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Literature Review for a Phenomenological Study of Adult Learners' Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment and Portfolio Development Process

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Abstract: The portfolio form of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) offers adult learners the opportunity to demonstrate their college-level learning acquired during adulthood toward potential course credit. By gaining insight into how the portfolio process is experienced from the learners' perspectives we can inform and improve current practices.

Adult learners in higher educational settings come equipped with experiences that can overlap with the course and degree requirements of their respective baccalaureate programs. These overlaps in experience and course curriculum offer a unique means for adult learners to potentially receive college credit(s) for the learning acquired in areas that can be demonstrated for assessment of their prior learning. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs provide adult learners the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, acquired as an adult, through various methods of assessment toward college credit. The portfolio form of PLA can be used in a plethora of ways for demonstrating one's abilities, experiences, background, achievements, and much more. Findings from research conducted by Peruniak and Powell (2007), suggest there are additional benefits for adult learners that engage in portfolio form of PLA, "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" (pp. 98-99). In terms of practice and application, research conducted by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2010), reflects an increase in the incorporation of portfolio assessment from 66% of institutions using it in 2006 to 88% of responding institutions offering portfolio assessment as a means of PLA credit in 2009 (CAEL, p. 19).

This review of literature represents the foundational theoretical literature as well as relevant scholarly research in related areas of practice. Dissertations, theses, and scholarly articles provide interrelated research insights for practitioners and researchers interested in PLA. In the literature and scholarly research reviewed, one study was found relating to research on portfolio programs. A quantitative study completed for the Flemish government with the goal of establishing the definition of what a portfolio is, was conducted by Sweygens, Soetewey, Meeus, Struyf, and Pieters (2009). This study attempted to identify and inventory the varying uses of portfolios as a form of PLA. The study concluded "the portfolio is undeniably growing in use" despite not being clearly defined. "It can have many different functions and adopt different forms according to those functions" (p. 101).

Additionally, three themes emerged from the review of literature related to portfolio development programs and courses: a) the portfolio development process, b) learner outcomes, and c) adult learners' experiences with the prior learning assessment process.

Research on the Portfolio Process

In a study by Freers (1994) the focus was on adult learners and their perceptions of the portfolio process within a particular community college's PLA program. The research was based on pre-collected survey data reviewed and analyzed for themes and related content. An "ex post facto" method was used to identify and analyze information in a database containing student information and student-based

surveys on the PLA process and program at the study site institution. This quantitative study looked at data such as: characteristics of adult learners in the PLA program at this community college; total credits granted for PLA by the study site pre and post 1990; and what factors correspond with success in PLA credits earned, degree(s) earned/programs completed, and professional goal achievement. Freers found the workplace to be the single largest contributor of experiences/learning used as the basis for portfolios for the population of this study.

Kent (1996) conducted a critical review on adult learner's insights on their respective PLA programs. The focus of this critical review was to aid in the transforming of PLA programs to a more efficient model and process, specifically the computer-based systems used in some PLA programs. This study differed from other studies reviewed on adult learners' experiences and perceptions with PLA programs in that, Kent was interested in user perception of the computer system(s) used in e-portfolio (electronic-portfolio) development and how to improve the system, rather than student outcomes.

Yueh (1997) looked at the relationship between the quality of portfolios and the students' use of self-regulated learning. This quantitative study relied on the feedback on portfolios developed and submitted by 52 students within an Engineering program at the single study site. The quality of portfolios was determined using the feedback from the respective instructors and assessors of the submitted portfolios. As the subject-matter experts, those instructors provided the primary data that informed this study. The findings presented in Yueh's study supported the hypothesis that "there is a relationship between the quality of students' performance on portfolio assessment and their use of self-regulated learning" (p. 136).

In a phenomenological study by Remington (2004) a collective case study was employed to research the effectiveness of ePortfolio systems. This qualitative research focused on the learners' experiences with the ePortfolio innovation. The data collected consisted of interviews with administrators, faculty members, and staff at the two site institutions. The findings indicated "four essential key components" for ePortfolio effectiveness: the system is aligned with the institution's mission, values, and goals; the system is supported by the institution's leadership; the system is a vehicle for life-long learning; and the system engages students in active learning for meaning-making (pp. 111-114). The incorporation and subsequent research on innovative learning systems for portfolio development reflects the value of such portfolio programs at institutions of higher education, and the need for further research on the students' perspective and experiences with portfolio development.

