review these submissions. Individual institutions set the limit for how much credit may be earned through the application of ACE guidelines. They also set the fee for the application of credit though most institutions either charge no fee or a nominal fee in the range of \$10 per applied credit.

Current Issues in Awarding Credit for Previous Learning

Several issues arise in the process of assessing previous learning across disciplines. In most cases, expectations for adult learners are unclear and inconsistent across institutions. In addition, an institution is typically constrained by resources, assessment capacity, and financial considerations in its ability to offer effective and quality measures of assessing previous learning (Zucker, Johnson, & Flint, 1999).

Aside from financial constraints, the interdisciplinary issues in awarding credit for previous learning include how much credit should be awarded, how credit should be assessed, and what the best measures of previous learning are for a particular student. Invariably, disciplines vary and each has a unique means to measure knowledge attained as a result of training in that discipline. Assessment of previous learning in the liberal arts, occupational and technical areas, business, and professional areas, includes multi-faceted and complex challenges for institutional administrators.

In the assessment of prior learning in the liberal arts, the question of “what a liberal arts student is expected to know” is the most daunting. The answer to the question of student attainment in the liberal arts varies widely across institutions. However, Simosko & Debling. (1988) stated that “ultimately, [liberal arts faculty] are concerned with the application of knowledge and understanding” (p.77). Further, they conclude that in order to make assessment of prior learning effective in the liberal arts, learning outcomes and performance criteria should be in place. In that vein, the assessor need only match the student’s work with already agreed upon performance criteria and learning outcomes. The issue at hand is that most institutions do not have performance criteria in place.

As a result of the de-industrialization of the U.S. economy and an immediate need for skilled technical workers, the number of occupational and technical programs offered through higher education continuing education departments significantly increased during the 1980s. In this field, several unique attributes of the adult learner may arise such as licenses, professional training, and on-the-job training that may translate into credit for previous learning. In this case, it is necessary to establish standards for assessing licenses and other types of professional training.

It is hypothesized that over the next several decades the need to develop new assessment procedures will increase, due to the continual growth of the nontraditional student, the continual workplace press to gain new skills and knowledge, and the growth in the number of educational experiences that individuals can engage in such as Internet-based institutions or professional development programs. One such mechanism might be the use of academic assessment centers, based on the personal performance assessment models operated by business and industry.

Clearly, many diverse issues exist in the assessment of prior learning across fields of study. These issues are a result of the unique nature

of each discipline, inherent differences across curricula and evaluation, and inconsistencies from institution to institution. In order to make the process credible, selective quality assurance practices should be in place.

Quality Assurance Practices in Continuing Education

Quality assurance has become a major concern for most educational institutions, both in the U.S. and internationally. Institutions need to be able to not only profess they offer quality programs but must provide evidence. Institutional reputations are of high importance and the quality of programs is a major factor in developing and maintaining institutional prestige. In a similar manner, quality assurance activities are necessary and must provide evidence that awards of credit for previous learning are valid. Further, a single quality criterion or process does not appear to be adequate since validation is an extremely difficult and complex process and requires the use of multiple approaches. Nevertheless, it is imperative that efforts be made to insure that students have the appropriate skills and knowledge to pursue their course of study in keeping with the standards of the academic program they wish to enter.

The following standards for Prior Learning Assessment are stated in Whitaker's (1989) seminal piece on adult education standards, principles, and procedures. The ten standards for assessing learning are an excellent starting point in a discussion of quality assurance practices in awarding credit for previous learning (p.9) (Table 1).

Quality assurance practices such as accreditation standards, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning standards, American Council of Education standards and internal review all should be employed to ensure that the assessment of previous learning is satisfactory. As well, traditional quality assurance processes such as benchmarking can add credibility to the credit award process when identifying and examining "best practices." Through such efforts, key factors can be determined that assist in the evaluation of previous learning experiences and their role in awarding credit. Further, standard evaluation techniques may be implemented for the comparison of traditional and nontraditional student performance on the same tests and the perceptions of faculty and employers concerning the preparedness of the non-traditional student. The relative success of non-traditional students in courses that have as a prerequisite the courses for which they were awarded credit, may be one determinant. In addition, such factors as graduation rates and relative

Table 1. Academic and Administrative Prior Learning Assessment Standards

Academic Standards	Administrative Standards
Credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience	Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning
College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning	Policies applied to assessment should be fully disclosed
Credit should be awarded only for learning that has balance, appropriate to the subject	Fees charged for assessment should be based on services performed and not by amount of credit awarded
Determination of competence levels and credit awards must be made by academic experts	Personnel involved in PLA should receive adequate training
Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted	Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served

Note. From "Assessing learning: Standards, principles, and procedures," by U. Whitaker, 1989, p.9. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

achievement on capstone examinations or other post graduation exams may also be used as a means of measuring program quality.

Prospects for Future Action

The following are prospects for future action aimed at improving the assessment of credit for previous learning in adult education:

- Follow-up studies to determine the accuracy of assessment of previous learning
- Careful documentation of the award process and specific evidence
- Course-by-course or challenge testing for a single existing course (although validity and reliability problems may arise)
- Expert judgment validated through multiple assessments against a set of anticipated outcomes
- Participant on-the-job performance compared to students who have successfully attended and passed all courses included in the curriculum
- Studies to compare the academic success of students who were awarded PLA credit versus those who were not awarded credit
- Studies to assess institutional revenue gain or loss from the awarding of PLA credit
- Studies to compare the institutional method of granting PLA credit to that identified as a “best practices” model.

Conclusion

It is anticipated that in the coming decades, there will be an increase in the awarding of academic credits for life experience activities and that the awarding process will be increasingly challenged due to factors such as increased job mobility, changing job requirements, and changing education practices (i.e. Internet delivery systems). In order to meet these challenges, and at the same time respond to national and state concerns for quality, both traditional and non-traditional programs must carefully specify processes and intended learning outcomes.

The field of adult education is rapidly expanding, as external forces drive an ever-changing higher education institutional environment in the U.S. It is not out of the question that the non-traditional student and their special learning needs could become the dominant instructional programming of the future. Due to the unique characteristics,

expectations, and needs of the adult learner, higher education administrators must address the issues of assessing prior learning as part of a quality academic program. Further, attention must be given toward making certain that the institutional method for awarding credit for life experience is consistent and systematic and that it reflects what has been identified as best practices.

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