Back Eddies of Learning In the Recognition of Prior Learning: A Case Study

Geoff Peruniak, Athabasca University
Rick Powell, Athabasca University

ABSTRACT

The limited research that exists in the area of prior learning assessment (PLA) has tended to be descriptive and conceptual in nature. Where empirical studies have been done, they have focussed mainly on PLA as a means of credentialing rather than as a learning experience. Furthermore, there has been very little empirical research into the educational effectiveness of PLA from the student's point of view.

This empirical study used a qualitative approach to investigate the perceptions of a focus group of 32 adult learners who were engaged in portfolio-based PLA in an open and distance-education university. The study explored students' initial expectations of PLA, what they think they got out of the pro-

RÉSUMÉ

La recherche limitée qui existe dans le domaine de l'évaluation des connaissances acquises (ÉCA) a tendance à être de nature descriptive et conceptuelle. Là où on a fait des études empiriques, celles-ci ont visé l'ÉCA comme moyen de délivrance de titres et certificats plutôt que d'expérience d'apprentissage. De plus, du point de vue de l'étudiant, il y a très peu de recherches empiriques sur l'efficacité pédagogique de l'ÉCA.

Dans cette étude empirique, nous avons utilisé une approche qualitative pour enquêter sur les perceptions d'un groupe de consultation de 32 apprenants adultes venant d'une université sans murs et d'éducation à distance et participant à une ÉCA basée sur portefolio. Nous avons exploré les attentes initiales

cess, and the extent to which these perceived benefits of PLA would extend to other adult students. The study examined the question of whether PLA operates as a motivator or as a selection mechanism and concluded that there was evidence for both factors. Further results indicated that, in general, PLA learners were surprised to find they had been engaged in a learning process. The study concludes that PLA can be an effective educational opportunity for certain kinds of adult learners, but it should not be taken as a panacea.

des étudiants envers l'ÉCA, ce qu'ils pensaient avoir obtenu du processus, et jusqu'à quel point ces bénéfices perçus de l'ÉCA pourraient se répandre à d'autres étudiants adultes. Dans l'étude, nous avons examiné la question de l'ÉCA agissant comme motivateur ou comme mécanisme de sélection, et avons conclu qu'il y avait preuve des deux facteurs. D'autres résultats ont indiqué qu'en général, les apprenants ÉCA étaient surpris d'apprendre qu'ils participaient à un processus d'apprentissage. Nous avons conclu dans cette étude que l'ÉCA peut être une occasion pédagogique efficace pour certains apprenants adultes, mais que l'ÉCA ne doit pas se prendre comme remède universel.

INTRODUCTION

Experienced canoeists are well aware of the "back-eddy effect." Back eddies flow in the opposite direction to the main current of a river, so canoeists use back eddies to paddle upstream against the main flow. We think that this metaphor is apt in relation to the recognition of prior learning, what we call prior learning assessment (PLA)[1] in this article, and more specifically, to the use of portfolio-based prior learning assessment. Students may enter the process with one set of expectations, but then encounter unexpected experiences and derive unanticipated results. In our case, students were doggedly headed downstream in the main current of credentialism, when they unexpectedly hit a back eddy of learning.

The concept of PLA emerged in the early 1970s from the deliberations of the Council for Experiential Learning (Gamson, 1989). Since then, its impact has spread worldwide and has prompted much ideological debate and critical commentary (Andersson & Harris, 2006). It developed as a technical application of experiential learning, based on the work of Dewey (1974), Kolb (1984), and Mezirow (1991), and is "Village One" in Weil and McGill's (1989) model of experiential learning, in which they likened four main areas

of experiential learning—accreditation, learner-centred education, social change, and personal growth—to villages with cultural and historic roots. Most often, PLA is concerned with reflection on content (what has been learned) rather than on process or premise reflection (Mezirow, 1991). In Canada, an "R" has been added to PLA to form the acronym PLAR to refer to recognition. We, however, prefer the old designation PLA because it does not promise recognition (credit) that it may not be able to deliver, just as taking an examination does not guarantee passing it. This study, although based on the theoretical traditions mentioned above, does not purport to test a theory of experiential learning but rather to enable learners to respond to open-ended questions, unfettered as much as possible by the researchers' theoretical perspectives.

The assessment and recognition of experiential learning remain highly contested areas of commentary and study. There are at least three major perspectives on PLA, which, although not mutually exclusive, stem from very different views on the role of higher education in society.

