

INTRODUCTION



module 1

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

INTRODUCTION

module 1

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This module introduces participants to the background, principles and assumptions of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). It provides an opportunity to explore the basic model of PLA as it is emerging in British Columbia and elsewhere, describes the key roles and responsibilities of advisors and assessors, and identifies key organisational factors that are known to contribute to the successful implementation of PLA services.

At the end of this module participants will be able to:

- Describe the background, principles and assumptions of PLA
- Determine the relevance of PLA to proposed system-wide reforms
- Identify the key characteristics and benefits of a sound model of PLA
- Analyse the roles and responsibilities of advisors and assessors
- Review the strengths and limitations of their own institution in implementing PLA successfully

Facilitation Plan

9:00 am:	Warm-up	12:15 pm:	Lunch
9:15 am:	The PLA Process	1:15 pm:	Who Benefits and How?
9:30 am:	The PLA Model	2:30 pm:	Break
10:00 am:	How We Learn	2:45 pm:	The Next Step
10:20 am:	Diversity of Evidence	3:45 pm:	Wrap-up
10:30 am:	Break		
10:45 am:	The PLA Team		
11:15 am:	Who Does what?		

You can introduce the schedule for today's session based on your own ideas or patterned after the facilitation plan provided here. The amount of time required for each part of the module is included as a guide. It can, of course, be adjusted to fit your circumstances. A full day is ideal, but this introductory module can be adapted, depending on the needs and range of knowledge of workshop participants.

- ! *Always be on the lookout for cartoons or other interesting material that relate to PLA and learners. (Be sure to obtain permission for use and to credit the author.) A humorous or personal touch can set a positive tone for the day.*

Warm-up

It is important to begin the day by having participants meet, introduce one another (this includes you, the facilitator), and have some interaction. It is also a good opportunity to clarify purpose and expectations.



Use transparencies **T1** and **T2** to introduce the module. This is a good time to probe the depth of PLA knowledge among participants. Explain that PLA is not something new and strange, but simply a way of applying old familiar principles and ideas in a flexible, learner-centred way.

To illustrate this point, you could explain how the process of applying for a job and preparing for the interview is similar to a learner preparing for prior learning assessment. In an interview, the selection committee is assessing what the candidate knows and can do to decide if she or he is a good match and meets their expectations.



Activity

The following activity can be used as an icebreaker and to assess PLA knowledge. Ask the participants to break into pairs and introduce themselves to their partner. Ask them to discuss:

- One thing they know about PLA
- One thing they hope to achieve from this workshop

Give participants a few minutes to exchange ideas then ask each participant to introduce his or her partner to the group based on the questions above. You may wish to list these ideas on a flip chart.

- ! *This particular introductory activity is suited to smaller groups. With larger groups have the groups record and report to the entire group.*

Allow two to three minutes maximum for each response. Record what participants hope to achieve from the workshop on flip-chart pages, which can be referred to during the day. It may be necessary to point out that some PLA topics will not be covered in detail in this module, but will be addressed in one of the other modules on a later date.

- ! *At this point you may wish to establish a “Parking Lot” on a flip-chart page to record concerns or issues raised during the workshop that will need to be addressed in depth or are too lengthy to discuss during the time allowed. Return to the Parking Lot at the end of the module, making sure you respond to each item and encourage suggestions for possible follow-up.*

This is a good time to reinforce the range of all the PLA training modules that can be delivered at your institution.

Briefly review what participants expect to achieve in this workshop, then refer to the list of the things they already know about PLA. This discussion leads into the following section.



Address each of the four processes of PLA using transparency **T3** and provide examples from an area that is familiar to you.

Explore the background of PLA, the basic concepts and tools of PLA, and the role that PLA can play as part of the system-wide educational reform. Draw out the basic principles of PLA from the discussion in the activities to follow, referring to **T4**.

Make up a scenario you can use to illustrate what typically happens to a PLA candidate. Present yourself as a PLA candidate coming through the door of your institution and say:

"I've decided to return to college to obtain a credential. But I've been working in this area for a few years now (or I've learned how to do this through my volunteer work). I took a course in this at night school and I've been using what I learned in my job. Here I am. What happens now?"

You may wish to ask for examples of similar situations from the group if you are ahead of your time schedule.

