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INTEGRATING INFORMAL LEARNING WITH PROGRAMS AT THE UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE LEVEL

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For years institutions of higher learning (IHLs) have adopted a variety of methods for acknowledging and granting credit for prior learning that prospective students bring to their studies. This prior learning is often in the form of informal learning activities through work, informal training, or pursuit of personal interest. Students are asked to demonstrate their prior learning through compilation of a learning portfolio, or by other methods such as exams. Current terms for this practice include prior learning assessment (PLA), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), and recognition of prior learning (RPL). The latter term is used below to refer to all of these processes of recognizing and evaluating prior learning gained outside of traditional school programs.

As suggested, *RPL* (recognition of prior learning) refers to a college or university's recognizing and assessing students' prior learning gained informally through work, information training, and life experience, and granting value for that learning through credits or some adjustment in program requirements. *Formal* learning refers to learning gained through completion of programs, degrees, and certificates offered by colleges, universities, and other IHLs. *Informal learning* happens outside of colleges and universities as adults engage their world through work, recreation, and life experience. Example sources of information learning include work colleagues, museums, libraries, and the Web. Informal learning is sometimes contrasted with *non-formal* learning, referring to structured learning such as training completed at work or non-accredited workshops and courses. *RPL* results in some exchange of value, usually credits or adjusted program requirements. *RPL* reviews are typically done at the front end of a student's education, as they consider or apply for an IHL degree or program.

Learning Portfolios

RPL procedures most often require submission and review of a learning portfolio. A learning portfolio is a collection of products and evidence, prepared by a learner, demonstrating that person's growth and development over time. Learning portfolios include reflections on individual artifacts and on the portfolio as a whole. Portfolios presented on the Web, known as electronic or e-portfolios, are becoming the most popular form of delivery. A typical portfolio includes several required elements, such as a

curriculum vitae, a petition specifying specific knowledge outcomes and linking that knowledge to program competencies, artifacts provided as supporting evidence along with short reflections for each, along with a critical narrative, reflecting on, analyzing, and evaluating the portfolio in terms of fit with program goals.

Ideally, learning portfolios are expected to meet the psychometric standards of reliability and validity, in common with other educational measures. In reality, institutions differ in the rigor applied to portfolio assessment, with perhaps a majority not systematically gathering psychometric data. Liesbeth Baartman and colleagues have suggested a different set of *edumetric* standards as a basis for evaluating portfolios, such as suitability for purpose, transparency, fairness, cost efficiency, and authenticity.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a professional organization of RPL specialists and practitioners from countries across the globe. The organization promotes the effective use of RPL methods and sponsors research and programs of interest to the community. The CAEL website, for example, includes a set of ten standards for determining whether credit for prior learning should be granted to a given student. These standards, taken together with Baartman's standards for portfolio use, provide a useful starting point for RPL best practices.

Benefits of Adoption and Use

As lead researcher for CAEL, Becky Klein-Collins reviewed practices of 48 IHLs representing more than 62,000 learners, and found an average 18 credits were granted to students participating in a RPL program. She found generally beneficial effects for students participating in RPL, including: (1) saved *money* when compared to non-RPL students; (2) saved *time* (2-10 months for a bachelor's degree); and (3) better *graduation* rates (56% graduating within seven years, compared to 21% of non-participating students). From the institutional side, the same advantages can be applied: students completing their studies more successfully, more quickly, and more efficiently leads to higher status and stronger reputation.

The creation of a learning portfolio can be especially helpful to students from racial and ethnic groups that are traditionally underserved by higher education. The CAEL study for example found that Hispanic students receiving RPL credit had graduation rates *eight times higher* than non-participating Hispanic students. Part of this benefit may be due to the portfolio's role in *identity construction*: Students completing learning portfolios often report greater self-understanding and pride as they come to appreciate the significant learning they have already achieved in their lives. They come to see themselves in new terms, as accomplished and competent learners ready for the next schooling challenge. Like digital stories, portfolios provide learners an opportunity to express themselves in their own voices – something particularly beneficial to groups who have traditionally be silenced or marginalized.

Challenges and Barriers

Relatively few institutions have a system-wide RPL system in place for recognizing informal learning accomplishments. CAEL has developed Learning Counts, a service aimed at institutions with no formal RPL systems in place. Barriers to system-wide RPL adoption include:

- **Cost.** Portfolio-based RPL remains a labor-intensive enterprise, both for the student preparing the portfolio and the faculty supporting that preparation and then evaluating the work.
- **Stigma.** Receiving credit for prior learning suffers from a negative stereotype perpetuated by exploitative diploma mills, wherein students receive a credential of dubious worth. The perception of getting something for nothing, or avoiding the harder more rigorous path, leads to questions of quality and legitimacy among some observers.
- **Faculty resistance.** Participating faculty members may resist RPL programs for a number of reasons, including concerns about time investment, validity, and reputation.

Student participation is another concern. Many students who could qualify for credit may be reluctant to participate; likewise some students have inflated expectations about their prior knowledge. A comprehensive system of support is needed to guide them through the process and ensure a positive experience. Sara Leiste and Kathryn Jensen report on efforts of Capella University to craft the RPL experience into something positive for participants. Three goals guide the project: (1) keeping students and faculty *motivated* and engaged; (2) ensuring *success* of students completing the program; and (3) keeping the *costs* affordable and within range of student and institutional capacity. This project illustrates the need for local commitment and use of data over time.

Emerging Alternatives

The open educational resources (OER) movement of the last ten years has led to a growing number of learning resources and self-directed learning options. These resources are often used within IHLs and integrated into curricula, but they have also proven valuable for informal learning uses. With online enthusiasts developing significant expertise outside of normal schooling channels, interest has grown in certifying or credentialing this informally gained expertise. Jim Taylor of the University of Southern Queensland posited five developmental stages in the progression of OER, beginning with learners accessing open courseware resources, and culminating in IHL granting credit for OER forms of learning and eventually full degrees. *Digital badges* (certificates attesting to informal learning accomplishments completed online) have some promise, although demand seems still to be waiting for a suitable technological solution. A consortium of IHLs is now moving toward the formation of Open Educational Resource University

(OERu), with the aim of supporting independent online learners toward formal credentialing of their skills.

See also Adult Learners and Social Networking, Badges and Skill Certification, Performance Assessment, Personal Learning Environments, Ubiquitous Learning

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