The first perspective is economic in nature, focusing on the need to generate credentials to increase labour force productivity and mobility. PLA is seen as a cost-effective way of generating credentials, from both the standpoint of students and society, by shortening the time, effort, and money required to obtain them (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1994, 1996; Human Resources Development Canada, 2002; Industry Canada, 2001).

The second perspective focuses on adult education. It highlights the role of PLA in encouraging reflection on past learning, self validation, and self-development (Coleman, Rogers, & King, 2002; Gamson, 1989; Keeton & Associates, 1976; Starr-Glass, 2003; Taylor & Clemans, 2000). In this case, PLA is seen as a mechanism for qualified adults to gain access to, advanced standing in, or course equivalency within the mainstream curriculum of post-secondary education.

The third perspective—a social-justice perspective—views PLA as a way for underprivileged and marginalized members of society to improve their lives and career prospects (Andersson, Fejes, & Ahn, 2004; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Harris, 1999; Michelson, 1996). It does so by validating the worth of their experiential learning, while shortening the time, money, and effort they require to earn a credential. This perspective implies the reformation of higher education institutions in order to acknowledge the validity of knowledge systems not captured within their curricula.

Apart from these three perspectives, the university community is an important stakeholder in the debates surrounding PLA. Many in the university community fear that the recognition of PLA undermines their self-perceived status in society and worry about the credibility of PLA-assisted degrees. On the whole, the attitude of the Canadian university commu-

nity toward PLA can be characterized as one of suspicion and resistance (Belanger & Mount, 1998; Brown, 2002; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Taylor & Clemens, 2000).

Ironically, in all the heated debate and discussion surrounding PLA, the viewpoints of adult students have largely been ignored in the academic literature (Taylor & Clemans, 2000). This article, however, centres on the student perspective and takes a pragmatic and empirical approach in order to allow them to speak for themselves. As researchers, rather than impose our own framework for understanding PLA, we tried, as far as possible, to give students an opportunity to express their own framework.

Before describing the research design and results, we attend to some contextual and theoretical matters in order to situate the relevance of our findings within the broader context of adult education.

Adult Education and Distance Education

Brookfield (1986) put forward seven principles of adult education that are still commonly held. Brookfield's principles revolved around four convictions. First, adult learners are self-directed: they know what they need to know. Second, the power relationship between teacher and student should be limited: teachers do not teach didactically—they facilitate. Third, the learning agenda is negotiated between students and instructor, not unilaterally determined by the instructor. Last, there is an emphasis on critical reflection through praxis, leading to self-determination.

In terms of these commonly accepted underpinnings of adult education, the response of adult-centred, distance-teaching universities has been weak, even though they pride themselves on being second-chance universities. In some respects, Athabasca University's (AU) educational provision is consistent with Brookfield's principles. One of the most "open" of the distance education universities, AU has no prior educational qualifications for entry into most of its undergraduate programs, conventional university assessment standards are applied at the point of exit from courses and programs rather than at entry, students can enrol throughout the year and register in courses on a monthly basis, and study is "un-paced," that is, students have at least six months to complete a three-credit (one semester) course, with flexible assignment deadlines.

Nonetheless, AU's role as an adult educator within Brookfield's context is circumscribed. The kind of education that AU provides is "adult friendly" in terms of access and flexibility—but it stops short there. There is no happy compromise between AU's role as an adult educator and as a university-level distance educator. Distance education institutions rely on an economy of scale that demands standardized course materials, delivered by various

media, and assessment. These conditions impose a highly didactic structure, leaving little room to manoeuvre on student-instructor negotiation on either account. Furthermore, distance-teaching universities operate within a wider university community that is largely concerned with the education of "front-end" students, typically 18 to 24 year olds. As a result, to be credible, the curricula of course offerings from distance education universities have to conform to those of conventional universities. For AU, these points remain tensions, if not contradictions, if it wants to be both a university among other universities and an educational institution alive to the interests of adults who not only want to be taught but also have their learning credentialed responsibly.

By the mid-1990s, AU was caught in a dilemma. Although its mandate was that of a second-chance university, its track record for producing degree graduates was poor. Moreover, visiting students—students from conventional universities wanting to pick up a few course credits at AU—had de facto emerged as its "core business" in its undergraduate educational provision. Also, its degree programming had increasingly been linked to that of conventional universities. In effect, in one way or another, AU had embraced "front-end" education and dissociated itself from adult education.

