

Defining Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition by **Bruce Spencer, Athabasca University**

What follows is a short encyclopedia entry from the 2005 *Encyclopaedia of Adult Education* (Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 508-512), designed more so for those interested in adult education than “adults in higher education.” It discusses the impact of PLAR on social purpose adult education and attempts to introduce some of the academic arguments, as opposed to process issues, around PLAR.

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) refers to the evaluation and acknowledgment of learning that occurs outside of *formal* credit awarding training and educational programs. Increasingly, educational and training institutions are accepting PLAR as a legitimate method of gaining access to, or credit in, formal credential-bearing programs. Students are demanding that learning at work and in society be recognized within the traditional educational institutions when they seek to make the transition to formal higher education or post-secondary training. Educators are increasingly confronted by the question of how to fairly and accurately use PLAR to assess the educational merit of *informal* learning and *non-formal* education.

PLAR is the preferred term in Canada. Others include: prior learning assessment, PLA; accrediting prior learning/assessing prior learning, APL; accrediting prior experiential learning/assessing prior experiential learning, AEPL; recognition of prior learning, RPL. Although APL is sometimes reserved for transferring previous course learning and differentiated from APEL, PLAR will be used in this entry to represent all of these terms. PLAR has become a worldwide “movement” encompassing Australia and New Zealand, Southern Africa, Europe and North America. It attracts those who see PLAR as important for increasing access for previously disadvantaged groups but also attracts politicians and business leaders which suggests they may well view PLAR as a mechanism that will help them turn traditional higher education towards meeting the needs, priorities, and interests of the “real” world, as they see it. Adult educators have always valued student experience in the classroom and while there is broad support for PLAR for adult students, there are concerns about processes, the transferability of knowledge, and dilution of the social, emancipatory purposes of education.

There are a number of ways of assessing prior learning; these include challenge exams, portfolio assessment (the most common), and demonstrations of skills and knowledge. Transfer credit is not included here since this essentially refers to the transferring of credit gained from one institution’s courses to courses and programs of another. The essence of PLAR is the recognition of non-course learning gained *experientially*, perhaps as a consequence of volunteer or workplace activities or private self-guided study. PLAR can also include recognizing learning in *non-formal* adult courses and ascribing credit to that learning. There are perhaps three basic assumptions behind PLAR: significant learning can and does take place outside the classroom; that learning should be evaluated

for credit by educational institutions and by the workplace for hiring and promotion; and education and training practices that force adults to repeat learning are inefficient, costly and unnecessary (HRDC, 1995, p.1). The process of completing a portfolio is represented as educational in itself, helping students to reflect on experience, gain confidence and redefine goals (EC, 2002). Assessing portfolios is, however, problematic and hinges on the students' writing skills and their ability to translate experience into "learning."

The process of PLAR is most often presented as theoretically unproblematic: the vast majority of research focuses on the technical questions of how to measure learning's worth and also how to persuade traditional educational institutions, and "elitist" academics, to accept PLAR credits (Thomas, 1998; EC, 2002). The case for PLAR fits best with technical training programs that have identifiable skills and abilities as the course objectives. *Behavioural* learning theories that emphasize *competencies* or *learning outcomes* best fit with this *instrumental* approach to training. Students are encouraged to match their skills to the course outline and outcomes and claim the credits. PLAR can be useful for workers to demonstrate they have knowledge and skills that are needed for promotions or are applied to "laddered" skills-based job categories (for example in Australia). PLAR meets most opposition as a method of gaining credit within academic programs (particularly non-professional or applied); most courses in traditional academic programs are presented as non-instrumental since the knowledge areas, theories, and learning processes of critical reading and writing they concentrate on are outside of common discourse. Where PLAR is applicable to these programs it is often easier to grant generic course credits that match up with the broad program goals than to grant specific course credits.

Learning and Knowledge

Adults learn for a whole variety of reasons and in a complex web of settings. The purposes of such learning may be communal or social as much as personal. PLAR raises the question of whether all adult learning should be viewed in terms of what is measurable, exchangeable, and credit-worthy. For example, Briton has argued that the "use value" of certain knowledge is being confused with its "exchange value"; what is very useful in one situation may not be "exchangeable" into course credits. It also "undervalues" experiential learning that cannot be transferred (Briton et al., 1998). This is not to claim that one kind of knowledge is superior to the other, but rather that they are different. When individuals decide they need to know more about a certain topic in order to solve a particular problem at work, they are unlikely to be focused on developing critical reading and writing skills. In most cases they are not going to seek out differing perspectives on a problem and then write an assessment of the arguments. Experiential learning can be useful when undertaking course-based learning, but it may be quite legitimate to argue that the prior learning is sufficiently different that it cannot be credited as if the applicant had undertaken the course of study. In these situations *accelerated* courses suited to mature adults may be most useful. (Many individualized distance education programs allow for students' self-pacing).