Your group will likely come to the conclusion that what we need to do is identify the stages the learner will go through to earn credit for his or her prior learning. The PLA Model, developed by Susan Simosko, PLA consultant, is being adopted to provide the framework for PLA opportunities in BC. It is described on **T5**.



Refer to transparency **T5** to address each stage a candidate will go through. Ask for ideas from participants on what may be involved at each stage. Refer to subsequent modules that will look at each of these points in depth.

Here are some ideas that participants may generate:

1. *Pre-entry:* Candidates will seek out information and attend orientation sessions.
2. *Candidate Profiling:* Candidates complete self-assessments that will assist in identifying what they know and what they can do. (People tend to devalue their knowledge or think about experience rather than the learning that has come from it. We define ourselves by what we do, not by what we know.) Participants could be provided with a checklist of skills or other tools to start thinking about the knowledge, skills and abilities they have gained.
3. *Gathering & Generating Evidence:* Candidates identify sources and types of evidence and prepare for assessment. Candidates have support through workshops, courses, group, and/or one-on-one sessions.
4. *Assessment:* Various assessment methods, such as testing, interviews and demonstrations, are available. The assessor assesses, provides feedback, and makes decisions.
5. *Credit:* Credit is officially recorded.
6. *Post-assessment Guidance:* A review of assessment results occurs with candidates. Candidates may revise educational plan, set new goals, seek other learning opportunities.



After the discussion, provide participants with handout **H1**, which provides detailed information.



Have all participants reflect on or write on a file card (whatever is their preference) some answers to the following questions which are provided on transparency **T6**:

- Describe something that you have recently learned.
- How did you learn it?
- How will you prove that you have learned it?



Activity

Ask participants to form groups of three or four and discuss their observations, perceptions, and answers. Ask each group to record responses to the two questions on a flip chart. Give the group 10 minutes for this activity and then ask them to share their responses with the plenary group.

Draw out ideas related to these concepts:

- Learning happens in many different contexts and in many different ways
- Ways to prove learning can be diverse (begin to introduce the idea of acceptable and diverse evidence)
- Assessment methods are also diverse
- Clear standards and expectations are important

Diversity of Evidence

10 minutes



Many types of evidence can be collected. But how can we make sure that the evidence is valid and appropriate? Begin by determining the difference between direct and indirect evidence. Refer to transparency **T7**.

Direct Evidence:

- What a candidate says about himself or herself
- Products or artifacts that the candidate has produced

Indirect Evidence:

- What others say or observe about a candidate

Use the examples that participants provided in the previous section and ask them, for each example, if the evidence that proved their learning was direct or indirect. Label them accordingly.

Suggest to the group that most PLA assessments involve and require both types of evidence in varying proportions. A balance of diverse evidence is important.

Reinforce the idea that there are many different kinds of evidence. Ask the group to comment on the difficulties and advantages of one kind of evidence over others.



Introduce the variety of assessment methods that can be used. Provide an example for each method. The following examples of assessment methods are described on transparency **T8**:

- Projects/assignments
- Program evaluations (equivalencies)
- Demonstrations
- Oral questioning
- Examinations: written/oral/standardised
- Portfolios of evidence (direct and indirect)

- ! Refer to Modules 3 and 4 for a more in-depth look at assessment methods and process from the assessor's perspective.



Break

15 minutes

Lead into the break by indicating that after the break you will be discussing the roles of each member of the PLA team.



Introduce this session using transparency **T9** to clarify the role of the institution with PLA. You may wish to ask questions to stimulate discussion:

- Should we be doing this as an institution?
- Does our institution do this?

Discuss the importance of building a PLA team to ensure success—for the candidate and for the institution. Briefly name the members who comprise the PLA team:

- Candidate (Learner)
- Advisor
- Assessor
- PLA Coordinator
- PLA Administrator or Manager



Introduce the PLA job roles and relate them to the PLA Model (**T5**). Discuss which team members may be involved at each of the six stages.

Who Does What?

60 minutes



Activity

Present yourself to the group as a PLA candidate in search of information and guidance. Describe your situation and your needs. Break the participants into four groups and ask each group to spend 5 to 10 minutes thinking about the various PLA roles. Assign a role to each group (Advisor, Assessor, Coordinator, Administrator), and ask the following questions:

- What functions does each team member fulfil at each stage of the process?
- What is the work done by each role?
- What information could you give to a potential candidate?

Have someone be the recorder and write examples of functions on a flip chart.