The movement toward a "front-end" model of educational provision at AU was not uniform, however. A concern for the interests of adult learners had remained, as had an interest in PLA, and in 1997 AU introduced portfolio-based PLA. By 2003, the candidate population was still small, only 180 students having completed a portfolio. Nonetheless, an analysis of the progress of these students showed that they were markedly more successful than "normal" AU students, both in terms of persistence and course pass rates (Powell, 2003). Consequently, although PLA had been a relatively marginal aspect of AU's educational provision, its attractiveness increased greatly after it was revealed that embracing PLA looked beneficial for both students and the university. At the very least, students would benefit by shortening the time and decreasing the costs of study it took them to earn their degree. AU would not only benefit by returning to its adult education roots but also benefit politically by increasing its graduation rates.

As the research literature was largely silent on the educational role played by PLA from a student perspective, we thought it important to find out where students "were coming from" as AU expands its profile as an adult educator and an accreditor of prior learning.

THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF PLA IN CANADA

To date, Canada's university sector has been indifferent if not hostile to PLA (Collier & Peruniak, 1997; Peruniak, 1993; Thomas & Klaiman, 1992). However, in the early 1990s the federal and the provincial governments began urging universities to provide PLA. In 1991, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (1994; 1996) brought PLA to the forefront of national educational strategies to prepare for global competition, and the federal government subsequently organized three national forums on PLA. Similar policy recommendations were made at the provincial level. For example, recommendations from the Alberta government encouraging PLA (Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, 1994; 1996 [March]; 1996 [July]) paralleled national initiatives. Nonetheless, Belanger and Mount (1998) argued that while industry, governments, adult learners, and many colleges had championed the concept of PLA, universities in Canada were reluctant to embrace it. The university community continued to doubt that experiential learning can be equated to formal learning (Brown, 2002).

PLA AND STUDENT PROGRESS AND SUCCESS IN FORMAL STUDIES

Over the past 25 years, research into the effect of PLA on student progress in university education has consistently found that PLA is highly correlated with student success. Billingham and Travaglini (1981), Reidel (1982), Freers (1994), Sargent (1999), Pearson (2000), and Powell (2003) found that students receiving PLA were more likely to persist and graduate than their peers who had not received it. The correlation between PLA and student success, however measured, has been convincingly established in a variety of university settings and over time. However, the question of why such a correlation exists has received less attention in the empirical literature on PLA.

In a survey of PLA-assisted graduates, Sargent (1999) found that about 80% of respondents indicated that PLA was, at least, "much" of a factor in their decision to enrol in a degree program. Sargent was also interested in whether students petitioning for PLA were more highly motivated than others and, indeed, over 50% of those surveyed said that they would have completed their degree even without PLA. However, 39% indicated that they "definitely" or "probably" would not have completed without PLA. Sargent's findings raise the question of whether PLA directly motivates students to succeed or simply selects students who are more likely to succeed in any event. Even if PLA has a motivating effect, it is unclear whether it is because of the educational experience itself or because of the savings in time and money to earn a degree.

LeGrow, Scheckley, and Kehrhahn (2002) compared the learning outcomes of students who took a course in organizational management with students who had been awarded credit for the same course based on PLA. They found that the PLA students achieved better results than the classroom-taught students in a test related to problem-solving skills. However, the puzzle remains: Was this result due to selection or to educational experience? It may be that PLA petitioners were already more strongly motivated and self-assured than their classroom-taught counterparts.

Freers (1994) reported that students completing PLA-assisted degrees said they had benefited from increased career opportunities, job promotions, and higher salaries, but, again, whether these findings were due to earning a credential or to pursuing PLA was not clear. Nonetheless, almost all of Freers' respondents believed that their self-confidence increased as a result of the PLA process. To this, Freers added the observation that the majority of this group of students achieved success because they had an academic plan. This finding raises the question of just how much their self-confidence was boosted, given that preparing an academic plan requires a certain degree of self-confidence to start and complete it.

