

Engaging the Portfolio: Giving Prior Learning Experience life and Meaning through Research

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Introduction

In the year 2016, it is safe to say that online learning is established as a viable and even popular mode of acquiring knowledge. Traditional colleges offer online programs; there are stand-alone online universities; and *Massive Open Online Courses* (MOOCs) have proven to be more than a short-lived experiment. According to OCLC's 2014 report *At a Tipping Point: Education, Learning, and Libraries*, 22% of respondents across all age ranges had taken an online class toward a degree, and close to half of college students had taken one (18).

Library instruction, however, is still largely rooted in face-to-face interactions via course-related instruction. Even where libraries may be doing a good job of creating online content, we know that online learners may not be finding it or even aware of its existence. *At A Tipping Point* reveals that 75% of online learners identified the library's "brand" as books (OCLC 2014, 51). Thus librarians need to do something different—something outside the traditional library instruction box—in order to meet the needs of students who don't even think of the library as a source for online information and research assistance. Because online learners are not physically present, their needs are often assumed and not known.

In addition, online learners are diverse in ways unique to them. They are often non-traditional students who bring Prior Learning Experiences (PLE), which may be labeled as non-academic, with them. From volunteer work to military service, to self-employment, PLE learners, particularly adult/continuing education students, come to the classroom with experiences that have extraordinary value, but the academy does not always give this experience its due acknowledgement.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

In order to address this issue, many universities are in the process of strengthening their procedures for prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA refers to the method(s) by which students may provide evidence of prior learning to their institution, in order to receive college credit. There are many common avenues for this process, including submission of advanced placement (AP) course credits, submission of military experience and training, completion of a standardized test, or submission of a portfolio. Experiences that qualify as prior learning might be—but are certainly not limited to—entrepreneurship, military service, volunteer work, or practical experience as an intern.

PLA and online learning as an opportunity for Library Collaboration: A Penn State Pilot

At Penn State University, efforts to bolster PLA credit programs are underway. Penn State University is a land-grant institution in central Pennsylvania. Its 24 campuses that are situated around the state serve over 76,000 undergraduates and over 9,000 graduate students. In addition, Penn State's online campus, called World Campus, has an enrollment of over 12,000 students, leaning slightly more heavily toward undergraduates with a count of just over 7,000 (Penn State Budget 2016). Exceptionally noteworthy when considering the role of PLA is that approximately 88% of World Campus students are classified as adult learners. 99% of graduate students are in that category (Julie Cross, pers. comm.). At Penn State, an adult learner is defined as someone who is 24 years of age or older; a veteran of the armed services; an active-duty service member; returning to school after four or more years of employment, homemaking, or other activity; or a person who assumes multiple adult roles such as parent, spouse/partner, and employee (Julie Cross, pers. comm.). What this means, in short, is that nearly all of the institution's online learners are coming into the university with some sort of prior life experience, whether professional, volunteer, military, or personal. Therefore, they are an excellent target population for development of programs and courses that provide vehicles to obtain PLA credits.

In particular, the Prior Learning Assessment program is striving to increase the number of courses that offer credit by exam or by portfolio, with the primary goal of making Penn State more transfer-friendly (Penn State Senate, 2015). And while transfer students are a factor university-wide, their population is growing most notably at World Campus. At present, Penn State does not track PLA credit awards in any sort of progression during a student's career at Penn State; however, data gathered about the number and type of credits awarded at students' entry to the university shows that there is much room for growth in the use of portfolios as a reflection of students' experience before and during their time at the university. Currently transfer credits from other institutions account for 95% of all PLA awarded. Portfolios and all other means comprise the remaining 5% (Michele Rice, pers. comm.)

In recognition of this fact, the Penn State College of the Liberal Arts and the University Libraries teamed up to attempt to address the call for more PLA-by-portfolio opportunities. They recognized that research can act as a vehicle to provide the context necessary for students with PLE to translate their experiences into a product with academic value—in this case a portfolio that can be submitted to the students' degree programs for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credit. To this end, a faculty member from Liberal Arts and a librarian from the Libraries' Learning Services department designed and taught an online course that guided students through the process of creating that portfolio.

Collaboration & Course Design

Every college at Penn State has different standards for reviewing and awarding prior learning experiences. The College of the Liberal Arts has established standards and a process for doing so, and designed LA201W: Experiential Learning Portfolio in order to help students meet those standards. A key element in these standards is that the students' portfolios must demonstrate learning as the result of their experience. That learning, in turn, must be grounded in theory, not just the practical (Penn State College of the Liberal Arts, 2016). This course is open to any Penn State student, from any campus, whether or not she or he plans to seek PLA credit following the

completion of the course. In other words, the credit awarded for the completion of the portfolio is separate from the awarding of PLA credit.

Rooted in David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the transformation of experiences into knowledge, the course divided into three units (Kolb 1983). The first unit's development was led by the Liberal Arts faculty. This unit, titled *An Introduction to Experiential Learning & Elements of a Portfolio*, introduced experiential learning as a concept, as well as the elements of a portfolio. Students were instructed to review all of their prior experiences in order to identify candidates for inclusion in the portfolio, and then establish what the learning outcomes of these experiences were.

