

## ePortfolios and PLA

### Hurley Betty, Streaming Editor

Welcome to this section on prior learning assessment (PLA) and ePortfolios. In this introductory paper, I present the major themes connected with these two areas, describe how they are interrelated, and then link to the three other papers in this first issue.

### Abstract

The division between formal and informal learning is blurring. Terms such as emergent learning better describe a networked environment of resources and a learner's interaction with those resources in creative ways. ePortfolios provide a natural environment for documenting emergent learning, perhaps in preparation for gaining a credential for that learning.

**KEYWORDS:** ePortfolios, prior learning



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## 1. WHERE TO BEGIN?

First of all, the term PLA, although still used widely, does not capture the breadth of approaches to credentialing learning used today. The “prior” in the term especially connects more with a time when separation between formal and informal education was clearer. Formal education, for my generation and many generations before me, meant learning that occurs in a classroom. It was learning that was assessed primarily through written tests. Informal learning, broadly defined, is learning that occurs elsewhere, whether through self-study or through participation in group

activities such as after-school programs and special events. Note that the National Science Foundation (NSF) still tries to differentiate between these categories of learning (NSF, no date).

With the dramatic increase of resources on the Internet, the boundaries between formal and informal learning are losing their helpfulness in describing learning environments. The emerging terms are “emergent learning” and “prescribed learning” (Williams et al., 2011). According to the authors, prescribed learning is centrally determined, hierarchical, fixed, and predictable. Emergent learning, on the other hand, is unpredictable and arises out of the interaction between the learners and their context.

The “prior” in PLA is being challenged, because it implies that once someone begins participating in formal education, one ends other forms of learning. Thus, the institution of higher learning may develop a process to credential previous learning that may be college level, but then the opportunity for credentialing learning outside the institution ends. In many of institutions, PLA is also confined to learning that equates to what is found in that institution’s curriculum. For example, someone with experience as a manager may be able to challenge the institution’s course in introduction to management, most likely by taking the final exam for that course. The article by Scott Campbell from CAEL provides an approach to PLA that applies this new paradigm.

Challenges to the status quo in higher education are not confined to pedagogical terms, however. We cannot forget the financial aspects. The horror at the amount of student loans and how these weighty loans are affecting the futures of graduates laden with them is increasing. The push now is to make higher education more affordable. The ability for a learner to credential emergent learning is the next frontier for the credentialing of learning.

Badges are evidence of this move to credential learning outside of the institution. But higher education is also heeding the call for radical change. The Gates Foundation has been providing large grants to institutions that create alternatives to traditional classroom-based learning and grading. The traditional credit hour is being challenged as a measure of learning. And American Council on Education (ACE), with a grant from the Gates Foundation, has launched an Alternative Credit Project involving 40 institutions accepting the credentialing of learning from organizations such as EdX, Ed4Online, Jumpcourse, and Saylor (ACE, no date)

Other organizations have been working at developing frameworks to assess emergent learning. Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) has developed VALUE (valid assessment of learning in Undergraduate education) rubrics to assess the achievement of essential learning outcomes for a twenty-first century learner (AAC&U, no date). These include communication skills as well as creative thinking, teamwork, and integrative thinking. The Lumina Foundation has as a primary goal alternative credentialing and has created a DQP (degree qualifications profile) as part of that project (LF, no date). The Lumina Foundation also provided a grant to SUNY Empire State College, which has been disseminating a GDQP (global degree qualifications framework). This framework was specifically developed to assess emergent learning (Global Learning Qualifications Framework, 2013).

Swirling around all of this is the construct of competencies. Rather than believing that taking 40 separate courses really leads to the development of skills needed to not only survive, but even

prosper in this century, why are we not assessing learners' core skills and their ability to apply them?

## 2. ePortfolios?

Enter ePortfolios. At a recent Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning conference, several suggested getting rid of the “e,” since the “e” can almost be assumed, given the expectation of electronic versions of almost everything. I will continue to use the term ePortfolio but agree that the “e” is superfluous.