Research on Learner Portfolio Outcomes

Research findings from studies of learner outcomes related to portfolio development and assessment include: increased persistence to degree and program completion Pearson, 2000; increase in feelings of self-confidence/self-esteem (Blinkhorn, 1999; Freers, 1994; Hayes, 1994); individual growth Freers, 1994; and deeper understandings of theory Lamoreaux, 2005.

In regard to persistence, a quantitative study conducted by Pearson (2000) investigated predictive persistence of adult learners that completed PLA seminars and developed portfolios. The findings supported the hypothesis that "the portfolio form of PLA was significant in the prediction of persistence" (p. 122). The aim of Pearson's study was to develop a model to enable the comparison of the persistence among eligible students who do or do not complete the portfolio. This study found that "the PLA portfolio process is one key intervention" for adult learners to utilize in order to overcome the barriers that population of learners needs to overcome to be successful (p. 121). In addition, Pearson described

the portfolio form of PLA as “the best choice for adult students seeking the baccalaureate degree” based on findings that include greater persistence, affective and cognitive outcomes, and increased self-awareness (p. 134).

In a case study, Hayes (1994) examined the portfolio development process, specifically the learning outcomes of the adult learners participating in that form of PLA. Among her findings, Hayes notes “PLA continues to be a valuable alternative for granting college credit, especially for a diversified student body such as the homebound, rural bound, global transient worker, prisoners, on-site retraining, or those with language deficits” (p. 126). Findings included participants’ perceptions of increased personal insight and self-esteem through the incorporation of projects that allowed them the use of their prior learning endeavors (Hayes, 1994, pp. 126-127).

A study by Lamoreaux (2005) aimed to develop a substantive theory related to the perceived changes reported by adult learners who completed portfolios and those aspects of the PLA process that fostered those changes. The context of this study was a portfolio course in which students develop portfolios demonstrating prior learning to be assessed for college credit. Interviews were conducted with 12 students who completed a portfolio, submitted following enrollment in a portfolio development course. The theory that emerged suggested four components of the portfolio course as most central to adult learners’ experience of change: a model for reflecting on and articulating learning from experience; a narrative writing process that fosters objectification of experience; an exposure to other perspectives, especially one’s peers; and a mentor who provides encouragement and challenge (p. 116). Additionally, “PLA may foster changes in learners’ problem-solving ability or changes described as developmental and transformative” (p. 117).

Research on Adult Learners’ Experiences with Portfolio Development

A study by Burris (1997) incorporated a multiple case study design to explore the adult student participants’ experiences of transformation throughout the portfolio development process. Burris relied on PLA literature, in-depth participant interviews, document analysis, and the researcher’s own perceptions and experiences of portfolio development. Burris maintained that the effective use of reflection, writing, and validation in portfolio development process has a powerful effect on the transformative experiences of participants.

In Blinkhorn’s (1999) research, the study utilized an exploratory case study method to examine how learners made meaning of their prior learning for use in portfolio(s) for potential college credit. This study incorporated a purposive sampling methodology that relied on single interviews of adult learners with differing experiences with the portfolio development process. Four of the adult learners were currently enrolled in the portfolio course; two participants had successfully completed portfolios for college credits, and three additional adult learners participated that chose not to pursue the portfolio course for potential college credit based on college-level prior learning. This research was developed to explore how learners “understand and create meaning from their prior learning” (p. 15). Blinkhorn’s findings include: (a) that the portfolio development process encourages reflection, (b) that learners who engage in the portfolio process are aware of their particular learning style(s) and can describe them accordingly (although the learners used unique and varied vocabulary, they were nonetheless aware of their particular learning styles), (c) that metacognitive abilities are apparent throughout the portfolio development process, and (d) that cognitive development is evident while preparing a portfolio (i.e. academic skills exemplified in writing a portfolio) (pp. 121-126).

Wozney (2001) utilized an ethnographic framework within which to base her case study on the exploration of adult learners' experiences with self-reflection in portfolio assessment. The participants in this program were a diverse group of adult learners comprised of undergraduate and graduate students. The students enrolled in the portfolio development course for various reasons that included: course credit (undergraduate level only), degree requirements, or non-academic related personal enrichment. Of the 24 adult learners in this case study, some were not enrolled in the institution, but rather were taking the course (and developing portfolios) with substantially less risk associated with the outcome and assessment of the portfolios. The students in the case study improved their abilities to be self-reflective learners as the course progressed and, as they understood the philosophy and multiple uses of their portfolios.

