2018

# Knowles, Kolb, & Google: Prior Learning Assessment as a Model for 21st-Century Learning

Jennie A. Harrop
*George Fox University*, jharrop@georgefox.edu

Rae Casey
*George Fox University*, rcasey@georgefox.edu

Michelle E. Shelton
*George Fox University*, sheltonm@georgefox.edu

**Knowles, Kolb, & Google:**

**Prior Learning Assessment as a Model for 21st-Century Learning**

Jennie A. Harrop, PhD, DMin
Chair, Department of Professional Studies
George Fox University
12753 SW 68th Ave.
Portland, OR 97223
503.554.6024
jharrop@georgefox.edu


Rae Casey, PhD
Associate Professor, Department of Professional Studies
George Fox University
12753 SW 68th Ave.
Portland, OR 97223
208.573.1963
rcasey@georgefox.edu


Michelle Shelton, MA
Assistant Professor, Department of Professional Studies
George Fox University
12753 SW 68th Ave.
Portland, OR 97223
503.554.6186
sheltonm@georgefox.edu

Knowles, Kolb, & Google:

Prior Learning Assessment as a Model for 21st-Century Learning

For adult students who have committed anew to completing a four-year bachelor's

degree, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) can be a surprising bonus that affirms their previous

life experiences, shortens the degree completion pathway, and ultimately lowers tuition dollars.

What students typically do not realize as they enter the process, however, is that PLA can be

much more than simply a road to a diploma: When designed with an intentional framework of

andragogical principals and experiential emphases, Prior Learning Assessment can provide adult

students with a lifelong model for self-assessment and higher-level learning in a 21st-century

Google era.

**Malcolm Knowles and Andragogy**

Children are taught new ideas, concepts, and boundaries through explanation,

exploration, and practice, facilitated at first by parents and caregivers and later by educators. As

a child grows and experiences life, he or she applies the learned knowledge to life experiences.

Educators who teach children make decisions about what the child will learn and how it will be

taught.

Adults are quite the opposite. Socially, adults are expected to make decisions, contribute

to society, and be self-directing (Knowles, Holmes, & Swanson, 2005, p. 64). Having

experienced life and formed knowledge from their experiences, adult learners have a concept of

themselves as learners and are motivated to do what is needed to achieve their goals. It follows

that teaching adults in the same ways children are taught is repetitious at best, or at worst

contradictory, confusing, or boring. Yet that is how adult education was conducted until the early

1970s when Malcolm Knowles introduced the notion of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 1). Educators and theorists took notice.

In contrast to educational theorists who balked at the notion of andragogy because of its lack of theoretical rigor, Knowles described andragogy as fluid, not limited to one theory or goal but instead as a "conceptual framework" or the basis for a theory (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 87). He viewed the role of the adult educator as a facilitator who considered each learning transaction and the learner, without distraction from other dimensions described by theorists (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 141).

## David Kolb and Experiential Learning

What it took for a learner to gain knowledge from experience was described by David Kolb. Kolb theorized that experiential learning required learners who (1) were open to new experiences (*concrete experience*), (2) had the skills to observe and reflect on the experience (*reflective observation*), (3) were able to analyze what they observed and conceive of new applications (*abstract conceptualization*), and (4) had the decision-making skills to determine if the new application was usable in practice (*active experimentation*) (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 164). The model Kolb developed was cyclical, meaning that learners began with a concrete experience and ended with active experimentation, which would lead to a new concrete experience. Like Knowles, Kolb's model focused on adult learners and the knowledge they gained from experience.