Brown (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with eight adult students who had completed a PLA portfolio. Her study explored the educational benefits associated with PLA beyond the earning of course credits. The study participants reported an increase in their self-knowledge of the value of workplace learning, an improved competence in written communication, and a greater awareness of the importance of self-reflection and the knowledge to be reflected on. Interestingly, respondents reported that although they welcomed these outcomes of the portfolio process, they did not expect them at the outset. The results of Brown's study may be encouraging to those committed to adult education, yet it is difficult to see how far these findings can be generalized, given the limited sample size (eight) and the potential for researcher bias in sampling and interviewing protocols.

Aside from these few studies, little empirical research has been conducted on the educational effectiveness of PLA from the student's point of view. The association of PLA with increased formal course-taking activity and increased rates of graduation is firmly established, although it remains unclear whether PLA operates as a motivator or as a selection mechanism. With the exception of Brown (2002), the empirical research has focused mainly on PLA as a means of credentialing rather than as a learning experience.

The purpose of this study is to explore students' experiences with PLA, both as a way of replicating limited past empirical research and as a way of extending the field of inquiry into the educational role of PLA in adult university education.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative technique—teleconferenced group interviews—which closely resembles focus-group analysis (Krueger, 1994; 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990),[2] and the coding principles of Strauss and Corbin (1998). This was done for two reasons. First, questioning respondents about specific motivations and perceived outcomes in PLA is prone to bias toward providing socially acceptable responses. Even the most obtuse respondent would realize that the researchers considered such educational goals and outcomes as self-actualization, learning reflected on, and educational self-direction to be "good things" and bias their responses accordingly. Second, AU did not have a sufficient candidate population (at the time, N =198) to warrant a survey-based methodology.

The study participants had all signed up for PLA. In order to obtain a representative cross-section of students in terms of their experience with PLA, we identified five distinct subgroups:

- **Graduates**—students who were awarded a significant amount of PLA credit
- **Experienced students**—students who had passed at least three AU courses before petitioning for portfolio-based credit
- **Novice students**—students who had passed fewer than three AU courses before portfolio assessment
- **Dropouts**—those who had completed a portfolio assessment but had subsequently withdrawn from their program
- **Portfolio course students**—students who were actively enrolled in AU's course on portfolio development and had not yet submitted a portfolio

The sampling frame also took into consideration programs of study and the amount of formal transfer credits students had brought to AU. The rationale behind this sampling frame was to cast as wide a net as possible in order to identify differences within the population of PLA petitioners, in terms of their expectations, experience with the process, and perceived outcomes.

The samples of graduates, experienced students, novice students, and portfolio course students were all reasonably representative of their respective sub-populations. The dropout focus group may not have been representative, however, given the high refusal rate of students who were asked to participate in the study.[3] Altogether, 32 students participated in the focus groups.

Data Analysis Methodology

The research team[4] conducted a content analysis of the taped, telephone focus-group sessions. Our first aim was to define, as clearly as possible, the issues and their dimensions as perceived by the study participants, not by the researchers. As researchers, we certainly had research questions in mind as to the design of this study but were unsure of how our understanding of PLA issues would map the students' perceptions. Consequently, our methodology controlled for researcher bias in a number of ways. First, the sample was stratified to include the broadest possible cross-section of student experience and opinion. Second, participants were allowed to identify and frame their PLA experience in their own words. Third, the precise definitions of research questions and variables were not made a priority but rather emerged from our analysis of the data. Fourth, the framework of analysis was developed intersubjectively through discussion and debate among members of the research team rather than by individuals.

We used the model of analysis described by Krueger (1994; 1998) and followed several sequential steps that are outlined in this model. Prior to the teleconference session, participants received copies of the questions by mail. These questions were very general and open-ended and were always asked in the same order. Each session was recorded. At the start of each session, the facilitator took time to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the setting and procedures. The facilitator asked each participant in turn to respond to each question. All participants had to respond to the same question before the facilitator moved on to the next question. The facilitator's role was restricted to clarifying the mutual understanding of participants' responses and providing additional information if asked.

In the analysis phase, the research team members listened to the focus-group tapes and individually categorized the responses that emerged from them under general themes, after which they compared notes and came to an agreement on these categories. Subsequently, they compared notes as a group and reached a consensus both on the meaning and the intensity of the responses. This intersubjective procedure was used to provide reasonable assurance that the range of variables covered by the resulting analytical framework was exhaustive and that each variable included in the framework provided an accurate encapsulation of student commentary. Audio recordings were transcribed by one member of the team and reviewed by another to confirm team codings and to locate representative student comments.

