

# Developing iPLA Requests with Labour Leaders Using the Threshold Learning Model

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*In efforts to encourage student recognition of greater connections between their experiential learning and college-level learning, the author has developed a model comprising four key areas towards a method he calls 'thresholding'. These key areas are: situating experience, reflecting on experience, understanding college-level learning, and analysing the value of their experiential learning relative to formal academic study. The Threshold Learning Model provides for a process-oriented experience in Prior Learning Assessment (PLA in the US; Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment/Accreditation of Prior Learning, or RPL/APL in the UK), in which students may seek credit for their experiential learning. The model also underscores how reflective thinking during this process helps students appreciate their experiences, learning and college-level development.*

*This essay also compares the Threshold Learning Model with a college labour studies education program for electrical apprentices at The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, in New York City and 'work-based learning (WBL)' programs in the UK. In both contexts, mentors, or program developers, work with students to draw on their experiences to reflect on learning.*

**Keywords:** Prior Learning Assessment; Labour Studies; Work-Based Learning; Threshold Learning Model; Experiential Learning; Recognition of Prior Learning

## Introduction

The following essay, based on a paper I presented at the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) Work and Learning Network conference in Leuven, Belgium on June 15, 2018, addresses the development of a model for individualised Prior Learning Assessment (iPLA). Among those at the conference were faculty from Middlesex University in London, including Carol Costley whom I had met previously while researching the UK system of 'work-based learning'. As a newcomer to the network of continental and UK educators, I am grateful for the encouragement and supportive dialogue I have shared so far. Still, this essay is about an interplay between theory and practice, and I want to assure those new to

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my own work, and, generally, the work of other North American prior learning assessment (PLA) specialists, that what I risk is an outcome in theorizing. I am confident that through a tool such as the Threshold Learning Model, practice begets learning; and inversely, from learning comes further experience. Yet, in all fairness, and in the words of the American philosopher, John Dewey (1938:25):

‘The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other’.

### **A Note on Usage**

The general terminology for the assessment of prior learning in the United States is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). However, Empire State College has adopted a preceding 'individualized' designation to distinguish the learning assessment of a single person's prior experiential learning from other criteria (i.e.: military training, foreign language tests, etc.). Throughout this essay, I will incorporate the complete usage of the term *individualized* prior learning assessment, or iPLA.

### **Developing an Inquisitive Eye**

In learning to help labour leaders develop iPLA requests since 2010, I have developed conceptual and practical skills in dozens of technical areas of their fields I had only known only existed through textbooks. Collective bargaining, industrial safety, labour-management relations, trade teaching and construction supervision were all foreign topics to me. The men and women who possess knowledge of their craft have taught me, as is said, by mentoring a mentor. In turn, I have gained a talent that has helped shape future efforts, including this current model. Having documented past practices through experiential essays of my own teaching and learning (see Kerr, 2013; 2014), I continue to wonder what improvements can be made to benefit students' reflective processes. I believe what I have done here is to subtly transform the *reflective* process into a general *thoughtfulness*.

I developed the concept of the "Threshold Learning Model" earlier this year, while reading Peter Handke's novel, *Across* (1986). Impressed by his use of the term 'thresholdologist (or

seeker after thresholds)', (12) I imagined he was describing students' engagement within a reflective process. In the story, Handke's main character, an archaeologist named Loser, had been accused by a peer as, while on digs, only interested in '*finding something*'. (11)

It was in part this remark that impelled me to train myself at digs to look less for what was there than for what was missing, for what had vanished ... as empty space or empty form. Thus, in the course of time, I acquired an eye for transitions that are ordinarily overlooked ... (11-12)

During any serious reflection, or thinking phase of our studies, whether we recognise it or not, we learn to develop acquisitive eyes that aid in the process of thought. Reflecting on terms such as *experience*, *learning* and *experiential learning*, the acquiring mind becomes an inquiring mind. To develop this into an educational model, I serialised and named the familiar processes, and imagined some other ideas, until they all sounded right. To date, I have worked with one student using the model; that student received 38 credits for nine iPLA titles, all with advanced and liberal attributes, in topic areas not usually credited as advanced level or liberal learning (as opposed to applied learning). The first two stages, 'Sources of Learning' and 'Skills and Knowledge' initially provide areas to describe and encourage reflection on experiential learning; 'Skills and Concepts' and 'Specific Learning' allow for the space to articulate college-level learning as well as an ability to translate that learning into college credit.