## Google and a New Era of Learning

As the internet morphed from single interface messages in the 1960s to the World Wide Web of the 1990s and beyond, the ability to quickly retrieve and disseminate information is just one of the dramatic changes the world has witnessed. With information instantly available on a

wide variety of devices, the definition of effective learning has shifted from the ability to discover new information to the acuity with which one perceives and filters a vast array of ideas, from credible to nonsensical. Pedagogical learning theories traditionally acknowledge a hierarchical teacher-student relationship that allows for the curriculum bearer to share information in varied conceptual frameworks in an effort to promote the highest possible level of understanding. Andragogical learning theories, on the other hand, emphasize students' foundational experiences, self-concepts, and motivations, drawing students immediately into the learning experience so the classroom becomes more about active student engagement in the process of learning rather than merely receiving information. Andragogical learning is problem-centered rather than content-centered, a foundational principle that aligns effectively with a new Google era of infinite information that demands a need for critical thinking, self-awareness, and intentionality. For those born prior to 1990, technology is a tool employed at a user's discretion; for those born after 1990 (and those who are particularly adept), technology is a lens through which the user perceives the world. The sooner educators acknowledge this marked shift in learning, the better equipped they will be to rethink the 20th-century learning theories that may undergird their 21st-century efforts. Knowles- and Kolb-inspired andragogical theories align educators with experience-focused classrooms, setting degree completion educators several steps ahead of the curve as higher education changes to match the demands of a new Google era.

Adult education is "a process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 35). For adult learners, employing their experiences to further educational goals is a logical choice. Using Knowles and Kolb as a foundation, George Fox University has developed a system for Prior Learning Assessment that encourages adult students to transform their experiences into college credit.

**Prior Learning Assessment at George Fox University**

Students at George Fox University in Oregon may submit prior learning in two forms:

- Professional Training Submissions

- Personal and Professional Assessment (PPA) Essays

For Professional Training Submissions, a student must have documented proof of at least eight seat hours in some kind of professional training or certification program. To appeal for credit, the student must submit (1) certification that documents the total number of hours and the content covered, (2) a succinct description of the learning experience, and (3) a list of three to five learning outcomes that emerged from the experience. The learning outcomes must describe learning that is university level, specific to the student, and broad enough to potentially be taught to others. Students are encouraged to access regular course syllabi to gain an understanding of how learning outcomes for a traditional undergraduate course are typically written. Students may turn in Professional Training Submissions at any point before their final semester of work for a fee of $75 per credit awarded; a student who completes the three-credit Personal and Professional Assessment (PPA) course with a grade of C- or better may turn in Professional Training Submissions for free once he or she has successfully completed the course.

In order to submit PPA Essays, a student must complete the three-credit, eight-week PPA course with a grade of C- or higher. Once a student has completed the course, he or she has 12 months to submit as many essays and certifications as needed at no additional cost beyond the tuition fee for the initial course. GFU students are permitted to earn up to 30 total credits through the PLA process; PLA credits may only satisfy elective requirements. For a student who enters his or her degree completion journey needing 30 or more elective credits, the PLA process can be a significant boon – both in terms of tuition dollars saved and the in-depth reflection required

as the student learns to articulate previous life experiences. Students may take the PPA course in

an in-person or online delivery format, and the course is designed to help students (1) ponder

appropriate personal and professional life experiences, (2) identify the number of PLA credits

they hope to earn and the submissions they intend to make to satisfy those credits, (3) learn to

articulate their learning clearly and precisely in three to five single-sentence learning outcomes,

(4) understand the key components of David Kolb's learning model, and (5) submit three eight-

page Kolb model essays twice over the course of eight weeks: once as an initial draft and again

as a revised draft, for a total of six submissions. Students receive extensive feedback on each

draft from the course instructor, as well as peer feedback in guided workshops and discussions.

At the completion of the course, students typically emerge with three polished Kolb model

essays that are ready for submission to the university. Students who intend to appeal for

additional credits via PLA essays beyond the three completed in the course may write and submit

essays for 12 months after completion of the PPA course.

