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PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF ACADEMIC LITERATURE

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Abstract

Many argue a college degree is more important than ever and required for many occupations. However, pursuing one requires time and money. Prior learning assessment (PLA) offers one solution to overcome such barriers by documenting outside learning through competency portfolios or assessment testing to receive academic credit. The purpose of this systematic literature review was to examine the academic literature related to PLA within the United States. The review searched 669 databases, across 72 disciplines/fields, and yielded 47 peer reviewed journal articles, published in 14 journals, during the last decade. Findings included six major themes with implications for adult education theory and practice.

Keywords: Prior learning assessment, PLA, systematic literature review, adult learners, non-traditional students

Many argue a college degree is more important than ever (Insik & Kim, 2017) and required for entry into many occupations (Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018). Over the lifespan, women and men with bachelor's degrees respectively earn \$630,000 and \$900,000 more than high school graduates (Social Security Administration, 2015). However, pursuing a college degree requires time and money (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). Prior learning assessment (PLA) offers one solution to overcome such barriers and earn a college degree.

PLA documents outside learning through competency portfolios or assessment testing to receive academic credit (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). Benefits include shortening time-to-degree, reducing tuition costs, supporting student persistence, and boosting degree completion, particularly for adult learners (non- and post-traditional students) and underserved populations (CAEL, 2017; Hayward & Williams, 2015; Klein, 2017; Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017; McKay et al., 2016; Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017). Irrespective of gender, race-ethnicity, age, academic ability, grade point average, and financial aid, those with PLA credit have higher graduate rates compared to those without (CAEL, 2010). PLA often empowers adult learners (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017) and underserved student populations (CAEL, 2011). PLA can make the difference between earning or not earning a college degree.

As a national non-profit organization, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) frequently examines and publishes reports focused on PLA, and institutions often use CAEL's 10 standards for assessing learning to create and evolve PLA programs (e.g., Boden et al., 2019; Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018). In the academic literature, researchers and practitioners have examined and published about PLA. However, such publications exclude an integrative and systematic review of the literature.

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to examine the academic literature related to PLA within the United States. Five research questions guided the study: How many PLA peer reviewed journal articles have been published in the last 10 years? When have PLA articles been published? Where have PLA articles been published? What institutions and organizations do published authors represent? What PLA-related findings

and results do authors examine and discuss in the peer-reviewed literature? In addition to the purpose and these questions, a systematic research design guided the review.

Research Design for Systematic Literature Review

Integrative literature reviews contribute to the knowledge base (Torraco, 2005) by examining peer-reviewed literature (Kennedy, 2007) to identify themes, synergies, and gaps (Booth et al., 2012). In this review, we searched 669 databases across 72 disciplines/fields of study. In this completed study, we sought articles situated in the United States since higher education accreditation standards vary by country (a replicated study in progress for international articles). Inclusion criteria comprised “prior learning assessment” in the Abstract, peer reviewed, and published in the last 10 years in English and yielded 47 articles.

For data collection, we used the matrix method (Garrard, 2014) to enhance the literature review’s rigor, quality, and clarity (Torraco, 2005). Each matrix row summarized one article, and columns organized 20 data fields related to journals, articles, and if applicable, underlying studies. For data analysis, we began by reviewing the data in their entirety. Based on Abstract data, two of us independently, inductively, and initially coded each article for primary article purpose. As reliability and validation strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2017), we held four coding sessions to test and reach inter-coder agreement and categories. We then read articles to finalize data and coding and summarize major purpose and findings. Based on final coding and categories, we identified major findings, presented in the next section.

Findings

Within the context of PLA in the United States in the last 10 years, Table 1 presents highlights from findings organized by research question. For a fuller presentation of findings, see Cherrstrom et al. (2021).

Table 1. Literature Review’s Research Questions and Highlights from Findings

Research Questions	Highlights From Findings
How many PLA peer reviewed journal articles have been published in the last 10 years?	47 peer reviewed journal articles published in the last 10 years
When have PLA articles been published?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Table of articles published by year for the last 10 years (see Figure 1) • Peaks in 2011 and 2017
Where have PLA articles been published?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 peer-reviewed journals (see Table 2) • 11 journals published one article • Three journals published multiple articles • One journal published 13 articles
What institutions and organizations do published authors represent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65 unique authors affiliated with (in descending order) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public higher education institutions ○ Private higher education institutions ○ Nonprofit organizations ○ Businesses ○ Government entities • One author published four articles and another published three articles • Eight additional authors published two articles
What PLA-related findings and results do authors examine and discuss in the peer-reviewed literature?	<p>Six major PLA themes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The big picture • Higher education changing PLA, and PLA changing higher education • Equity and access

Research Questions	Highlights From Findings
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program overviews • Approaches, methods, and processes • Quality assessment

For the reviewed decade, Figure 1 details articles published by year and indicates publishing peaks in 2011 and 2017.