### **New Forms Require Focus**

Before I describe the students I work with through the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies and provide a demonstration of the Threshold Learning Model, I will share observations on the topic of "work-based learning," as I have come to understand that system. Thanks to British scholars Carol Costley at Middlesex University and Jon Talbot at the University of Chester, who have introduced me to the field. I argue that relationships exist between work-based learning methods of the UK and the signature style of labour studies offered through the Van Arsdale Center at Empire State College, and a relationship between each of these to the Threshold Learning Model.

In their writing, Carol Costley and Abdulai Abukari (2009) describe the social importance of taking on new ways of thinking about education, when they write that, 'New forms of learning and work require a focus of what constitutes knowledge. It also requires new structures and processes'. (313)

I value innovation, and found potential for parallels among programs encouraging students reflecting on their working lives as influential on their classroom study. Again, Costley and Abukari (2009:313):

WBL [work-based learning] has worked in the opposite direction to the familiar body of knowledge that is then learned. It has put working first, so has not prioritized [sic] the knowledge already inscribed in university curricula, but focused on the knowledge derived from work, drawing on a range of knowledges, including tacit and academic knowledge. It has then considered learning and how knowledge from work is understood, researched and managed by learners and other stakeholders (individuals, groups, organisations [sic] and communities).

By presenting WBL in this way, I see the broader need for reflection of what students bring to the classroom significant to learning models in place in the Van Arsdale Model and the Threshold Learning Model.

### **Thinking of Relationships**

The Van Arsdale Center, named after Harry Van Arsdale Jr., a legendary New York City labour leader who served for decades in the position of business manager of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3, should stand as a brick and mortar tribute to the legacy of the man's commitment to learning. In his excellent biography, *Labor's Champion*, Gene Ruffini (2003) shares an anecdotal account of Van Arsdale's intelligent inquiry when he consulted a former dean of Columbia University, who helped him in 1956 develop an initial course to offer electricians, titled, "Critical Thinking in Human Relations". (109) That course, and others after it, became part of an educational program offered to IBEW members prior to the establishment of Empire State College. As one of Van Arsdale's contemporaries put it (1956:110):

In the field of education, Harry was continuously an advocate of the broadest kind of education for his rank and file. [Van Arsdale's program for apprentices included not only instruction in technical matters but also] involved broad liberal arts skills, discussions of politics and economics, etc. [Brackets in original].

In this way, he provided journeymen, and ultimately apprentices at Local Union 3, the benefit of free education. By establishing a college program dedicated to teaching a broader group of union members to think critically about the politics and current affairs affecting their union, he therefore increased the chance of a politicised labour movement being sustained. I speculate it was Van Arsdale's *faith* in liberal education, and a belief in the type of knowledge gained within communities of scholarship that would instill in his members a *trust* in the value of higher education. Additionally, that he believed a classroom liberal arts education would help his apprentices further connect relationships between their occupational training (e.g. the industrial electrical theory classes) and workplace learning. These three ways of learning have, seemingly, benefitted Local Union 3 members for decades, so it should come as no surprise why those who speak the highest praise of 'Harry' literally learned from his legacy. However, it does not come without a critical component.

