

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

● ABOUT THE PLA TRAINING MODULES



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INTRODUCTION TO THE PLA TRAINING MODULES

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Prior learning assessment : PLA training modules

"Produced by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer & Technology for the
Province of British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training."
ISBN 0-7718-9509 7

1. College students - Rating of - British Columbia. 2. Academic
achievement - British Columbia - Evaluation. I. British Columbia.
Ministry of Education, Skills and Training.
II. Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology.

LB2351.4.C3P74 1997 378.1'664'09711 C97-960272-6

**Produced by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer & Technology
for the Province of British Columbia
Ministry of Education, Skills and Training**

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Introduction to the PLA Training Modules

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is an initiative fully endorsed by the Province of British Columbia and supported by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology.

The *PLA Training Modules* were developed in response to a widespread need throughout British Columbia for information support and training for PLA practitioners, faculty assessors, support staff administrators and employers—all stakeholders in the implementation of Prior Learning Assessment in the province's post-secondary institutions.

The modules each focus on a particular content area and provide background information as well as hands-on activities for participants and instructional support with commentary for facilitators. They can each be typically covered in a day-long workshop or combined by experienced facilitators to cover several areas in the same workshop according to the needs and interests of the participants. The modules are as follows:

- Module 1: *Introduction*
- Module 2: *Advising & Supporting Candidates*
- Module 3: *Introduction to Assessment*
- Module 4: *Applying Good Practice in Assessment*
- Module 5: *Marketing PLA*
- Module 6: *Implications for Curriculum*
- Module 7: *Institutional Systems for Supporting Learners*
- Module 8: *PLA Materials*
- Module 9: *Ensuring Quality & Cost Effectiveness*
- Module 10: *Introducing PLA to Employers*

PLA in British Columbia

British Columbia needs a "seamless learning system": one that will value, recognize and credit the skills, knowledge and abilities of British Columbian citizens, regardless of how, when or where they were achieved, and provide the flexible learning options adults require as part of the growing commitment to lifelong learning. (Simosko, 1995)

Fundamental change is taking place in British Columbia. Educational and training providers throughout the system are working to become more flexible and responsive to individual learners and the communities they represent. They are making sure that education and training programs and services are relevant and accessible to the increasingly diverse needs of learners across the province.

Several recent publications have prepared the groundwork for this change, among them *Charting a New Course*, the strategic plan of the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training; *Training for What?*, developed by the BC Labor Force Development Board; and *Prior Learning Assessment and Educational Reform: A Vision for Now*, produced by Susan Simosko. All have a common denominator—the imperative to provide increased access to quality learning and assessment opportunities. PLA is viewed as a significant catalyst to this end.

British Columbia has been exploring PLA and its applications since the late 1980s. In 1993 the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer formed a Standing Committee on PLA. During these early years, guidelines and standards for PLA were published, awareness-raising and training events were held and a handful of pilot projects were funded.

By 1995 it was clear that the groundwork had been laid for the systematic implementation of PLA through the province's post-secondary system. Government support over the next few years included the provision of implementation grants to those institutions that showed evidence of PLA-readiness. By the fall of 1997, all 25 publicly funded institutions—colleges, university-colleges, institutes, agencies and universities—had received funds to implement PLA services in some of their programs.

The development of PLA services at institutions in British Columbia has led to:

- Use of a wide range of assessment methods and tools
- Increased development of learning outcomes and the use of competence-based standards as an integral component of the assessment process
- Consistent approach to PLA practices and processes across institutional contexts
- Introduction of the phrase “flexible assessment” to replace the term “PLA”

The material contained in the *PLA Training Modules* reflects BC's experience in developing a provincial framework for implementing PLA programs. Since work is still underway, however, concepts, strategies and new directions will continue to emerge. This is the dynamic nature of implementing flexible assessment services.

Preparation of the Modules

The 10 training modules were prepared by PLA practitioners in response to an urgent provincial need—the development of a coherent framework and approach to PLA across educational contexts and levels to maximize learner access and transferability and minimize inconsistencies in assessment decisions. The modules represent a critical step forward in our efforts to ensure the quality of training offered to advisors, assessors and others involved in the implementation of Prior Learning Assessment.

The modules were produced by 11 BC practitioners with the technical support and editorial guidance of Susan Simosko:

Louise Abbot and Ron McRae, *College of the Rockies*
Susan Brain, *Open Learning Agency*
Valerie Carew, *College of New Caledonia*
Carol Ebner, *Douglas College*
Maria Gomes, *Malaspina University College*
Bill Howorth, *British Columbia Institute of Technology*
Wendy Hurst, *Selkirk College*
Chelene Koenig, *University College of the Fraser Valley*
Julie Martin, *Camosun College*
Jan Shiell, *Capilano College*
Sherman Waddell, *Royal Roads University*

Bo Hansen, on secondment to the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology from the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, supported and assisted the practitioners in the development of this material.