Characteristics of PLA Petitioners

The average amount of credit granted to the 24 students who had participated in the PLA process (of the 32 study participants, 8 were enrolled in the portfolio course but had not completed it) was 18 credits; the actual numbers ranged from 3 to 60 credits. In this article, 3 credits are equal to a traditional one-semester (12-week) university course.

Although the design of the study was stratified to uncover differences between PLA student subgroups, all five groups showed similar characteristics. Certainly, there were differences among respondents in terms of background, experience, and opinion, but these variances were within sampled groups. In fact, the groups themselves did not vary appreciably, despite a sampling design predicated on unveiling between-group differences. Table 1 below compares the characteristics of all PLA recipients at the time of the study with those of AU's total program student population.

Table 1: *PLA Recipients and AU's Total Program Student Population*

Characteristic	PLA Recipients (N=180)	Total Program Student Population (N=16,941)
Gender	female: 54.3% male: 45.7%	female: 65.2% male: 34.8%
Percent aged 35 to 45	58.3% (mean age=39.1)	24.3% (mean age=29.6)
Enrolled in applied program of study	72.1%	62.8%
Workforce sector	90% public sector	not available[5]

This rough comparative profile suggests that, compared to program students in general, PLA recipients tended to be older, enrolled in applied programs of study, and employed in the public sector. This demographic profile of PLA petitioners makes sense for several reasons. The public sector in Canada may well be at the forefront of recognizing the validity of PLA as a method of credentialing, given the prominence accorded to it by governments. The concentration of PLA recipients in applied programs of study is hardly surprising since workplace learning in business, administration, and computing is much easier to assess and validate than knowledge in such disciplines as history or philosophy. The clustering of the age of PLA students (around 39 years) suggests that they were mid-career and that earning a university degree assumed greater practical importance for them than for "general" AU program students.

One important finding relating to portfolio students was not statistically verifiable. Two of the investigators, a professor and a counsellor who had between them dealt with thousands of AU students throughout their careers, noted that students in this study were remarkably more focused on their educational goals and more self-confident educationally. The perceptions of thse research team members were in line with the results of an AU survey (Powell & Keens, 2001) that estimated that 20% of AU undergraduate student admissions were "diagnostic students," that is, students who wanted to "test the waters" of higher, distance education.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented under three main headings: student expectations at the outset concerning PLA; their experience in developing a portfolio; and the outcomes they experienced after portfolio completion. As well, there are more direct quotes reported here than might appear in other studies, for two reasons. First, it enables readers to see if the researchers' categories are in line with what participants seem to be saying and, second, it gives readers a better sense and flavour of the range of commentary.

Student Expectations of PLA

Participants in all five focus groups were asked an open-ended question on what they expected from PLA. As their expectations emerged from the content analysis, they were grouped into three categories: gaining a credential; self-affirmation; and student-directed learning.

Gaining a Credential

The definition of "credentialism" always seems to be cast in negative terms, which signifies a disconnection between the issuing of credentials and the valuing of the educational content. Nonetheless, governments and many economists view the credentialing of knowledge as evidence of the building of human capital that will improve the competitiveness of a country's labour force by increasing worker productivity and labour force mobility. Bloom and Grant (1994) took this approach, as did Industry Canada (2001) and Human Resources Development Canada (2002). Whatever one's view on the matter, the need to earn a university degree—any university degree—was a central motivation for most of the study participants.

Two-thirds of the survey respondents (22 of the 32) expressed the importance of either gaining credit or earning a degree for the purpose of career advancement, career change, or even keeping their current job. The following quotes serve to illustrate this point.

> I think what really prompted it was a bit of pushing from management above because I had reached a ceiling at that time. Jobs were changing and there was a degree requirement. I really wasn't interested in getting a degree or pursuing my education until management said they would give me funded leave.

> I had some university [education] and I had done some CGA courses in the early nineties and I had gotten away from education . . . In my current role I've hit that point where I can't go any further up the ladder until I have letters after my name. My employer was very sticky on that point.

> I was being encouraged at the time by the vice president of the college, who was also the chair of our program, that we'd like our college professors to have some further education aside from the college diploma.

> I'm a psychiatric nurse and want to get my degree . . . I know that if I don't have a degree my advancement is severely limited.

> I did it for personal reasons because I wanted out of the job I was in and I felt that that was a way to get out of it.