At the Van Arsdale Center, we have collaborated in the contract. We hold classes with IBEW Local 3 apprentices and other trades – working with students representing members from about 20 unions (an occasional non-union student interested in our model enrolls as well). The program brings to life the real experiences of para-educators, machinists, carpenters and painters, through an engaging and consciousness-building curriculum focusing on what they know as learned from their days on the job working with their unions or in their communities. As represented in the Center's 'Student Orientation Handbook' (2018), we want students to learn how, 'they can most effectively communicate their own views or tell their own story'.  
(1)

### **Faith in Action**

As I suggested before, 'Harry's' vision and the continued practice of the Van Arsdale model of labour studies requires an appreciation for the role 'work' plays in the experiential learning of students. My colleagues Sharon Szymanski and Richard Wells (2016) suggest Harry Van

Arsdale Jr. possessed a 'social democratic ethos.' (70) Could we at the Van Arsdale Center be examples of the 'new structures and processes' Costley and Abukari (2009) are referring to? Working with students to improve their chances of lifelong learning through their experiences in work-based learning, iPLA and the Van Arsdale Center's Labor Studies model seems to me a valid approach to these goals. By articulating their experiences in college, either in a traditional classroom or in a work-based learning environment or through the iPLA credit process, students develop a reflective way to think about their experiences they can use in the future.

How the Threshold Learning Model (TLM) adds to this aim is largely through reflection, or more critically through the thinking about one's overall growth as a practitioner. This is similar in some ways to faculty asking students in the Van Arsdale classrooms to reflect on their lives working on the job (as apprentices) and to apply those experiences to their studies in economics, literature, sociology and global studies. Through the iPLA process, we do the same throughout the TLM. I ask in this process for students to reflect upon their workplace experience, to push that reflection against itself, learning from the learning. This double reflective process is the power of the Threshold Learning Model, and the four stages developed within. As Gilbert Ryle (1949: 30) writes:

To do something thinking what one is doing is, ... to do a bit of theory and then to do a bit of practice. ... Certainly we often do not only reflect before we act but reflect in order to act properly.

### **Frank Criticism**

I began assisting labour leaders develop individual prior learning assessment (iPLA) requests in 2012, and have worked with several dozen students since then. The two main industries I have worked with are in the fields of electrical and aerospace-related, and within these single sectors are significant knowledge areas. Empire State College requires students to write a request for credit based on experiential learning and submit that to evaluation by either an expert college faculty or outside evaluator in the area of a student's request. Each request receives a separate interview, based on a separate request. Traditionally, these iPLA requests

require substantial essays in order for a student to elaborate upon his/her experiential learning.

When I entered this field, there was talk around the college faculty working with students whose writing skills were secondary to their experience, and those faculty were trying to figure out how to help students document their learning without what was, for some, an embarrassing writing challenge. I was sharing in a conversation with the former dean of the Van Arsdale Center, Michael Merrill, about my experience as a community radio labour journalist in the 1990's, when he suggested I interview students with a hand-held recorder. We brainstormed how that might work using digital files. This way, students could replace the written essay with an oral interview, transcribed into a text document. Students and I hold conversations about the topics they are requesting and I email them the digital files so they can transcribe, use them as notes to formulate their own typed/composed essays, or opt to have them transcribed professionally. I limit these interviews to 10 to 15 minutes and, if they have them professionally transcribed (at \$1.00 to \$2.00 per minute) the rate is approximately equivalent to the price of lunch at a New York diner. (see Kerr, 2013)

Until now, the transcriptions have been edited and submitted as *an introduction to the evaluator* so students can begin the practice of sharing their prior experiential learning. This process has helped students produce, collectively, a high volume of requests as I have quickly learned entire industrial nomenclature and skill sets with intentions to better illustrate and critically support their requests for a claim of learning.

