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## Expanding on Phenomenological Research Findings on Adult Learners' Experiences with the Portfolio Process

Benjamin A. Jimenez

St. Edward's University - Austin, TX, [bjimenez23@gmail.com](mailto:bjimenez23@gmail.com)

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## Expanding on Phenomenological Research Findings on Adult Learners' Experiences with the Portfolio Process

Benjamin A. Jiminez  
St. Edward's University, Austin, TX

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to further explore a significant finding of research conducted to identify the essence of the portfolio process, a form of prior learning assessment, as experienced and described by adult learners. The findings to be presented focus on the participants' descriptions of experiences with the portfolio process that resulted in the creation of new learning. The new learning and meaning-making stemmed from the active reflection of prior learning, which is inherent in the portfolio process.

**Keywords:** Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), Portfolio, Tacit Knowledge, Active Reflection

### Introduction

The impetus for this paper was a research study conducted on the essence of participants' experiences with the portfolio form of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Specifically, this paper focuses on the finding of new meaning constructed as a result of the active and engaged reflection, inherent in the portfolio development process. Portfolio development offers students the opportunity to demonstrate course learning outcomes that are equivalent to college-level learning, in order to potentially earn course credits for their respective prior learning. The study utilized a phenomenological design to capture the depth and breadth of the participants' experiences with the portfolio development. Previous research conducted on the phenomenon incorporated various theoretical perspectives, including transformational learning theory (Kolb, 1984), (Burris, 1997), (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), (Remington, 2004), (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010), while other literature connects PLA to feminist (Michelson, 1996), emancipatory (Michelson, 1999), and social frameworks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Previous phenomenological studies on the topic utilized different methodologies and varied in scope. Kent (1996) focused on effectiveness of e-portfolio systems; while Angel (2008), conducted a study on Canadian vocational and community college-level PLA settings.

The findings of the study presented here drew from each of these theoretical perspectives to better understand and interpret the participants' stories. The use of phenomenological interviews enabled the researcher access to student-centered experiences with portfolio development. This study provided the researcher with direct access to

participants and attempted to elicit a greater understanding of how the portfolio form of PLA is currently used, how it might be used moving forward, and how the participants' experiences with the portfolio process allowed new learning to occur as an outgrowth of reflecting on their prior learning as a part of the portfolio development process.

### **Purpose of Study**

The emphasis of this paper presentation was on the meaning made by the participants as it pertained to the essence of the phenomenon and the additional meaning deciphered from the individual and collective participant responses. The guiding research questions for this study were: *How do participants perceive their learning experiences with the effort to earn college credit through the portfolio development process and how do participants make sense of the process of explicating their prior experiential learning as a part of the portfolio process?*

The focus of this paper is to further the discussion on a particular research finding from a dissertation on adult learners' experiences with the portfolio form of prior learning assessment. Specifically, this paper will focus on the finding that the participants created new and different learning on previously attained knowledge, skills, or abilities as they engaged in the portfolio process. Additionally, this paper explores the role of active reflection in the creation of new learning in the context of prior learning assessment.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a three-tiered interview process with each of the nine participants. The three-tiered, semi-structured interview design provided the researcher and the participants the opportunity to progressively uncover the learning and the process of constructing new learning involved in portfolio creation. According to Seidman (2006), "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience," which "provides access to the context of people's behavior" (pp. 9-10). The initial interview captured a brief life history of each participant, from the beginning of adulthood to the point when participants decided to pursue the portfolio process. The next interview explored the participants' experiences with the portfolio process itself. The final interview focused on any new meaning-making and learning gained by the participants through their experiences with the portfolio development process.

## **Theoretical Perspective**

The understanding and demonstration of tacit knowledge in portfolios is often fundamental to the process. Correspondingly, Polanyi's (2005) definition of tacit learning provided the undergirding theoretical framework for this study relevant to the process by which students uncover and make explicit their prior, often unconscious, knowledge. The in-depth phenomenological interviews conducted for this study captured a better sense of the meaning participants make of their experiences with their prior learning. The framework described established the context and meaning of participants' behaviors, through the phenomenological exploration of the participants' prior learning. Additionally, theories of experiential learning were useful for interpreting the experiences of participants with the portfolio process, including characteristics of self-directed learning.

## **Significance of Findings**

The findings of the study included validation as the essence of the learners' experiences with the portfolio process, as well as persistence and self-directed learning as foundational to successful portfolios. Throughout the review of literature, there emerged a theme of reflection as being connected to, if not foundational for, understanding experiential learning in adult educational programs. The experiential learning theories of Knowles (1980), Kolb (1984), and Mezirow (1990) describe the crucial importance of reflection or reflective practices in the learning process. As Mezirow (1990) expressed, "by far the most significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection" (p. 13). In addition, reflective practices within PLA were found to be foundational for an increase in self-actualization and led to "increased depth of knowledge" (Peruniak & Powell, 2007, p. 99).

Relevant to the focus of this paper is the finding that new learning occurred for the participants during the reflective processing of their prior learning for potential use in portfolios. The participants described new and different applications for their prior learning. Marshall stated,

Through all that work of looking at your own history, the process helped me, it forced me, in a very positive way to be able to explain my history and how it ties into, not just the course learning objectives, but also potentially a job I might want (Jimenez, 2015).