At the core of many PLAR problems is a central contradiction of formal education that is writ even larger when considering experiential learning. The purpose of education is knowledge exploration and creation; the gaining of insights and understandings (in short, learning) but the outcome and importance of formal education is increasingly seen as the credential. As a result many learners (and educators) substitute the credential for learning as their central objective. For those seeking PLAR, credit recognition can become the only goal. Instead of using PLAR to focus attention on the gaps in skills or knowledge – what is yet to be learned – the emphasis is placed on finding the fastest route to gain a credential.

PLAR emphasizes specific and generic skills as the “outcomes” of learning rather than the gaining of insights and theoretical understandings around a particular area of knowledge. But the transference gained through PLAR into academic (as opposed to applied) credits is mainly based on what knowledge has been gained. Amongst adult education scholars, the usual starting point for a discussion about knowledge is Habermas, for example, as used by Mezirow in his theory of perspective transformation. Habermas recognizes the importance of beginning with an empirical-analytic framework and of moving beyond that to transforming and liberating the consciousness – hence the importance of critical social sciences (see Spencer, 1998, pp.62-68 for a discussion and references). Knowledge exploration is also linked to the distinction between *critical thinking skills* and *critical thought* (as promoted in Critical Theory). Critical thought begins by questioning belief systems and by asking who benefits from dominant ideas: its project is educational *and* emancipatory (Burbules & Berk, 1999). It is very difficult to assess these areas of knowledge through PLAR. For example, it can be argued (Briton et al., 1998) that this approach to learning will not usually be gained at work, especially given the narrow practices of our modern-day global corporations that demand loyalty and punish criticism (Klein, 2000).

Adult educators have always acknowledged the importance of adult experience in the classroom (Knowles is just one example) but knowledge gained through experience is not unproblematic. For example, Freire’s work has been used to justify PLAR. But this reading of Freire ignores his understanding that experience was a starting place, and could be very limiting, leading to a “culture of silence.” His argument is for a dialogical and collective education that results in workers “renaming” the world they occupy and eventually organizing to change it. His concern with self-awareness, action and reflection is similar to feminist scholars’ approaches to learning that can also be labeled experientially based but not experientially limited (Spencer, 1998, pp.68-70; 90-92).

However, the academy does not have a stranglehold on what counts as knowledge – women’s studies, labour studies, indigenous knowledge, cultural studies and the study of adult education all began life outside of the main halls and cloisters of the established universities. And mainstream education today still downplays or ignores the experience of minority groups in society such that their own learning about who they are and what place they occupy within the dominant culture is undertaken outside the official curriculum (Kelly, 2004). This illustrates that knowledge originating and gained outside of universities is important. Also working people are capable of breaking through the

workplace ideology designed to co-opt their compliance and critical experiential learning or non-formal education is relevant to some programs.

Granting Credit

Credit can be granted on a modular or course-by-course basis or as program credits. Building PLAR into programs can have a significant impact resulting in a program tailored to meet mature student needs. However, any claim for extensive transference of experiential learning into higher education credits needs to be critically examined if it is to gain support of academics. As Hanson has commented, "Rigorous though the technical requirements of PLA may be, they are of little help without a clear understanding of what they are measuring against and why" (1997, p.11). Accelerating an adult student to achieve degree completion may result in their missing out on crucial areas of knowledge. On the other hand, adult students do not have to travel the same road to a degree as a high school graduate; for example, adult life experiences may legitimately replace elective courses designed to give breadth for younger students, even if they cannot substitute for core courses.

One of the challenges for PLAR advocates and reluctant academics alike is to overcome the "with us or against us" attitude that pervades debate about PLAR and to engage in critical evaluation of the value and applicability of PLAR in particular programs. While PLAR may emphasize access (dramatically illustrated in post-apartheid South Africa but little evidenced in Europe) and has the potential to shake up traditional teaching, the mainstream promotion of PLAR does little to resuscitate the democratic social purposes of adult education. Rather, it has the opposite tendency: it emphasizes the argument that learning is essentially about skills and competencies useful for employment. The challenge for progressive educators is to marry the critical experiential learning that working people do engage in to critical theoretical knowledge within the academy: to recognize experiential knowledge when it is appropriate and build on it when needed.

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