Some key points to emphasise:

- A person could be both an Assessor and Advisor, but generally not with the same candidate
- A person in a Coordinator role sometimes is the same person as the Advisor
- An Administrator needs to provide recording and tracking (Registrar) and hold responsibility for systems development and support (Executive Manager)



After collecting and recording all the ideas from the groups, summarise the findings, then distribute handouts **H2, H3, H4, and H5**. Note how the handouts compare to the flip chart lists. Is there anything missing; is there anything extra?



Lunch Break

60 minutes

Who Benefits and How?

75 minutes

Start up again with “welcome-back” remarks and clarify any questions or concerns that have arisen. Using the PLA Model and the descriptions of the functions of various team members, consider the benefits of PLA to various “people areas” such as:

- Learners
- Faculty
- Institution
- Community/Employers



Activity

Ask participants to break into four (or eight if you have more than 24 people) new groups. Suggest that people join with someone with whom they do not usually work.

Assign one “people area” from the list above to each group. Ask each group to look at PLA from the perspective of its assigned area and to generate a list of the benefits of PLA.

Each group will need to record and report back the results from this session.

- ! *Be sure to obtain the reporters’ notes, or list them on the flip chart, so that notes can be typed up for the whole group as a follow-up.*

As you discuss the benefits, pose the following questions:

- What would be some of the challenges you may face in order to gain these benefits?
- What would be some of the strategies that could be used to overcome these challenges?



Break

15 minutes

Facilitate a discussion with the participants, asking them the question:

"Where are we now with PLA, and what are the next steps to be taken?"

Ask them to reflect on this question in two ways:

- Personally, in their own area of responsibility
- Corporately, at their own institution



Then look at the questions again, using transparency **T10** to focus comments on the following areas:

- Mission Statement
- Policies
- Space
- Budgets
- Roles and responsibilities
- Academic structures
- Staff and faculty development
- Marketing
- Administrative procedures
- Learning outcomes/curriculum change
- Marketing

Do a 1-to-10 thermometer-style check (10 is the highest value), asking participants to rate their institution at present in relation to the areas identified above.

Establish a list of the commitments needed within the institution and review the list with participants, encouraging them to give suggestions for making sure that some level of action is taken. Ask each member of the group to voice a commitment to do at least one follow-up item on today's workshop, such as:

- Have lunch with a colleague who is not here today and summarise what you learned at this workshop
- Make a commitment to attend another training workshop or do follow-up reading on an aspect of PLA
- Talk with others in the department or division about getting started in offering PLA services

Make sure that before participants leave for the day, you:

- Review the purpose of this session
- Address the Parking-Lot issues
- Obtain a commitment from a group member to write up and distribute the information generated from group participation
- Ask everyone to complete the evaluation form
- Thank everyone for participating in the workshop
- Remind participants of dates for future workshops

The PLA Model

Stages	Activities
1. Pre-Entry	Candidates access publicity, promotional and other marketing literature and sometimes are provided with information or briefing sessions
2. Candidate Profiling	Candidates establish aims, reflect on experiences, match learning to course or program expectations and establish clear educational or career targets with assistance from the institutional advisor
3. Gathering & Generating Evidence	Candidates identify sources and types of evidence and prepare for assessment. The institution supports candidates through workshops, courses by one-to-one and/or group support. In person support and/or various forms of technology could be used
4. Assessment	Candidates submit evidence, and Assessor reviews and assesses, provides feedback and makes decisions regarding candidates' requests for credit
5. Credit	Registrar posts credit and/or candidates are supported to develop new learning plans
6. Post-assessment Guidance	Candidates review accomplishments in light of initial goals and sets new targets, with assistance from institution

PLA Advisors: What do they really do?

1. Help candidates become aware of the purpose and nature of PLA
2. Help candidates clarify goals in seeking PLA
3. Help candidates become familiar with the learning outcomes/expectations in courses or programs
4. Help candidates match learning to requirements
5. Respond to questions
6. Provide information about the PLA process and roles and responsibilities of faculty/staff
7. Help candidates identify appropriate sources and types of evidence
8. Negotiate and agree on action or assessment plans
9. Facilitate group workshops
10. Provide on-going support and feedback on an individual and group basis
11. Help candidates prepare for assessment
12. Provide information on new learning opportunities
13. Review candidate's evidence for completeness
14. Liaise with assessors
15. Submit evidence to assessors
16. Provide support and guidance after the assessment
17. Maintain records
18. Advocate for candidates

PLA Assessors: What do they really do?