The significant takeaway from this finding was that the deeply reflective nature of portfolios offered the participants the opportunity to construct new and valuable meaning from their prior learning, drawing on their respective tacit-knowledge reservoirs.

## **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

The creation of new learning stemming from an active reflection of the portfolio development process increases the opportunity for adult learners to capitalize on their learning experiences. Not only can those adult learners utilize their respective prior learning to earn college-level credits, any new learning created can have a profound impact on re-contextualizing prior learning for different applications. Accordingly, as educators of adult learners, the more often and more effective we can be at incorporating avenues for active reflection in our courses, the greater the likelihood of catalyzing opportunities for knowledge, skills, and abilities that stem directly from previously attained learning. This educational landscape is fruitful ground for effectively acknowledging the validity of prior learning, while also increasing the range and scope of applications for that learning.

Correspondingly, studies conducted by Blinkhorn (1999) and Peruniak & Powell (2007) on adult learners' experiences with the portfolio form of PLA indicate new meaning is created as a result of the reflection on and adaptation of prior learning. Blinkhorn (1999) found that "the portfolio process encourages reflection" and that "the learners were reflecting on their prior learning throughout the construction of their portfolios" (p. 154). Furthermore, "through reflection, the portfolio process allowed these learners to create meaning from their prior learning" (p. 155). Similarly, Burris (1997) described what she deemed "bonus" learning by participants in her study on their experiences with portfolios. She noted that, "in all cases it was as if the learning and new meaning perspectives were viewed as a "bonus" or unintended positive side effect of the portfolio experience" (p. 157).

Cassie described similar experiences with the process of converting her prior learning into new meaning as it applied to her portfolio and course requirements. She stated, "the experience was a learning experience in-and-of-itself in taking objectives and seeing whether or not you matched them" (Jimenez, 2015).

Mezirow (1991) wrote,

Meaning schemes, made up of specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgments, and feelings that constitute interpretations of experience, become more differentiated and integrated or transformed by reflection on the context or process of problem solving in progressively wider contexts" (p. 5).

He furthered, "learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 12). The portfolio process allowed participants the opportunity to recognize

their knowledge, skills, and learning while also providing the chance for new meaning making related to their prior learning. The ability of adult learners to be aware of their world and their ability to incorporate differing *dimensions* of their prior learning into new and more complete meanings, results in a sense of transformation (Mezirow, 1991).

Donald Schön (1983) wrote, “reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning” and that, “through reflection...[he] can criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences...and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience” (p. 61). This new meaning could then be applied to varying contexts through additional reflection and action. Schön continued, “The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior; He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation” (Schön, p. 68). Shelley articulated her experiences with gathering tacit knowledge from her prior learning and transforming it into new meaning within new contexts. She stated,

I hadn't had a need to really frame my knowledge and present it in any way. It was all just in there, and so this process just kind of helped me to frame that, and to really see it as something, you know, instead of just in my head...it made me think about jobs I'd had, and what I used to do, and just kind of where I am now, so it was all very interesting (Jimenez, 2015).

The portfolio process allowed participants the opportunity to more fully recognize their knowledge, skills, and learning while also providing the chance for new meaning to be made related to their prior learning. This foundation for new application through the engaged reflection on prior learning seems to be both affirming and confidence building for the participating adult learners.

### **Summary**

The iterative and deep levels of reflection essential to portfolio development provided participants with additional learning opportunities, including the strengthening of their connections with and understanding of their prior learning. Additionally, the participants benefited from their experiences of constructing new meaning and realizing different applications for that prior learning. While reflection itself is inherent in the portfolio process, participants described a sense of depth related to the reflective-based learning experienced.

The participants' responses indicate diverse forms of learning take place during the reflection-based process of developing portfolios. While also an opportunity to catalog and

serve as a reminder of past accomplishments, the participants described a deeper connection to their prior learning than the learning that they experienced in traditional classroom settings, which was made possible by the reflection-based learning inherent in the portfolio process. Accordingly, the practice of the portfolio process strengthened the original learning, but also on occasion provided a catalyst for new applications and thus, new learning.

The study concludes that the reflection foundational to the portfolio process provided the participants with the opportunity to deepen their awareness of prior learning and strengthened the ability to recall that prior learning. Furthermore, the reflective engagement required to make tacit knowledge explicit for demonstration in portfolios created the opportunity for new meaning to be constructed from that prior learning (Jimenez, 2015). Although the process of matching-up prior learning to course objectives was described by some participants as difficult or cumbersome, the laborious and sometimes frustrating nature of that process proved to offer participants opportunities for growth. The application of the reflection used in portfolios involves the re-examining of and ultimate deconstruction of one's knowledge and skills to allow for explicit description and demonstration of those skills. The conclusions of this study are representative of the nine participants. However, the findings of this research also reflect opportunities outside of the contexts of this study for the reflection, retrieval, and application of prior tacit knowledge. It is through the identification of new applications and the construction of new meanings of prior tacit knowledge that deeper understanding exists. This deep, focused, reflective process created an opportunity for participants to learn about themselves, recall and reapply their prior learning, categorize and re-categorize their skills, and create new meanings from that original learning.

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