In a phenomenological study, Angel (2008) researched the portfolio development program at a community college that trained students in various vocational and technical skills. The learning portfolios developed in this program at a community college in Ontario were closely related to the respective participants' vocational field or desired future profession. This direct correlation between the current educational endeavors and the previously acquired knowledge, skills, and abilities for the participating students provides ample opportunity for that prior learning to serve multiple purposes. Angel's study was based on three research questions: (a) what are the shared phenomenological experiences of students and their perceptions of program effectiveness? (b) how effective are the portfolios developed at the study site when compared to findings in related literature? and (c) what are the implications for key theoretical frameworks that describe portfolios? (pp. 66-67). Angel found that there were some 'shared experiences' amongst those interviewed, as categorized by theme. The themes found included: portfolio as a tool to facilitate learning, as a repository of learning, as a learning strategy useful in identifying gaps in skill, as a motivational tool, as an organizational tool, as a career preparation tool, and as a context for reflection to promote a holistic perspective of students' experiences (p. 94). Additionally, Angel found that 84% of survey respondents "were very positive when it came to assessing their overall experience of creating a portfolio" (p. 123).

A phenomenological study conducted by Smith (2002), focusing on the experiences of adult learners as the primary source of data, explored the experiences of adult learners with the portfolio development process. The goal was to capture the experiences in an effort to further develop the practice of portfolio development and assessment. Participants were selected based on network sampling, where participants in the study assist in the identification and selection of additional participants. The participants were required to have completed a PLA seminar as well as successfully received credit for their assessed portfolio, within the twelve months preceding the study. There were three study sites from which participants were chosen to include one college, one university, and one nursing education center. Smith described five themes found in the data analysis: (a) validation of learning, (b) valuing the past, (c) encountering support, (d) facilitating personal growth (self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-awareness), and (e) the confronting and embracing of time (pp. 76-77). According to Smith, the incorporation of self-reflection in portfolio development "was beneficial to the learner as it provided an opportunity to analyze knowledge gained through past experiences" (p. 78). Of the negative experiences reported by participants, the need for more time to complete and develop portfolios was expressed. Locating documents and verification of learning through demonstration proved to be a challenging task for some participants, too (pp. 82-83). The quest of this phenomenological research for the essence of portfolio

development through the experiences of the adult learners' was succinctly and effectively summarized with the phrase "it opened doors for me" (p. 135).

Summary and the Reflection Connection

Throughout this review of literature there has materialized a theme of reflection as being connected to, if not foundational for, the practice of experiential learning in adult educational programs. Experiential learning theories by Knowles (1980), Kolb (1984), and Mezirow (1990) describe the importance of reflection/reflective practices in the learning process. As Mezirow (1990) expressed it, "by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection" (p. 13). As noted in Fenwick (2001), "PLA also can be a helpful ongoing process of reflection and self-assessment for the learner. It focuses on competency and understandings rather than grades" (p. 18). In addition, the research indicates that reflective practices within PLA were foundational for an increase in self-actualization and, lead to "increased depth of knowledge" (Peruniak & Powell, 2007, p. 99). Furthermore, of the scholarly research reviewed, Burris (1997), Yueh (1997), Wozney (2001), Smith (2002), Lamoreaux (2005), and Angel (2008), each discuss the importance of reflection in adult learning, as related to the portfolio method of PLA. Other studies by Kent (1996) and Blinkhorn (1999) make mention of reflection in their research findings related to PLA and portfolio development.

This review of literature also suggests areas of further research including: how do students perceive their experiences with the effort to earn college credit through the portfolio development process? How do students describe their learning through the process of developing the portfolio, including the process of uncovering and demonstrating their tacit knowledge? How do students describe the nature of the learning used as the basis for portfolio submission(s)? As well as some output-related research such as: How does portfolio output (credit earned versus credits sought) relate to student's perception of success with the portfolio development process? What other dimensions (e.g. instruction, support) influence their perception of success related to credit earned through portfolio(s) submitted?

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