Chapter 3
Rediscovering the North American Legacy of Self-Initiated Learning in Prior Learning Assessments

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ABSTRACT
Throughout history, particularly in the United States, adults have engaged in deliberate acts of learning so as to meet their particular needs or interests. Education has been viewed simply as an integral part of being alive and, until the professionalisation of adult education, adults were considered competent self-reliant learners. In this chapter, we will argue, firstly, that this legacy is continued when prior learning assessments of student-initiated learning do not match extant, already-established knowledge. Secondly, this chapter posits that the recognition of uniquely acquired knowledge is not only appropriate within the university setting, but that the process itself may begin to free the university from an unhealthy preoccupation with what is already known and open it up further to new and multiple ways of knowing.

INTRODUCTION
Higher education today increasingly regards “open-ness” as an inherent good. Although “open” is typically considered equivalent to “accessible,” in truth, being “open” is also closely associated with the idea of being “free.” Thus, open universities can be free of charge, or at least comparatively low cost, can have flexible schedules and learning formats, can offer multiple curricular choices, and can be democratic; that is, available to anyone who wishes to attend (e.g., Burge, Gibson, & Gibson, 2011; Peters, 2014). That some universities have come to view these characteristics as valuable can be attributed, at least in part, to the importance of these characteristics to adults, a relatively recent growing and attractive market.
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of students. The award of college credit for knowledge acquired through “self-education,” also keenly valued by adults (Kett, 1994), is yet another way the formerly isolated ivory tower is opening its doors.

Assessments of such “prior knowledge” originally appeared on the American university landscape in the late 60’s, when demands for educational freedom were particularly strident (Gamson, 1989). The goal was to “open” the existing curriculum to skills and knowledge acquired in settings other than the university and to recognise them as potentially “creditable” – as worthy of inclusion in the curriculum as any course taught by a university professor. While this assessment process was by no means universally accepted, the resulting knowledge, when carefully scrutinised by experienced educators, stimulated serious reflection about the meaning of college-level learning (e.g., Coulter, 2002; Travers, 2012). A successful actress, a published author, a composer with works performed by well known orchestras – all without benefit of college study – seemed to know not only what naïve undergraduates might be taught in class but considerably more than could possibly be learned in a standard 15-week term, let alone after many years of formal study.1 Whether these artists could or could not pass a conventional exam in the subject area seemed irrelevant compared to the range and depth of what they actually knew.

It soon became evident that public validation in itself was not a necessary condition for creditable knowledge. As Lindeman commented decades earlier, “...people who perform productive tasks [are] themselves creating the experience out of which education might emerge” (1926, p. xv). Years before universities began offering courses on welfare policy, social workers or administrators of social agencies requested (and obtained) credit for the knowledge of policy that they not only executed but, in many cases, created and sometimes sought to change. A steel worker inventing new types of steel rolling methods, a beer manufacturer overseeing intricate brewing processes, a computer technician in charge of complex information systems, each brought to the table knowledge that was not part of any existing university curriculum but which, epistemologically, was complex and theoretical enough to be easily characterised as college learning. Even parenting, a skill typically denigrated by academics, upon closer examination (Coulter, 2001; Klinger & Pisaneschi, 1994) revealed degrees of breadth, depth, and critical understanding not ordinarily expected in other practical but unquestioningly credit-bearing courses, such as in physical education, construction management, or music performance.

Thus, the introduction of prior learning assessment (PLA2) adds not only a procedural, but also a substantive dimension to the meaning of “open” in the university. By acknowledging the credit-worthiness of independently acquired knowledge, colleges grant adults accelerated access to higher education (Klein-Collins, 2010) and also expand the range of what can be considered “higher learning.” However, despite growing demand (e.g., Friesen & Wihak, 2013; Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013), this expansion has not been warmly embraced (Wong, 2011). Many academics directly oppose or are at least uncomfortable recognising knowledge that originates outside the scholarly realm. For them, recognition of such learning represents a lowering of academic standards unless filtered through carefully wrought prerequisite structures. As a result, PLA now faces the danger of being co-opted by practices that challenge its very essence. Just as it could offer new ways of opening our universities, PLA is finding itself increasingly closed down by efforts to harness it with traditionally acceptable – and “scalable” – practices that force whatever the student has learned to fit within the constraints of what is already known. As observed by the late Ohliger, “the ‘in’ word for the ed biz media folks seems to be ‘open’ – open learning, open universities, open systems. What we sometimes forget is that the jaws of the alligator and the mouth of the bottomless pit are also ‘open’” (2009, p. 55).

In this chapter, we wish to remind our readers of a rich and far-reaching philosophical tradition of self-initiated learning that is at the heart of adult education and to show how this philosophy can justify