  As they prepare to submit essays and trainings to the university, students have access to a

PLA Google Site that includes detailed information for students, assessors, instructors, and

enrollment counselors about the PLA submission process. In addition to tips for writing effective

learning outcomes and submission deadlines, the site includes a 125-page *PLA Student Guide*

that outlines the various requirements and expectations of both Professional Training and PLA

Essay submissions. Once a student is ready to submit, he or she clicks on either the certification

submission tab or the essay submission tab in order to begin the Google-aided submission

process. Once a submission is received, the university's PLA Processor scans the submission to

ensure that all required components are present. If all is in order, she forwards the submission to

an approved PLA evaluator whose graduate-level degrees are in a related field. GFU currently

has a list of more than 30 evaluators who have been trained on the PLA process and who agree to assess student submissions for a nominal payment of $50 per submission. Most evaluators have doctoral-level degrees in their discipline area, and all have access to a 20-page *PLA Faculty Guide* that provides instructions and a rubric for uniform, fair, and rigorous assessment of student learning.

While the credits awarded for Professional Certifications vary greatly depending on the content and number of seat hours, PLA Essays typically garner one, two, or three credits per essay. On rare occasion, an essay that demonstrates notable learning will earn more than three credits. Evaluators also occasionally request a student rewrite before completing an assessment. Evaluators are asked to consider the depth of learning that has occurred and the student's ability to articulate that learning in a succinct, mature manner. Most evaluators consider whether the learning is something that has been or potentially could be taught in a traditional undergraduate university course. Evaluators complete the assessment process by assigning the appropriate number of credits and completing the online evaluation form. The PLA Processor informs the student of the credits awarded and applies the credits to the student's record.

### The Kolb Model Essay

The brilliance of David Kolb's model is that it teaches not only an academic learning theory but also a healthy life theory that most students carry forward into a renewed effort to live with intentionality and wisdom. Instructors who teach the PLA course begin by informing students that the essays they will learn to write using the Kolb model will be very different from the traditional essay format that they have been taught. Even with this warning, many students try to apply an *introduction* ➔ *body paragraphs* ➔ *conclusion* formula to the PLA essay, but this approach does not aid students in articulating their prior learning with clarity, depth, and

higher-level-Bloom's understanding. The four sections of the Kolb essay are distinctively

different and limited to two pages each. The first section, listed under the subheading **Concrete**

**Experience**, asks students to objectively describe their learning experience from the beginning to

the end with no emotions or reflections. This narrative should include a clear time parameter for

the learning – whether it occurred over several hours or many years – and the discussion should

be as matter-of-fact as possible. The better a student is able to remove his or her emotions from

the experience, the better he or she will be able to effectively analyze and teach from that

experience.

The second section, listed under the subheading **Observation and Reflections**, is an

opportunity for the students to revisit the same time parameter as section one, adding in all of the

reflections and emotions to give readers a deeper sense of why things may have occurred and

what those events meant to the student. It is important that students hold to the same time

parameter as section one in section two, rather than using the additional two pages as a chance to

continue telling a single story. Students who are able to both remove emotions and then

adequately reflect on emotions will have a much easier time stepping up to new levels in sections

three and four.

In the third section, listed under the subheading **Abstract Concepts and**

**Generalizations**, students are asked to list three to five single-sentence learning outcomes, along

with a brief discussion of each learning outcome and how it reflects university-level learning. A

successful section three will typically begin each new paragraph with an underlined learning

outcome, and then follow that sentence with an outside source or two in order to demonstrate the

student's ability to access and converse with current academic conversations related to the

student's learning.

The fourth section, listed under the subheading **Applying Concepts in New Situations**, is a student's opportunity to demonstrate how he or she has used the learning of section three in new work or personal situations that are different from the original learning experience. Just as section two looks back at section one, section four looks back at section three: For each of the learning outcomes presented in section three, the student must offer a single-moment story of a new situation in which he or she used the learning – ideally with a new paragraph for each new learning outcome, and offered in the order that the learning outcomes appear in section three.