While I justified this practice as expediency and part of the task of working with 5 to 15 students at a time with as many as 7 to 8 requests each (see Kerr, 2013), I was not too surprised when confronted by a member of the college faculty who had evaluated a student I worked with. It was Alan Mandell's frank criticism that brought to light the omissions of the previous practice. The *introduction to the evaluator* was not enough, and he knew that I knew it when he commented that the student seemed to lack any understanding of what it meant to connect his experience to the college-level learning he would gain, for example, if he had sat in on a classroom focused on that topic, in this particular case, Mentoring. According to Mandell, the student 'clearly knew his stuff', but he was unprepared to articulate what

expectations of him were needed to demonstrate, during the interview process, a college-level understanding of the subject matter. I interpreted this as a problem; students need to know why a topic, such as 'mentoring', is college level, not only an outcome of the learning from experience. The Threshold Learning Model is an outcome of that criticism by Mandell.

### **'Knowledge of the Past'**

The problem: how to create a systematic process that would allow continuing to work with a group of between 5 to 15 students, averaging 7 to 8 requests each, while helping students develop a stronger sense of college-level learning outcomes when they complete their iPLA requests. I believe I have discovered such a system. The key criteria of this new model is to help a student understand the importance of their knowledge – not only that gained from experience (whether they gained any at all), but what they might gain when going through the iPLA request process. To help students ask questions such as: What do I know? How did I learn it? What does it mean to me? Into what additional contexts can I compare such knowledge? What is the subject's value? Alan Mandell and Lee Herman (2011:339-340), both long-time mentors at Empire State College speak to this when they write:

We learn in the university in order to affect our lives in the world beyond it. The value of this learning depends on two conditions: It must be somewhat cloistered so that we are free from the buzzing [sic] distraction of the outside world; however, it must be somehow relevant to the world so that we can understand and change our lives.

This then will all lead to a larger question: What is the relationship between prior learning and future learning? Can the learning about the past – experiential learning gained through the iPLA process – be used to influence learning *outside* of the university following its exploration *within* the university? This brings to mind a point raised by RG Collingwood (1978:100) when he proposed that, 'So long as the past and present are outside of one another, knowledge of the past is not of much use in the problems of the present'.

But suppose that past lives on in the present; suppose, though incapsulated in it, and at first sight hidden beneath the present's contradictory and more prominent features, it is still alive and active; then the historian may very well be related to the non-historian.... The historian's business is to reveal the less obvious features hidden from a careless eye in the present

situation. What history can bring to moral and political life is a trained eye for the situation in which one has to act.

### **In Practice**

Let us turn to an example to see how the practice of the Threshold Learning Model might work using as an example a female ticket agent serving in the capacity of union steward. She represents her fellow union members in labour-management relations upholding a negotiated contract, while generally ensuring that the membership also upholds its responsibilities to management. We begin by having a brief conversation prior to turning on the recorder when I inform her that two parts of the interview will be developed through the recording: her experiences and her experiential learning. So, the flow of her narrative will be to lay out what she did and what she gained from doing that.

So, I might ask her prior to pressing the "record" button or as prompts during the recording (as in an interview) to describe her experiences as a ticket agent: How she started her career? How long she has held the job? How long her company has had union representation? When did she become a steward? Does she hold other positions in the union? Then I might ask about her experience as a union steward: How much does she know about the contract? How many members are in her bargaining unit? Has she filed grievances? Has she mediated any cases? Has she helped write contract language? These questions help me to understand the quality of her experiences in this capacity. Therefore, in the end, the gist of her first section relating her "experiences" will tell a story of her past to a reader – the evaluator – as well as to her *future* self. Briefly, for the sake of this essay, her 250 words might boil down to 'In twelve months as a union steward, I have sat through five labour-management meetings'.

That language will become text to be organised into the section titled 'Sources of Learning'. To be fit into the second section, 'Skills and Knowledge,' I would encourage her to use the language that comes from ideas about the learning she thinks she has gained while practicing the role of steward. So, again, a condensed version of a longer description may be something like:

In the past twelve months as a steward, during five labour-management meetings, I have gained knowledge using effective communication with management and mediation between employers and employees.