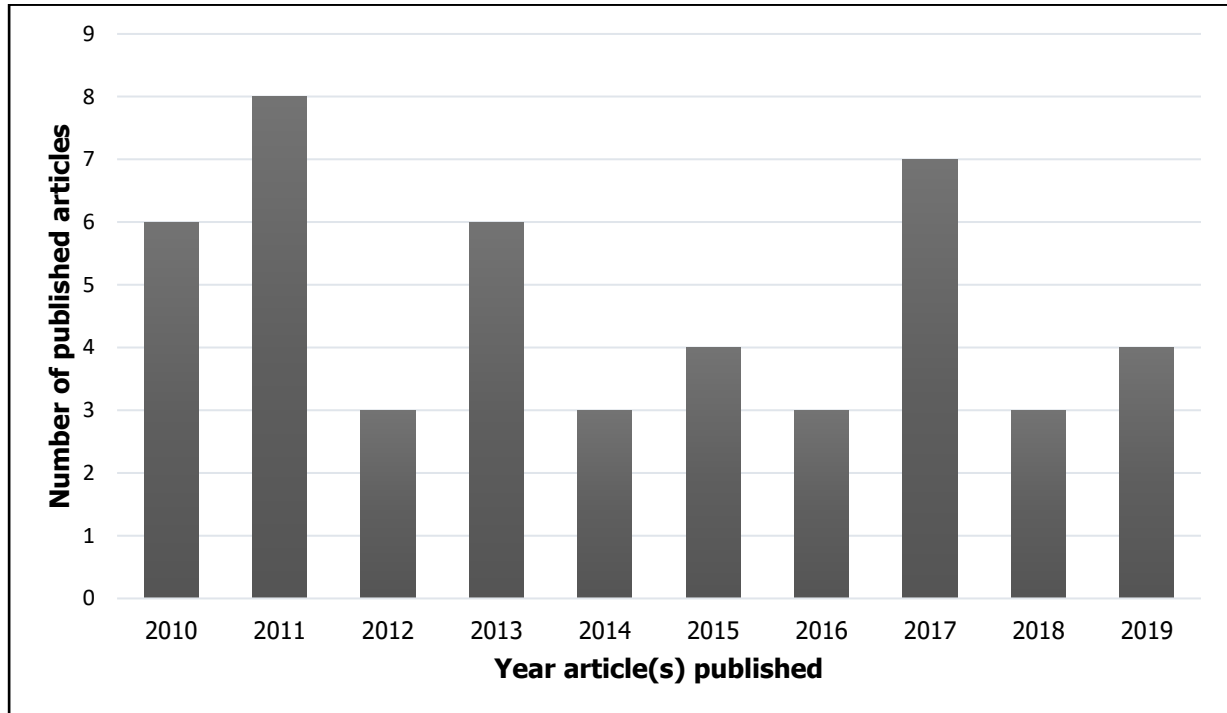


Figure 1. Number of PLA articles published by year

In descending order, Table 2 lists the 14 peer viewed journals and number of published articles about PLA.

Table 2. Journals and Number of Published Articles About Prior Learning Assessment (2010-2019)

Journal	# of Published Articles
<i>Journal of Continuing Higher Education</i>	26
<i>International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning</i>	4
<i>Change</i>	3
<i>New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education</i>	2
<i>Adult Education Quarterly</i>	1
<i>Advances in Developing Human Resources</i>	1
<i>College Composition and Communication</i>	1
<i>Community College Journal of Research and Practice</i>	1
<i>Continuing Higher Education Review</i>	1
<i>Counselor Education & Supervision</i>	1
<i>International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology</i>	1
<i>Journal of Case Studies in Accreditation and Assessment</i>	1
<i>Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education</i>	1
<i>Journal of Strategic Innovation & Sustainability</i>	1
<i>Journal of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters</i>	1
<i>Negro Educational Review</i>	1

In the next section, we briefly discuss the major finding from this systematic review of the PLA literature.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses journals publishing about PLA, author perspectives, and six primary themes. We also highlight the implications of these findings with a focus on the development of adult education theory and practice.