While a student may write a Kolb model essay in the order that the model presents – section one, then section two, then section three, then section four – an evaluator typically will assess the student's PLA essay in the reverse order: from section four to section three to section two to section one. In other words, a student who is able to adeptly describe how he or she used a learning outcome in a completely new situation likely has written a solid learning outcome in section three and offered sufficient basic information in sections one and two. Much as the levels of learning build on one another in Bloom's Taxonomy, the levels of learning build on one another in David Kolb's experiential learning model. PPA Essays must be submitted in proper APA formatting, including a title page, a succinct abstract, and a references page. Students are also required to include a single page of documentation that substantiates their experience: a letter, a certification, an email, a photo, etc. This documentation is required when they submit to the university, not during the PPA course itself.

## 10 Concerns to Consider

George Fox University has offered Prior Learning Assessment training and credits since the inception of its degree completion program in 1986. While the program has been a success,

here are some concerns that arise each year and should be anticipated and mitigated as much as possible:

1. *With a base minimum of eight seat hours required for training submissions, students assume that the assessment of additional hours will be mathematical.* While the assumption is understandable, students and faculty alike must be reminded that professional and personal experience do not equate uniformly with academia; the PLA process is a means of drawing those parallels in a systematic, uniform manner.

2. *Students equate their grade in the PPA course with their potential for earned credits.* Grades earned in the PPA course assess how well the student is able to write an effective Kolb essay. An evaluator will assess the student's learning rather than the quality of the student's writing.

3. *Students struggle to write effective university-level learning outcomes.* Students are not faculty members, and it is a high calling to ask them to write appropriate learning outcomes when many faculty members struggle to accomplish this task. A high priority of the PPA course is to spend time reading, writing, and re-writing learning outcomes as a group.

4. *Students struggle to hold to the narrow definitions of the four Kolb essay sections.* Because the Kolb model essay is so different from anything the students have written before, it is important to offer students several opportunities to write and re-write these sections under an instructor's guidance.

5. *Students save PLA requirements until shortly before graduation.* To assuage procrastination, students are required to submit essays and certifications within 12

months of completing the PPA course and at least one full semester before

graduation.

6.  *Students attempt to take the PPA course alongside rigorous major-level courses.*

    Students should be adequately warned that the PPA process is both time-intensive and

    emotionally exhausting. It is a course best taken alongside other electives and before

    a student enters his or her final semesters.

7.  *Students underestimate the rigor of the eight-week PPA course.* All faculty, staff, and

    admissions personnel should understand fully the challenge of the PPA process.

    Students should know that while the work is do-able, haphazard or partial attention

    will not earn university credits.

8.  *Students underestimate the high standards expected in PLA.* While a student may be

    able to scrape by with C- or even D-level work in a typical basic writing course, the

    PLA process demands higher-level learning and careful articulation. A student who

    attempts to scrape by will likely receive a "no credit" or a "revision" from an

    evaluator.

9.  *Other faculty underestimate the high standards expected in PLA.* Faculty who hear of

    the PLA process but who have no involvement often assume that the process is an

    easy way to hand adults university credits for experiences that are better left in the

    work world or one's personal life. The more fully faculty are exposed to the detail,

    rigor, and high standards of the PLA path, the better they will be able to affirm its

    merit to others.

10. *Evaluators feel disconnected.* Evaluators must have a written guide and/or rubric that

    specifically defines what they are asked to assess, including an emphasis on the

student's ability to articulate the depth of his or her learning. Evaluators should also

be gathered online or in person occasionally to discuss the assessment process and

ensure that everyone is assessing uniformly and appropriately.

## In Conclusion

In an age when information is vast and communication is a constant, the Prior Learning

Assessment process teaches students to think critically, self-assess effectively, engage fully,

anticipate wisely, and articulate maturely. While information is instantly available via nearly any

medium, the ability to think critically and reflectively is at a premium – and PLA can be an adult

student's pathway to excellence. An effective PLA program affords students not only a speedier,

less expensive path to graduation, but also a broader, more expansive understanding of how to

think about learning, the workplace, and an internet-connected world where students are called to

engage with integrity and intentionality.

References

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive*

*classic in adult education and human resource development*. London: Elsevier.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A*

*comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.