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Phenomenological Research Findings on Adult Learners’ Experiences with the Portfolio Process

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Keywords: prior learning assessment (PLA), portfolio, tacit knowledge, validation

Abstract: This study was 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’ experiences with portfolios that provided them with a significant sense of validation. They described experiencing validation and an increase in the sense of worth of their prior learning, skills, and work in relation to their portfolio development.

Introduction

While much of the research literature on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) to date seems to draw on transformative learning theory for a conceptual base (Burris, 1997; Kolb, 1984; Michelson & Mandell, 2004; Remington, 2004; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010) other literature connects PLA to feminist (Michelson, 1996), emancipatory (Michelson, 1999), and social frameworks (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Previous research using a phenomenological foundation has been conducted using varying methodologies and differing in scope, depth, and focus. Kent (1996) focused on user perception of efficiency of e-portfolio system; Smith (2002), used network sampling across multiple institutions granting credit for PLA at various levels (e.g. vocational-based credit, educational course credit, and etc.); and Angel (2008), focused on experiences of students receiving PLA credit for vocational and technical skills in community college settings in Canada. This study drew from each of these theoretical perspectives or others, as appropriate to better understand and interpret the stories of the adult learners studied. The use of phenomenological interviews enabled the researcher to delve deeper into the topic by allowing participants the opportunity to share their stories and experiences with portfolios that sought to understand participants’ experiences without a pre-determined theoretical frame.

As posited by Michelson and Mandell (2004), “PLA announces the possibility of access, second chances, improvisation, and know-how as part of the educational field” (p.10). Accordingly, this study aimed to provide access to student-centered experiences with PLA, specifically the portfolio development process. Demonstration of prior experiential learning via reflection, documentation, categorization, synthesis and explanation allows adult learners the most wide-ranging options for prior learning assessment. Portfolio development offers students the potential to showcase their entire catalog of experiences, in areas those experiences meet or exceed college-level equivalence, toward academic credit.

This study allowed the researcher 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, and how 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. By offering insight into how the portfolio process is perceived by the participants, this research may suggest strategies for improvements in the implementation of portfolio-based prior learning
assessment programs. As such, this research should contribute to practices in the fields of adult learning, PLA, and portfolio development in higher education.

**Purpose of Study**

The focus of this in-depth qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences with the portfolio form of prior learning assessment of nine participants. The emphasis of this study 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?* Accordingly, a series of in-person interviews were conducted with each participant to elicit their reflections on the learning associated with their experiences with portfolios.

**Research Design**

A three-tiered interview process allowed me to uncover a breadth of information about the phenomenon that would not have otherwise been feasible. While I reviewed other sources of data, including participants’ learning essays and other portfolio related artifacts, those resources did not add substantially to the findings of this study. The first interview captured a brief life history from each participant, beginning at adulthood up to the point they decided to pursue the portfolio form of PLA. Those interviews provided insight into the nine participants’ motivations for pursuing their formal education goals and how those goals were connected to their decision to attempt to earn credit via the portfolio. The second interview explored the participants’ experiences with the portfolio process. Participants further described their motivations for pursuing portfolio credits and discussed the details of each aspect of portfolios from their perspective as adult learners. The researcher was able to deduce apparent links to previous research and adult learning theories from those valuable insights. The third interview more thoroughly examined any new meaning-making and learning gained by the participants during their experiences with the development process. The breadth of information and the depth of experiences captured in the responses of the third interview were critical in the discovery of the essence of the phenomenon of this study. 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 that new learning involved in portfolios.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Successful portfolios for college credit often require adult learners to effectively demonstrate their tacit knowledge in an explicit manner. Accordingly, the concept of tacit knowledge, as defined by Polanyi (2005), provides a foundational theoretical framework for this study relevant to the process by which students uncover and make explicit their prior, often unconscious, knowledge. Through documentation and analysis of the experiences of participants, the study yielded greater insight into the essence of this form of PLA. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted in order to capture a better sense of the meaning participants make of their experiences of the experiences.
Findings

Assessment is the culminating phase of the portfolio process. A student’s ability to demonstrate prior learning in a portfolio, as it relates to specific course objectives, is evaluated for potential course credit. However, the findings indicated a deeper sense of validation was experienced by the participants of this study. They described feeling an increase in their self-esteem and developing a more positive lens through which they viewed themselves. The participants expressed a sense of worth in regard to their prior learning that derived from reflecting on their life learning experiences. The recognition of additional value and new meaning associated with the clearer perspective from which they were able to frame their experiences proved to be rewarding for the participants.

The increase in self-esteem, the greater appreciation for life choices and experiences, and the deeply felt sense of validation participants described experiencing with their portfolios, provide for a holistically positive journey of the exploration and demonstration of their prior learning.

Validation

The aim of this phenomenological study was to identify the essence of the portfolio process. In order to do so, participants’ descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon were captured and analyzed. Overwhelmingly, a sense of validation was found to be the essence of this process for the participants of this study. Under the overarching umbrella of validation two subthemes emerged: increased confidence and sense of achievement. The participants described how the use of their prior learning toward current course credit requirements at the college-level positively impacted how they viewed themselves and how they view their prior learning contexts as more meaningful in light of the portfolio process.