Self-affirmation

The idea of self-concept usually conveys all the dimensions of being and becoming, regardless of how accurately they may be perceived by others (Hoyle, Kernis, Leary, & Baldwin, 1999). Carl Rogers (1959) did much to highlight the importance of self-concept in his theory of person-centred therapy. According to Steele (1988), self-affirmation is a function of the self that preserves integrity and morale adequacy.

   As stated previously, Freers (1994) and Brown (2002) claimed that PLA plays a role in confidence building. However, in this study, the drive toward self-affirmation played a minor motivating role for most of the participants. Of the 32 participants, only 3 mentioned that building self-confidence acted as a motivator for enrolling in PLA. The comments of two participants illustrate this minority view:

> I thought that probably I had some life experience that would not only work toward obtaining some credit but would help to pull a portfolio together just to acknowledge what I have been doing for the past 15 years.

> What's the harm in trying? If I get credits towards my degree, that's a bonus. Other than that, it's been a real opportunity to pull together a portfolio of what I did learn over the years.

Self-directed Learning

Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and other resources for learning, choosing and implementing learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18). Although there has been subsequent debate over Knowles' definition as being too broad, it still serves the purposes of this study.

None of the participants in the study mentioned PLA as a motivator for clarifying his or her educational goals. PLA petitioners appeared, at the outset, to have been relatively clear about what they wanted to achieve, although they were certainly open to advice on how to achieve their goals.

Student Experience of PLA

Of the 24 respondents who had completed the portfolio course, 5 said portfolio development was a taxing and time-consuming endeavour. Of the 8 students who were currently taking the portfolio course, 2 complained:

> The number of hours it's taken to do this course well has already superseded several other AU 3-credit courses. I would question if this is really a 3-credit course given the number of hours it takes to do it.

> I agree that it has been very time consuming. I do have a number of other courses from AU and from the amount of time I've spent on this course, I could have completed two or three others.

Among the students who had completed a portfolio, two commented:

> I found the process involved in putting it together pretty extensive when you have a great deal of history to compile.

> It took me a long time to prepare it . . . It was one of the most difficult things I've had to do.

Participants who had completed their portfolios may have been less likely to object to the time and effort required because they realized, in retrospect, that the benefits outweighed the effort.

Outcomes of PLA

The outcome questions related only to those 24 respondents who had undergone PLA. Five broad categories of PLA outcomes emerged from the focus groups: earning a credential, self-affirmation, reflected-on learning, self-

directed learning, and employer recognition of PLA-assisted credentials. Of course, PLA recipients may have experienced more than one outcome. For instance, they may not only have been promoted but also have benefited from a greater appreciation of their experiential learning. In such instances, student comments were counted twice.[6]

Earning a Credential

Out of the 24 participants, 12 (50%) indicated that credit was an important outcome for them. Three participants commented:

> It helped me finish off my degree. If I had not received all of the credits that I did, I still would have gone on anyway.

> Most of us [in a police force] intended to get our degree anyway, but any help was great. I'm currently the chair of business studies at X College . . . and one of the conditions they placed on me [was that I had to] get a degree.

> I'm certain it will be beneficial when I acquire the other credit. My objective is simply to get as much completed as possible to get a degree . . . quite frankly, it's a check in the box for promotion.

However, for 6 of the 24 participants, the only perceived gain was course credit, as illustrated by these comments:

> Just doing the portfolio and getting the credits was enough. I knew where I was headed. I just did it because it sounded interesting.

> It didn't really make a difference to me.

> I would have completed my certificate regardless. I was happy to get the credits I received. I suppose you could say that it encourages you to go on because of getting credits.

Self-affirmation

Of the 24 respondents 8 (one third) identified personal affirmation as an outcome of the PLA process, noting that:

> It was nice to look back at it [portfolio] and to actually recognize myself what I've been up to over the years. It was a good thing to do.

> I felt I was really into self actualization. It was quite interesting to me because I think [PLA] does build self confidence and it helps you to kind of organize and analyze your life experience. So personally it's a very good thing.

I think I had never realized what I had done in so much of my life and the accomplishments. So yes, it was for the credits but it was really nice to learn that you've accomplished so much in your career. And also, it gave me a little boost in my confidence.

I really enjoy the fact that I have an autobiography now of all my courses and training and I also went into personal experience and life lessons learned. My kids can look at it . . . It's really a unique document for me.