Helen Barrett is known as the “grandmother” of ePortfolios. She has been advocating ePortfolios for many years, and her Web page is full of helpful resources. Her TED talk (Barrett, 2010) is inspirational—one that moves viewers away from conceiving an ePortfolio as merely a depository. For her, an ePortfolio becomes the center of one's emergent learning. From one's ePortfolio space, a learner reaches out to resources, including Internet resources and also humans. Yes, this space documents that journey. But, it also includes reflection by the learner about the artifacts in the ePortfolio. In addition, in the organizing of that space, the learner is taking ownership of his or her learning journey.

Because of the perfect correlation with emergent learning (learner controlled, unpredictable, collaborative), the ePortfolio is an ideal environment to document emergent learning for credentialing purposes. In order to credential learning, the learner needs to make that learning visible to the evaluator. If the learner is documenting that learning as it occurs through the ePortfolio environment, that visible proof will then be available to the evaluator.

Shane Sutherland, president of PebblePad, an innovative ePortfolio system, uses the term ABLE (activity-based learning environment) to describe what can happen in an ePortfolio environment. Shane identifies two types of portfolios, namely, *task* and *about me*. Task portfolios focus on a project, such as an independent study, team project, research project, documentation of a field trip, or internship. About-me portfolios provide information about the learner, e.g., his or her attributes, competencies, achievements.

The term “employability” was discussed many times at the AAEEBL conference. Certainly, the development of a portfolio as part of one's application for employment is a potentially high motivator for many students. A new ePortfolio provider, Seelio, builds on that motivation with a direct connection to potential employers. (More information about Seelio and other providers is available in the Web version of this journal.)

A different approach to ePortfolios was taken by Elaine Gray of Appalachian University. Gray, author of the book, *Conscious Choices: A Model for Self-Directed Learning*, discussed the method of contemplative pedagogy for empowering and situating the student's sense of purpose as they initiate their ePortfolio designs. She refers to this as a strategy of living questions to help students make meaning out of their studies at college.

ePortfolio systems have been used for many different applications. Recently, David Eddy of Sheffield Hallam University used PebblePad to deliver a MOOC to health professionals interested in enhancing prostate cancer care. PebblePad workbooks were used to deliver content. Participants

engaged in discussions through PebblePad as well as through tweetchats. There were over 900 participants in the MOOC. In a remarkable use of ePortfolios, a university system in Chile, called DuocUC, instituted the use of ePortfolios as a final assessment in a competency-based program. Since 2012, 83,000 students have developed their ePortfolios for assessment. Improvements are needed, but the mere number is impressive.

### 3. NEXT STEPS

With each issue that this stream represents, my plan is to present some specific examples. In addition, in the Web version, I will provide links to resources, such as support groups for ePortfolio users and platform providers. If you would like to have a resource and/or application highlighted, please let me know.

For this initial issue, I have included a piece that looks at the broader issues, “From “MyWork” to “Our Work”: A Return to the Mission of Higher Education,” by Terrel Rhodes of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Dr. Rhodes is currently Vice President for AAC&U where he focuses on the quality of undergraduate education, access, general education, and assessment of student learning. He is also director of the annual General Education Institute at AAC&U. He has been a primary force behind the VALUE rubric project mentioned earlier. In this article, he challenges higher education to move toward more learner-centered environments. He provides solid evidence of a disconnect between employer expectations and faculty claims of achievements of college graduates. He then provides some recommendations for how educational institutions can better facilitate deep, connected learning (through ePortfolios) and assess that learning more holistically (via using rubrics such as the VALUE rubrics.)

In the next issue, Bill Heinrich, an assessment specialist at MSU Global, and Jenó Rivera, a faculty innovation faculty at MSU Global, will discuss an innovative method for assessing learning in their article, “*A method for assessing experiential learning for ePortfolios.*”

And, to look at the PLA side, Scott Campbell, Vice President, Higher Education Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), has provided the article, “Portfolio Assessment Bridges the Employment Gap for Healthcare: Certified Workers Save Time and Money and Meet the Industry’s Growing Need for Qualified Workers.” This article provides information about a project whereby health workers can document learning from job experiences through an ePortfolio process.

Clearly, this introduction and the three papers have barely scraped the surface of these two areas. I look forward to exploring prior learning assessment (or perhaps emergent learning assessment) and portfolios with you in upcoming issues.

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