The librarian led the development of the course's second unit. Unit two focused on contextualization of experience through research. To accomplish this, students were asked to watch a series of tutorials that introduced source evaluation and concept mapping. The terms generated in the students' concept maps were to serve as keywords for research. They were then directed to complete searches in the library's discovery platform and identify resources that supported their experiences as college-level learning. Finally, the students established their experiences' academic context by completing a rigorous annotated bibliography (see Figure 1). This unit also required students to write an in-depth personal narrative to establish their voices and the meaning of their experiences within the context of their academic goals. As a result, the students gained skills in research and writing that will serve them for the rest of their academic careers, as well as the opportunity to acquire PLA credits if they chose to do so.

Figure 1. Sample annotated bibliography entry (used by student permission)

1. Lewis, Hope. "Human Rights and Natural Disaster: The Indian Ocean Tsunami." *Human Rights Magazine* Fall 2006. American Bar Association, Fall 2006. Web. 2 October 2015.

In this article, Lewis calls upon governments and the international community to take moral and legal responsibility to ensure human rights is considered in disaster relief operations. She presents principles and articles written in two legally binding international human rights treaties, such as nondiscrimination in relief provisions, access to quality healthcare, and emphasis on the inclusion of locals. Lewis acknowledges that lawyers provide legal services to survivors within the U.S., but believes that lawyers can do more to hold international governments accountable for human rights issues during disaster relief.

This article supports my portfolio by exploring the ways rule of law can assist disaster relief operations so as to prevent discrimination, child trafficking, transition to sustainable development, and other issues.

Lewis' article is an appropriate resource as it meets the evaluation guidelines of authorship, content, currency, citation, and publisher. Lewis is a law professor at Northeastern University School of Law and an internationally recognized legal scholar on human rights. Although this article was published in 2006, its content was originated from actual international legal documents, with references cited, and published by the American Bar Association.

The final unit of the course, *Portfolio Development and Assembly*, leads students through the process of compiling all of the materials required for a portfolio, including educational goal statements, transcripts, resumes, and supporting documentation (Penn State College of the Liberal Arts, 2016). Students have many opportunities during this process for peer and instructor feedback on their portfolio elements and design. The final product, in most cases, is a word document or pdf file (The College of the Liberal Arts offers a separate course in online portfolio creation.).

Early Impact and the Way Forward

LA:201W was taught during spring 2015, by the faculty member who worked on its development, and again in fall 2015, by the librarian. Following the first offering, no one submitted their portfolio for PLA credit. In the fall, two students did so successfully. The majority of students enrolled were able to be classified as adult learners, a number of whom were active or former members of the United States military. Each section also included students who were based in international locations, including Africa, India, and South America.

While impact of incorporating research as context was not directly assessed, the effectiveness of doing so was evident in both the student submissions, as well as their unsolicited comments about the course. The Experiential Learning Portfolio course challenged students. Said one student in an email,

“...I can truly say it has been one of the most challenging writing intensive classes I’ve had. I’ve had to be more creative in design than content which really pushed me outside my comfort zone. That’s a good thing.”

Another student shared,

“...Reflecting on what I’ve learned in putting together my portfolio, I realized that the editing skills are so paramount in today’s age of technology. It is no longer the matter of finding an answer, rather, it is the matter of deconflicting an infinite number of answers. What editing has taught me, is to choose one paradigm of thought and run with it...while knowing that there might be just as strong of an argument or vantage point on the other side. I can never be 100 percent objective or comprehensive, and that is O-K. This was a HUGE lesson to learn....”

As this person worked through the portfolio process, she was able to make meaning of her experiences in new and unexpected ways.

Finally, both instructors of this course attest that it is an excellent vehicle for connecting with online students in a way that may not be typical of the medium. Because portfolio creation is an iterative process, the course builds in many opportunities for students to gather both peer and instructor feedback. Many students took advantage of these opportunities, and one wrote, “Thank you...for your guidance and assistance helping me through with the course...I will always be grateful for all your help getting me through this process.”

All of this feedback is encouraging, as well as indicative of the need to seize on opportunities to support student learning through experience and information contextualization and research integration with the curriculum. In 2016, Penn State University is converting to a new learning management system, and at that time LA:201W will be edited to address some noted points of difficulty for students. In the realm of research, more activities will be presented to help further unpack the research process and gather student feedback on progress more frequently, as they digest information about the library and resource evaluation.

Also under consideration is a section of the course dedicated entirely to students with military experience, as their experiences are unique to them and peer evaluation among a more homogenous cohort may lead to a more comfortable class environment for this group. Enrollment in the course is expected to grow as well, and more sections will eventually be offered. A new online major under the College of the Liberal Arts, Integrative Social Sciences, will be requiring LA:201W. In addition, the university as a whole will continue to promote portfolios as a viable method for awarding PLA, as well as some standardization of what those portfolios must present.

Additionally, the anecdotal evidence of the impact that research integration into a course like this is significant fuel for the fire of librarian collaboration on curriculum design and development, particularly for online learners who lack the benefit of face-to-face contact with a librarian. Future developments will include an online library orientation experience for World Campus students, as well as assessment of those students' prior information literacy knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve to include a much higher adoption of online courses, it is essential that librarians work to understand online learners' information needs and identify opportunities for curricular collaboration. Doing so enables research tools and concepts to be embedded into the fabric of a course, rather than relying on students to find their way to the library, which many of them envision as a physical space. In addition, through assessment and observations of adult learners' experiences with research, librarians can apply understanding of their research needs and knowledge gaps to other areas of library instructional services.

Sources

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