After 50 years of business experience I knew I knew a lot of things. I just didn't realize they had such a connection to some theory. I now talk to my students about my experience with the portfolio [since] we do prior learning assessment at Seneca College.

I found that throughout each stage of the course, I learned so much about myself, that, I mean, I'm still amazed.

This is a huge summary of my entire work experience. When I was reviewing it for the call, I was telling my husband, "Gee, I should update it" . . . just to keep adding to it. I think it's just wonderful.

Reflected-on Learning

Mezirow (1998) made a distinction between critical self-reflection and reflection: critical self-reflection entails the critique of a belief or set of beliefs upon which a person has constructed part of their reality, as opposed to a summing up of experiential learning. In the present study, there was evidence of important self-reflection in comments by 11 of its 24 participants, although there was no direct evidence of critical self-reflection. Comments included:

With the career portfolio I found it advantageous to look at personal and professional experience that I have had and put it together in one binder so you could examine your life.

The other contribution from the PLA process is that I was able to then really sit back and assess what kind of skills or what kind of experiential learning that could contribute positively to the new world which I was in [changing health care field].

Improved Self-direction

There is an ongoing debate in adult education about the ambiguities and meaning of self-directed learning. We understand self-directed learning as the individual's awareness of the options that are available by following his or her academic and personal goals. Ten of the 24 study participants indi-

cated that PLA made significant contributions to their pursuit of their educational goals. As one student commented:

> It made me more aware of my course selection and where I was heading in my career. I think the greatest part is when you get that letter back [assessor's report] and it recommends courses you should take and where you can go. Being new to the program I wasn't sure what courses I should be taking and some of that direct feedback guided my decisions around the courses that I took.

> I will be able to use some of the structured components of creating a portfolio in my further AU studies. There were some discipline things— a time management component—that will help me.

Employer Recognition of PLA-Assisted Credentials

Previously, we discussed the reluctance of the Canadian university community to embrace PLA as a legitimate credentialing procedure. However, the job market can confer its own sense of legitimacy. Five of the six program graduates commented on the validity of their PLA-assisted degrees. These graduates had known beforehand that their degrees would be regarded as bona fide, and some were reimbursed for tuition or had time off from work to complete the process. Their comments included:

> I had an interview for a job [with Alberta Environment] last week . . . if I didn't have the degree I couldn't have even applied for the job. They checked my educational record and my PLA and there didn't seem to be any problem.

> Certainly it was recognized by my employer (federal government). I was refunded in full for my expenses and of course they were paying me my salary as well.

> I asked [the human resources department at Canada Customs] to be funded and it was all funded by the employer at the front end so they knew the process and they agreed with it.

CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction to this article, we outlined three perspectives from which the role of PLA in the higher education system can be understood: the economic perspective, the adult learning perspective, and the social-justice perspective. Almost all of the participants in this study conformed to the economic viewpoint of PLA in terms of motivation. That is, PLA is primarily a mechanism to reduce the time, effort, and cost to earn a credential. However,

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. This back-eddy effect belonged more to the second perspective of adult learning. The third perspective, social justice, did not emerge in this study. This may be because PLA attracts highly motivated students who are focused on career blockage and need credentials for career advancement or change; as a result, they are not higher-education reformers at this point in time. Thus, a more in-depth discussion of only the first two perspectives follows.

In terms of the economic perspective, portfolio-based PLA is certainly about credentialing but is not limited to it. Most adult educators like to think of the process of developing a portfolio as a significant educational experience, which may lead to self-affirmation, recognition of the importance of reflection in the deepening of knowledge, and enhanced self-directed learning. The results of this study suggested that most students undertake PLA simply as a way of reducing the time and expense needed to earn a credential—and almost any credential would do. Moreover, their educational goals were extrinsic: they needed a credential because their careers were stalled or they wanted to shift careers. Notions of self-affirmation and the importance of reflection on past learning did not enter their minds in petitioning for PLA. Indeed, the earning of credentials may have been the only outcome for a subset of these PLA petitioners.

Saying this, however, is not to deride the importance of receiving credit to the students involved in the study. Studying part-time and, in the case of AU, at a distance is a long and arduous task. Even the most motivated adult students are subject to changes in life circumstances that could adversely affect their chances of graduating. Shortening the time and decreasing the expense associated with achieving a degree undoubtedly benefits students and (indirectly) the educational provider by increasing the chances of graduation. In this study, the average amount of credit per student granted through PLA was equivalent to six half-year courses, a considerable savings of time and money. As such, the additional effects of incidental learning might be considered to be welcome add-ons.