At around 10 to 15 minutes of her speaking, with as little of my own prompting or inquiry as necessary, we would end the conversation. Fifteen minutes is about 3,000 words and that is a good number to begin to edit into a thoughtful draft essay of her experiences and experiential learning. She will transcribe the recording by the methods mentioned above, and we will move on to the third phase, 'Skills and Concepts'.

In this part of the process, she will read a manual compiled by, among others, my colleagues Nan Travers, Betty Hurley and Rhianna Rogers, titled the 'Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF)' (2014). This is one of many helpful tools to generate an understanding and articulation of college-level learning. Using such a resource as a foundation to define what is meant by academic areas of competency, the steward may determine a few good examples:

In the GLQF, 'communications' by definition are 'ideas and beliefs [that] develop connections and knowledge.' (27) I also have learned that some of the work I engage in involves ethics and other more specialised and applied areas of knowledge.

I would then ask her to elaborate on other areas of college learning while continuing to reflect upon her previous two sections (which she may not yet have completed edited from the transcribed recordings). If, for example, she understands, through this serialised process of reflective engagement, that her role as steward is laden with previously unacknowledged ethical and specialised areas (ethics, communication, community development or leadership), does she see her experiential learning in a new light? Additionally, can she imagine this type of learning influencing her future development as a shop steward? Does she recognise college-level knowledge gained through the experiential learning process? I ask myself during this phase of development whether this is akin to what 'Harry' hoped a college education would do for his members.

### **Rigorous Challenges**

An interesting question then arises: If she does a serious amount of reflection in these new ways and develops a transformative viewpoint to her sense of learning, how will she challenge us as educators? In the fourth and final area of the Threshold Learning Model, 'Specific Learning', these ideas can come together, along with a credit request. The union steward will use this area to make the 'claim' that through this process of the TLM, she has gained an understanding of her own knowledge, doubling down on that learning, having circled back. She might reflect upon the speed with which she was able to accomplish her iPLA requests through use of the recorded interviews, or she might report on the GLQF experience as being central to her ability to grasp concepts in a timely way while encouraging herself to complete requests she may have as a labour leader. However, most important, she may want to express why the college needs her to acknowledge college-level learning and competencies, and whether the iPLA process has been helpful in reaching that goal.

If she can further relate why the Threshold Learning Model is of significance – as a double-reflective method of work-related investigation – then she is, in the vernacular, 'golden'. It is a rigorous inquiry that I hope leads students through this model and its method. I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1947:1), in his paper, 'The Purpose of Education,' where he wrote:

Education must... train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking... to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.... The broad education will... transmit to one... the accumulated knowledge... [and] experience of social living.

Not only do students need to take on rigorous investigation and acceptance of new ideas. Examples have been set. Ignoring where good structures and practices have made a difference is to miss a chance at gaining important learning opportunities at an institutional or organisational level. To return to the threshold metaphor, it is imperative to take our collective thinking across the transverse boundaries we cannot see, by, as Peter Handke's (1986) *Loser* suggests, looking for 'transitions that are ordinarily overlooked'. (12) In doing so, educational efforts can be directed towards further development of innovative programming that supports experiential learning, thereby building greater outreach and relationships with communities and individuals with an eye for learning.

Jon Talbot (2014), of the University of Chester, describes his institution's program, Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS), as providing a 'combination of knowing from experience with more formal varieties of knowledge', (3) and he continues by providing a definition that is close to the above discussions:

[The] reference to "integration" in the WBIS title... [points to] essentially an experiential learning program, it is integrated with more formal ways of knowing. An important aspect of the distinctive pedagogy of WBIS is the dialogue between the real, lived experience of students and abstracted conceptions of the world.

The Threshold Learning Model facilitates such a dialog as well. As I have developed this model and, subsequently, have written the essay you are reading, I have come to see myself as a greater advocate for increasing the *practice* behind the *theory*, by acknowledging these two elements as distinct and necessary. As Jon Talbot distinguishes the two spaces – the *lived* and the *abstracted* – I see this as being where the learning occurs.

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