1. Agree on academic and/or vocational areas that they feel qualified to serve on as an assessor
2. Develop checklists or other support materials for use by advisors and candidates
3. Participate in development of guidance material for acceptable evidence or assessment options
4. Identify likely experiences and types and sources of evidence related to their areas of expertise
5. Set assessment criteria
6. Design assessments
7. Assess candidate's evidence
8. Ensure candidate meets academic requirements
9. Ensure the evidence meets validity, reliability, sufficiency, currency and authenticity requirements
10. Develop an initial assessment plan (prior to meeting with the candidate)
11. Communicate with candidate and give feedback on the acceptability of candidate's evidence and any further evidence requirements
12. Meet with candidate to administer oral questioning and/or other assessment techniques
13. Make recommendations about award or denial of credits
14. Provide feedback to candidate
15. Provide support and liaise with advisors
16. Maintain records and forward on to the appropriate office or organization
17. Participate in internal quality-assurance process
18. Participate in group events that may require assessor's input or experience

PLA Coordinators: What do they really do?

1. Serve as a resource person for PLA information
2. Assist with the development and monitoring of PLA policies, practices and procedures
3. Work with faculty groups to coordinate PLA opportunities
4. Facilitate PLA best practices
5. Facilitate PLA education/training to faculty, staff, administrators, and employer groups
6. Contribute to the development of an institutional and provincial system to support flexible learning and assessment
7. Contribute to quality-assurance mechanisms for PLA practice
8. Advocate for the PLA initiative within the context of educational reform

PLA Administrators: What do they really do?

1. Promote institutional policies for flexible assessment and learning opportunities
2. Develop institution-wide systems for PLA implementation
3. Advocate for the PLA processes and practices within the institution
4. Facilitate accreditation and transfer issues
5. Develop and monitor quality-assurance practices
6. Liaise with PLA provincial groups and the Ministry
7. Develop admissions, registration, recording and tracking processes

Purpose

This module introduces and explores:

- ✓ PLA principles and assumptions
- ✓ Basic process of PLA in BC
- ✓ Key PLA roles & responsibilities
- ✓ Organizational factors associated with PLA

T1



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Introduction to PLA

At the end of this module, participants will be able to describe:

- ✓ Principles, assumptions, benefits and characteristics of a sound PLA model
- ✓ Roles and responsibilities of advisors and assessors
- ✓ Strengths and limitations of own institution

T2



PLA Process

- ✓ Identifying
- ✓ Equating
- ✓ Assessing
- ✓ Recognizing/Crediting

T3



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Basic Principles of PLA

- ✓ **Assessment of Learning**
- ✓ **Valid and Reliable Assessment**
- ✓ **Learner-centered**
- ✓ **Independent of Location and Method of Learning**
- ✓ **Credit Granted for Proven Learning**



PLA Model

Stage 1: Pre-Entry

Stage 2: Candidate profiling

Stage 3: Gathering or generating evidence

Stage 4: Assessment

Stage 5: Credit

Stage 6: Post-assessment guidance

Your Learning

- ✓ Describe something that you have recently learned**
- ✓ How did you learn it?**
- ✓ How will you prove that you have learned it?**

T6



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Types of Evidence

Direct Evidence

- ✓ What the candidate says
- ✓ Products or artifacts that the candidate has produced

Indirect Evidence

- ✓ What others say or observe about the candidate



Assessment Methods

- ✓ **Projects/assignments**
- ✓ **Program evaluations
(equivalencies)**
- ✓ **Demonstrations**
- ✓ **Oral questioning**
- ✓ **Examination/course challenge**
- ✓ **Portfolio of evidence
(direct/indirect)**

T8



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Role of the Institution

- ✓ **Help people value their own learning**
- ✓ **Help people receive recognition**
- ✓ **Provide credentials**

T9



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Where Are We Now?

- ✓ **Mission Statement**
- ✓ **Policies**
- ✓ **Space**
- ✓ **Budget**
- ✓ **Roles and responsibilities**
- ✓ **Academic Structures**
- ✓ **Staff and Faculty Development**
- ✓ **Administrative Procedures**
- ✓ **Learning Outcomes**
- ✓ **Curriculum Change**
- ✓ **Marketing**

T10



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