Increased confidence in self. The portfolio process requires a deep engagement of prior learning. That immersive reflective practice allows students the opportunity to ‘take stock’ of their learning and potentially apply it to new contexts. While the goal of portfolios is to earn college-credit for prior learning, additional benefits seem inherent to this phenomenon, including an increase in self-confidence associated with successful portfolio(s). Participants described their deep elation and foundational impact the portfolio process provided for their experiences as an adult learner in higher education. As one participant expressed, “I think my biggest takeaway was that it just built my self-confidence in that process of validating what I knew.” Another participant described her experience of increased confidence via the portfolio, she stated, “the ability to recognize and feel confident that you have skills to contribute, skills to help you feel confident …it definitely is something that you can show yourself and to others, that your experiences, your skills are worthy and meaningful; there’s validation in that.”

Sense of achievement. In addition to finding an increase in self-esteem via the portfolio process, participants expressed their sense of validation from accomplishments and achievements relived from the exploration of prior learning. One participant stated, “I think it’s helped in a lot of ways that, you know, not only being able to be proud of the fact that I made that accomplishment…my hope is that it really has added to the esteem of my family, I think, in general.” Similarly, another participant in this study noted, “The valuable part, though, in…remembering what I had accomplished back on those days…I look back and say ‘wow, I climbed that mountain, so this is just a little hill compared to that mountain,’ so it helps. It was a confidence-building exercise.” Participants described their key meaning-made in regard to the portfolio process as validation. They expressed a sense of worth and value gained from their experiences with the portfolio process, which will be explored further in this text. To summarize,
a third participant’s description of the essence of the portfolio process: “Just self-validation.” The uncovering and reassessing of prior learning proved to be inspirational, motivational, and a source of positive change for the participants.

Reflecting on Learning and Learning from Reflection

Although this study yielded findings that reflect a connection between experiences with portfolios and transformational learning, those discoveries serve primarily to strengthen previous research on the phenomenon. A key contribution of this study to the knowledge base is the conclusion regarding the current learning acquired in the process of making prior learning explicit from tacit knowledge. The ability of the participants to demonstrate previously acquired tacit knowledge was found to be a key dimension of success with portfolios. Moreover, 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 described their experiences of constructing new meaning and realizing different applications for that prior learning. A participant stated, “Finding out what I knew, but then also being able to change the way I communicate that information. So, not only was I proving I knew something, I was actually learning from that process on how to present what I know. You know get it out of here and onto there was really, really exciting.”

In addition to the insights into participants’ more complete understanding of prior learning drawn from their experiences with portfolios, another essential conclusion was that portfolios provided participants an opportunity to critically examine and reconstruct their learning. One participant expressed, I mean, that’s the whole thing about the portfolio process is, yes, there’s an output and you might get something out of it, but more importantly, there’s the reflection…I had forgotten how far I had come in my life. I had forgotten some major events in my life, and when I had to sit down and write it all our like that, I almost felt closer to myself…yeah, it’s just like therapy. I mean, it’s like self-therapy because therapy is supposed to be about helping you through your issues. Well, so often we don’t ever work-through them. We just scurry around them. Portfolio made you, even aside from the subject matter, made you [work-through] that and that was a pretty awesome experience.

This opportunity was not only integral to their success with portfolios, but it was also found to be ‘therapeutic’ in nature, and it allowed the participants a fuller perspective from which to view themselves in regard to their vast amounts of validated prior 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.

This study further examined both the struggles and positive outcomes associated with the reflection-based learning inherent in the development of portfolios. Although the process of matching-up prior learning to course objectives was described 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. 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.

**Summary of Findings**

The participants in this study addressed their motivations for pursuing the portfolio process, which included the potential to save time and money, and the opportunity to achieve their goal of degree completion. The adult learners interviewed for this study also described the elements involved in being successful with the portfolio process. Those insights included avoiding procrastination, taking an honest and critical approach to your prior learning, realizing the amount of work that is involved with the portfolio process, and respecting the feedback loop associated with the process.

The ability to identify prior learning and then make connections between that prior learning and identified course objectives is fundamental to the portfolio process. The reflective process inherent in that practice was found to contribute to learning. There is the learning embedded in the portfolio process, the learning through rediscovery of self and skills involved in the ‘taking stock’ portfolio exercises, and there were transferrable skills learned as a result of reflecting on prior learning and needing to apply that learning to new and different contexts. That practice was found to not only strengthen the original learning, but also on occasion to be the catalyst for new applications.

A key conclusion of this study was that portfolios provide the opportunity for validation of prior learning, both in what is assessed for portfolios and what is evaluated internally throughout the process. The sense of accomplishment experienced, the participants’ descriptions of increased self-esteem, and the overall sense of validation they felt in regard to their prior learning was found to be as rewarding, if not more so, than receiving course credits for successful portfolios. The most significant conclusion generated from the findings was that new learning appeared to have occurred for the participants’ during their reflective processing of their prior learning for potential use in portfolios. This new learning was seemingly linked to the participants’ abilities to accurately reflect on prior learning and demonstrate that knowledge, skill, and ability. This process required participants to adapt tacit knowledge into explicit formats in order for it to be assessed. The participants’ experiences with portfolios resulted in a deeper understanding of their respective prior learning. In addition, participants conveyed discovering new and different applications for their prior learning. The major conclusion 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 a tacit-knowledge reservoir.

**References**


