**PLA as a Phenomenological Study**

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*Phenomenology* is a rather intimidating word, but it simply means intensely studying an object, experience, or event (i.e. a phenomenon) as objectively and systematically as possible until you thoroughly understand it….You can study the phenomenon of your own learning (a process also called metacognition) to identify your college level learning.  I will “walk” you through the process using the journey of a fictitious student (made up of a number of real students I have mentored over the years) demonstrating how we used some phenomenological techniques in degree planning.

Phenomenological research as an approach to creating Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) essays involves starting with your experience and some questions that you want to answer, and then further defining the nature of the experience. In the PLA process this involves thinking deeply about the components of your broad experiences and determining with the help of your mentor how these components might be organized into a coherent whole that you can share with others. Once you have defined what you consider to be significant college level learning, the phenomenological research process itself involves living or reliving the experience, identifying its key components and describing them, and then giving them meaning or interpreting them. Interpretation or meaning making involves consciously moving back and forth between the right-hemisphere, divergent, creative part of your brain and the left hemisphere, logical, decision making area so that in the end you have a detailed description of the experience (i.e. phenomenon), know what it means, and are able to convey what you have learned.  Sometimes you can do this alone, but I believe that findings are likely to be more valid (true) if at least some of the reflection is done in dialogue with another person.  All of this probably seems very abstract (and it is part of a very high level of philosophy called epistemology or the study of meaning).   It is also surprisingly practical as you will see, as we journey with a fictitious student I will call Maria as she uses phenomenological processes to define her PLA requests and their place in her degree plan.

Maria has entered Empire State College with a life and a dream.  For ten years she has been happily married.  She has three children, a son from her first marriage who has developmental disabilities and two daughters from her current marriage.   For fifteen years she has worked in the domestic violence field first as a volunteer and then as the office manager.  After she received her associate degree in human services from the local community college, she held progressively more responsible positions as case manager, volunteer coordinator, community liaison, and now associate director.   The executive director, her boss, is planning to retire in two and a half years and has told Maria that she is in line for the position but must have her bachelor’s degree because all of the agency’s grant funding requires that the director have at least a bachelor’s degree (with a master’s preferred).   Maria would like to finish her bachelor’s degree within the two year time frame and wonders if she might have PLA credit to help her meet her goals. Mary begins with the same information you now have at your fingertips.  She knows a bit about Empire State College:  that we accept transcript credit from accredited colleges … as long as it logically fits the degree plan, that we give credit for legitimate college level learning acquired outside the formal classroom, that the State University of New York requires credits in at least seven of ten broad general education courses, and that ESC degrees must total 124 credits, 31 of which must be from ESC, and 45 of which must be advanced or junior-senior level.  She also knows that no matter how hard the course material, all associate level courses are considered introductory or freshman-sophomore level.

As Maria and her mentor look at her transcript credits, it seems clear that Maria will want to use her whole community college degree.... She and her mentor do some math.  They want to try to maximize her 64 credits from her transcript and add credits gained through PLA, but realize that they are up against the 45 advanced level credit rule.  They thoroughly discuss her goals and determine that when her degree is finished she wants to come across as a well-rounded human services professional with an in-depth knowledge of domestic violence issues.

With this rather broad framework in mind Maria begins her PLA search.  Her mentor encourages her to “mentally wander” through her life, jotting down areas where she has significant learning.  The mentor says that she should just let her mind roam freely, picturing herself in various situations and noting whatever comes to mind in answer to the broad questions:  “Where have I done significant learning? What did I do to accomplish the learning? What was its broad content?”   Her mentor tells her not to worry at this point about “fleshing out” the learning…that she is just looking for broad areas.  Maria comes up with the following list from picturing scenes in her mind:

* Domestic Violence:  case management, going to court with victims, talking with agencies to find housing for people, learning about domestic violence laws in the state, helping her boss write grant proposals, teaching volunteers, some of the details of in service trainings in the field, specific particularly meaningful cases.
* Knowledge of her ethnic heritage:  Maria thinks about how she has loved learning about her family’s history in general.   She has taken many trips to the Caribbean, has talked to her grandmother about her grandmother’s experiences in the islands, read many fiction and non-fiction books of Caribbean history, has taken several non-credit conversational Spanish courses and can speak the language adequately, and has even done some genealogical research online tracing her Spanish, African, and Native American ancestry and their lives in the islands.
* Knowledge of computers:   She has taken several online training courses from a non-accredited college and has also completed training programs offered through her work.  She is pretty confident about her knowledge of Word and Excel, and her ability to use and even develop a system (which she did) to manage information. She is fairly sure that her learning about computers would be considered acceptable in accredited colleges and universities.
* Developmental disabilities:   Her son suffers from autism.  She has read everything she can on the disorder and on the rights of the disabled to education and accessibility.  She has successfully advocated for her son and often helps other parents navigate the system.
* Community service:   She is very active in her community and can think of many projects large and small that she has led.  She pictures herself working with various people and knows that she can “get things done” smoothly and with a minimum of conflict.
* Hobbies:   With her work, family, church, and community activities Maria doesn’t have much time for hobbies but she does paint a bit, she knits, and likes to camp with her family.  She has developed some skills in these areas.
* Relationships:   Her two marriages have taught her about marital communications.  She has often helped friends through her natural mediation skills although she has no formal training in the field.