Academic journals play an important role in a discipline, supporting the process of new knowledge joining the body of existing knowledge (Cherrstrom et al., 2017; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Taylor, 2011; Wellington & Nixon, 2005). Although PLA is not considered a discipline, we deepen our knowledge by examining when and where new PLA knowledge has joined the existing body of knowledge. During the last decade, 14 journals published 47 articles about PLA with annual publications ranging from three to eight articles over the decade. One journal, the *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, represented more than half of all publications with 26 articles in nine of the decade's years. These findings indicate continued interest in PLA across the decade and identify journals with aims and scopes encompassing PLA.

Authors also support the addition of new knowledge, and discerning their perspectives is critical in examining academic literature, (Cherrstrom et al., 2017; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). This review's 47 articles represented 65 unique author perspectives. Most prolific authors included Travers (2012a, 2012b; 2013; Travers & Evans, 2011) with four publications and Popova (Popova & Clougherty, 2014; Popova-Gonci & Lamb, 2012; Popova-Gonci & Tobol, 2011) with three publications. Eight additional authors published two articles. Overall, authors predominately affiliated with higher education institutions, not surprising given the emphasis on publishing in higher education. However, PLA can benefit from author perspectives from nonprofits, businesses, and governments. These findings illustrate the critical role of higher education institutions in PLA, especially public institutions, and identify an opportunity for private institutions and other organizations.

This review identified six major themes related to PLA—the big picture; higher education changing PLA, and PLA changing higher education; equity and access; program overviews; approaches, methods, and processes; and quality assessment. For full discussion of themes, see Cherrstrom et al. (2021). Here, we briefly discuss each theme.

The big picture comprises six articles addressing foundational, historical, or broad-based topics. The articles in this theme suggest PLA is mature, versatile, and adaptive, pivoting and evolving to serve the needs of adult learners and the workforce.

Higher education is changing PLA, and PLA is changing higher education. Six articles comprise this theme, illustrating a symbiotic change relationship between PLA and higher education. The articles in this theme indicate a symbiotic change relationship between higher education and PLA with opportunities to adapt to participatory societal shifts and capitalize on opportunities to synthesize learning across emerging options.

PLA supports *equity and access* for learners pursuing a college degree. Four articles comprise this theme. The articles in this theme illuminate the opportunities for PLA to support equity and access and for institutions to create inclusive spaces and structures for special populations of learners.

Eleven articles provide *PLA program overviews* at 10 institutions, and sub-themes included numerous benefits to students participating in PLA and tools and best practices other institutions might adopt. The articles in this theme illustrate the wide variety of PLA programs offering numerous benefits to students and offer best practices for other programs to consider.

PLA uses a variety of *approaches, methods, and processes*. Eleven articles comprise this theme. The articles in this theme illustrate the variety of PLA approaches, methods, and

processes and offer yet additional resources for those beginning or enhancing PLA programs or practices.

Quality assessment, the final major theme, comprises eight articles discussing assessment of programs, assessment of prior learning, or student outcomes and perceptions. The articles in this theme provide examples of assessment for programs and prior learning along with student outcomes and perceptions. Such examples may offer resources to those beginning or enhancing PLA programs and practices.

Collectively, the findings from this review offer implications for theory and practice in adult education and inform future research. For adult education theory, this proceeding adds a systematic and integrative review of the academic literature on PLA. Spanning 72 disciplines/fields of study, the review illustrates continued interest in PLA and adds synthesized findings. Findings shed light on the big picture perspective and context of PLA, illustrate the symbiotic relationship between higher education and PLA, illuminate opportunities for those in marginalized populations to use PLA, highlight 12 PLA programs, document multiple PLA approaches and processes, and include quality assessment to strengthen PLA.

For adult education practice, the findings offer implications for institutions and organizations, program administrators, instructors, assessors, and adult learners. The review documents journals, articles, authors, and affiliated institutions/organizations. Ultimately such documentation offers potential resources for information, best practices, and collaborative activities. In addition to the big picture, the review offers specific information about PLA programs, approaches, methods, and processes, including quality assessment.

Future research opportunities include replicating this literature review (in progress) to examine international academic literature related to PLA. Such research will further add to theory and practice to leverage the power of PLA for all adult learners pursuing a college degree.

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