Three-quarters (18 of 24) of the study participants explicitly stated that they experienced real benefits such as self-affirmation, knowledge reflected-on, and clarification of learning paths and goals. However, these outcomes were either incidental or unintended. In general, students entered the process with the sole intention of earning credits for experience but emerged with unanticipated educational benefits on completion of their portfolios. This is the "back-eddy effect"—an outcome that any educator, let alone any adult educator, should welcome.

In our review of the research literature on PLA, the correlation between PLA and formal academic success—good grades, high program completion rates, and further education—are striking and noteworthy. Certainly, the success of PLA students in formal studies lends credibility to the PLA process. Questions would need to be raised if these students had failed at formal studies yet walked away with buckets of PLA credits; instead, these students proved themselves in the fire of formal studies. However, it is difficult to sort out the reason for the well-established correlation between formal academic success and participation in PLA. Is PLA effective only because academically adept students petition or does PLA contribute positively toward academic success? The results of this study are consistent with past results: there is no simple answer. Nonetheless, PLA does seem to operate as a crucial selection device. PLA petitioners at AU were unusually confident and self-directed learners, compared to "average" AU students, although it is hard to say whether they were reflective learners before starting their portfolios. The findings suggested strongly that PLA "accentuates the positive." Most of the PLA petitioners in this study were highly motivated before they developed their portfolios, and their motivation was extrinsic—they needed a degree to advance in their careers, to change career paths, or to keep their job. Nonetheless, adult students who are probably already predisposed toward academic success receive real educational benefits from PLA, apart from receiving PLA-awarded credits.

There was an additional back-eddy effect accruing to AU. As noted previously, AU had come to look more like a "front-end" university and less like one with a mission to offer a second chance for adults to earn a degree. Portfolio-based PLA seems not only to provide an opportunity for AU to modestly increase its graduation rate but also to flesh out its role as an adult educator. We say "modestly" because there was little evidence that PLA was effective apart from this group of students who had the specific characteristics of being mid-career, of facing serious challenges to advancement or career change, and, consequently, of being highly motivated to complete their programs of study. As such, PLA offers no panacea to disappointing graduation rates. Nonetheless, there was substantial evidence that PLA can provide a true educational experience in adult higher education.

ENDNOTES

1. The portfolio methods of assessment in this study consisted of pro-
   gram- and course-based techniques. Program-based assessment relates
   to generic outcomes of university programs (e.g., psychology) and
   course-based assessment relates to outcomes of specific courses (e.g.,
   introduction to counselling). The majority of assessments in the study
   were program-based.

2. Teleconferencing was used because of the geographical dispersion of
   AU students. Although it obviously misses data provided by partici-
   pant body language, we did not see this as a serious limitation given
   the nature of the research questions. In addition, in teleconference
   focus groups, the facilitator has to pay more attention to the building
   of a group dynamic and to the meaning attached to participants' com-
   mentary than in face-to-face situations.

3. Of the 17 dropouts who were asked to participate in the study, 9
   refused. There were no refusals from the other four candidate sample
   groups.

4. The research team consisted of a professor of psychology, a coordina-
   tor of institutional studies, a director of learning accreditation, a stu-
   dent counsellor, and a research assistant.

5. While AU does not collect data on employment for its student records,
   it is highly unlikely that 90% of its program students would be
   employed in the public sector.

6. One fifth of the respondents mentioned more than one category or
   theme in their comments.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Geoff Peruniak coordinates the University Certificate in Career Development at Athabasca University. He has been involved in the development and implementation of prior learning assessment for 25 years.

Geoff Peruniak fait la coordination du Certificat universitaire en développement de carrières à l'Université d'Athabasca. Depuis 25 ans, il participe au développement et à la réalisation de l'évaluation des connaissances acquises.

Rick Powell has worked as an institutional researcher at the British Open University, the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre, and Athabasca University. His research interests include student progress and dropout in distance education and the assessment of prior learning.

Rick Powell a travaillé comme chercheur institutionnel au British Open University, le Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre et à l'Université d'Athabasca. Ses intérêts de recherche comprennent le progrès des étudiants et leur décrochage dans l'éducation à distance, et l'évaluation des connaissances acquises.