Maria and her mentor look at this list together in light of Maria’s degree planning needs and goals.   It is clear to both that some areas of learning have more potential than others.

1. Domestic Violence:    Maria has a rich, varied background in Domestic Violence including a deep understanding of its nature, skills in working with victims, knowledge and skills in developing training programs, and an understanding of government policies and funding sources that affect the field.   They agree that she may have advanced college level learning in the field, that it fits in nicely to the overall degree she is planning, and probably could earn her more than 4 advanced level credits. They “guesstimate” this credit at 4 advanced level liberal credits for her knowledge of the probable causes of domestic violence along with its psychological, cultural, and sociological aspects and 4 more advanced non-liberal credits in case management, community awareness, volunteer training, and domestic violence policy.   Maria does not yet have the specifics of her essays, but she has a “ballpark” to work within.
2. Caribbean History, Language and Culture:    It is clear that Maria has significant learning in this area and her mentor feels that it could be used to meet the college’s Other World Civilizations enough to be worth 3 or 4 credits.   Maria finds it intriguing to think that she could use the PLA writing process to consolidate her learning in this area and can even imagine doing a bit of reading to fill in some missing pieces.  She decides to do a PLA entitled Caribbean History, Language and Culture for 3 or 4 introductory, liberal credits and use it to meet her Other World Civilizations general education requirement.
3. Computer Studies:  At her mentor’s urging Maria looks at various course descriptions in this field from ESC and other fully accredited liberal arts colleges.   She realizes that she definitely has the knowledge covered in a Computer Applications course and possibly some of the knowledge covered in a management Information Systems course. She decides definitely to do a PLA request in Computer Applications, and to keep a PLA request in Management Information Systems “on hold” initially, to give her a chance to pursue PLA in fields where she has deeper and broader knowledge.
4. Language:  Maria considers the idea of taking a CLEP exam or doing a PLA request for Spanish, but decides that the Caribbean studies credits appeal more to her as a way of meeting general education requirements.  She doesn’t like tests, doesn’t want to make arrangements to take one, and is concerned that she does not have the level of proficiency needed to pass.  She will, however, mention her knowledge of Spanish in her Caribbean studies essay as further documentation of her knowledge of the culture.
5. Developmental Disabilities/Autism:  Maria feels that she has significant learning in this area and could probably ask for 4 advanced level credits, but she has no interest in moving from the domestic violence field into the developmental disabilities field professionally and is concerned that her “navigating the system” skills are many of the same that she will use in her PLA request based on her work in the field of domestic violence. She wants to avoid overlap in PLA learning, because she understands that a college assessment committee reviews PLA for potential overlap, and has the right to recommend deleting overlapping credits from a degree plan. She decides to set this area aside for now, knowing she could pursue a credit or two if she needs to fill in credit later on.
6. Community Activities: Maria enjoys her community work but neither she nor her mentor feel that she knows enough about community organizing theory and/or program design to earn advanced level credit. Working on an essay in this area does not seem as though it would be productive. However Maria realizes that she does have a lot of learning in project management, through her community activities as well as her work experience. She researched project management course descriptions to determine whether her learning approximately matches what’s normally taught in courses in this area, and it does. She also is able to identify some common rules and procedures in project management, and can apply and adapt them to different situations. Given that she has broad and deep knowledge that can be applied and adapted to different situations. Maria and her mentor decide to pursue PLA at the advanced level in this area.
7. Hobbies:  Although Maria values what she has learned through her hobbies and outdoor interests, she does not feel that any of it involved college level learning.
8. Relationships:  Maria values …her reputation among her friends as a wise, loving helper and says that what she has learned in this area is more important to her than anything else on the list, but she feels quite rightly that this learning would not be easily translatable into college level credit.

After this personal exploration of significant learning experiences (based on her life and work), informally categorizing (the step where Maria and her mentor named the broad learning areas), and evaluating (the simultaneous process of where they determined whether a broad area was college level learning, what level of learning was involved, where it might fit into the degree plan, how many credits might be legitimate, and how interested Maria was in pursuing a particular avenue), Maria made the following choices:

* 8 advanced level credits for her knowledge and skills directly related to Domestic Violence (4 liberal covering theory and 4 non-liberal covering practice)
* 4 introductory credits in Caribbean History, Language, and Culture to meet her Other World Civilizations general education requirement
* 4 introductory credits in Computer Applications
* 4 advanced credits in Project Management
* total 20 PLA credits

Maria will then be bringing into her bachelor’s degree plan the following:

* 64 transcript credits (all introductory)
* 8 introductory PLA credits
* 12 advanced level credits
* total of 84 credits