Use of the Modules

The modules are designed to facilitate PLA education and training sessions. They are not intended as self-study guides, nor as texts to introduce readers to PLA. Instead they are meant to be used as a resource by experienced PLA practitioners to assist in designing and delivering education and training sessions.

It is recommended that those using the modules have:

- Knowledge and experience with PLA, including access to a range of contemporary PLA literature
- Experience in working with adults
- Applied knowledge of the basic principles of androgogy (adult learning) and experiential learning
- Expertise in designing and facilitating workshops

The modules each have a purpose, suggested time-frames, activities and supporting commentaries. Although each module is organized around particular content areas with day-long Facilitation Plans, it is assumed that experienced facilitators will select from the material on a mix-and-match basis, according to the needs of any particular group of participants.

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These modules incorporate the contributions of many people and the materials they have developed for use in Prior Learning Assessment. Every effort has been made to obtain copyright clearance and permission for use of any previously published materials.

Hints for Facilitators

A number of effective facilitation practices apply to almost any workshop setting, PLA training events included. Since these have not been written into every module, some of the more critical ones have been summarized here:

- *Be clear about the purpose of the event and what you hope to achieve.* Remember, the modules do not have all the answers; they are resources to help individuals and institutions develop their own successful PLA implementation strategies.
- *Remember to find out what participants want and need.* Although the modules have been organized around particular content areas, these need to be adapted and modified to meet the needs of the individuals who attend the particular training session.
- *Retain and transcribe the materials generated during these workshops.* Many of the activities suggested in the modules provide participants with excellent opportunities to solve problems, think creatively and benefit from the combined efforts of the group. It will be important to prearrange to have the outcomes of the session transcribed and disseminated to the group after the session.
- *Use your own icebreakers.* Because participants will be working intensively in groups, it is important to make sure everyone feels as comfortable as possible. You will want to make sure that all participants have a chance to identify themselves, get to know others in the group, and understand how the day will progress.
- *Integrate the concept of the Parking Lot.* PLA often generates many spin-off issues. It is suggested that facilitators use a spare flip chart as a “Parking Lot” for issues and concerns that arise. These can be addressed as time allows at the end of the session or the group may decide to tackle them in a subsequent session. The Parking Lot provides a constructive mechanism for both acknowledging and addressing participants' issues and concerns.

- *Evaluate the learning experience.* A commitment to a learning-centered approach implies careful attention to participants' views on the effectiveness and value of each workshop session. Be sure to develop a questionnaire or other mechanism to gather feedback systematically from participants. This will allow you to sharpen your facilitation skills, improve the design of any future PLA workshops, and assess participants' future development needs.

Benefits of PLA

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is an important educational initiative that provides learners with welcome opportunities to identify and gain recognition for what they already know and can do. It enables them to access new learning opportunities more efficiently and to earn meaningful credentials in less time.

PLA also provides institutions with an exciting opportunity to promote positive change and development. It enables them to meet the needs of individual learners more responsively and flexibly. It offers them a sound way of recognizing that in today's world learning has no boundaries—people learn at work, in their communities and at home. Educational institutions, once the principle providers of learning opportunities, are recognizing this with increasing astuteness and are determining how they can most effectively enable learners to build on what they already know and can do to achieve both short-term and long-term learning goals. PLA is one important vehicle for doing this.

For many institutions, PLA provides an exciting opportunity to promote positive change; for others, PLA is a challenge to the status quo. And for still other institutions, PLA is probably regarded as a bit of both, particularly in an era of high fiscal constraint, limited resources and shifting provincial priorities.

These modules have been developed to help educational institutions to integrate PLA concepts and tools into their day-to-day programs and services. They are intended to help institutions address the challenges of becoming more flexible and more learner-centered.

Acknowledgments

The *PLA Training Modules* could not have been produced without the ideas, efforts and contributions of many people. In addition to the principle contributors cited above, the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology would like to extend a special thanks to:

- Devron Gabor, Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, for his on-going support of this project and of PLA efforts in general
- Carol Matthews, Malaspina University College, for her leadership and dedication in seeing the *PLA Training Modules* come to print
- Julie Martin, Camosun College, for her review, rewriting and editing of the final version of the modules
- Terrie McAloney and Katherine Zmetana for their final review and preparation for publication
- Susan Simosko for her vision, guidance and technical support throughout the development process