



# **SITUATING PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR) IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Open and distance educational institutions share a commitment to principles of access and flexibility which, in turn, reflect a set of foundational beliefs that shape learning activity. Housed within this broad mandate is an explicit recognition of the presence and value of mature learners' prior learning. This chapter describes and situates *prior learning assessment and recognition* (PLAR) as a knowledge-building process within an online post-secondary learning culture. In doing so, it briefly reviews the history and context of PLAR; discusses the pedagogy of portfolio construction; outlines PLAR's operational functionality; and considers the potential of the e-portfolio as a learning tool. Athabasca University's use of PLAR in an open and distance university setting will serve as context.

## THE ROLE OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) ENVIRONMENTS

By definition and through practice, distance education has become synonymous with innovative models of program delivery that offer more generous open and flexible learning opportunities to wider and more diverse audiences than did traditional classrooms. The commonly accepted ways in which open and distance learning (ODL) institutions are perceived to serve diverse student populations centre around issues of scheduling and geography, typically allowing easier access to post-secondary education for those who have not previously enjoyed that option. And while the complex relationship between the concepts of diversity, access, and facilitating adults' learning through the recognition of their prior learning raises philosophical questions around social and power relationships, the presence of PLAR within post-secondary systems nonetheless provides viable alternative learning opportunities to many distance learners.

PLAR is practiced globally as a means of honouring and building on mature learners' past experiential learning. Grounded in ancient philosophies, the recognition of prior learning is defined by UNESCO as "the formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience" (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2004, p. 55). More recent history on PLAR can be found in the works of Pestalozzi (1907), Dewey (1938), and Kolb (1984).

Dewey presented a sound pedagogical rationale for recognizing adults' experiential learning – "the beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have...this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (1938, p. 74) – while advocating a progressive philosophy whose real-world learning echoed through the work of many adult educators. In North America, Moses Coady (1971) and Myles Horton (1990) were among those whose parallel views were instrumental in bringing educational opportunities to the oppressed and poverty-stricken. Farther abroad, Paulo Freire's work with farm workers in South America rested on the foundational premise of their experiential learning (1970). More recently, in exploring transformational learning across the span of adults' lives, Welton (1995) cites Mezirow's understanding of the role of educators in helping learners mine their past for reflexive learning, thereby declaring the value of

experiential learning as an active-learning occasion by involving the teaching role in the re-creation of learners' pasts.

## ODL AND THE COMMITMENT TO PLAR AT ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

As do other ODL institutions, Athabasca University outlines its commitment to reducing barriers to university education in its mandate and vision statements. Following on this, Athabasca University adopts as a key pillar in its foundation the process of recognizing learners' prior experiential learning. To implement a coherent and integrated prior learning recognition policy, AU maintains a central office where personnel champion, direct, and manage the PLAR process. The existence of such an internal and integrated structure makes Athabasca University somewhat unique among Canadian universities; the size of its operation places it at the forefront of university prior learning practice in Canada.

AU implements PLAR using both challenge-for-credit and portfolio assessment methods, thereby reflecting the field's general understanding of the twin practices for PLAR implementation, challenge, and equivalency (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). Under the challenge-for-credit policy, learners may choose to target a specific course for which they feel they already possess the required knowledge or skills. Working with the course professor, they then engage in a contractual relationship to meet the challenge conditions that have been pre-established for the course. While this process honours their right to bring forward their prior knowledge, learners applying to have their prior knowledge recognized in this fashion are obliged to tailor their learning histories to fit into pre-determined knowledge clusters that look like Athabasca University courses. While this is just one model of PLAR – and an acceptable one – it is not a model that gives learners the opportunity to build new knowledge on the foundation of their prior knowledge. Rather, it is the process of preparing a portfolio that permits learners to demonstrate their prior knowledge through the careful selection, reflection, connection, and projection of learning artefacts. In so doing, learners can most fully exercise the scope and latitude of their prior knowledge while learners' cognitive engagement with their learning histories gives rise to new knowledge – of self, of self situated within the trajectory of growth, and of self situated within the profession.

It is important to note that the portfolio approach is necessarily guided by sets of university-provided criteria and outcomes. That said,

portfolio criteria and outcomes serve as guidelines and structuring devices rather than as hard-and-fast targets. They provide signposts around which learners can rally and organize their own learning, rather than stipulating for them what they must know to be successful in their petition.

## KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING THROUGH PLAR PORTFOLIOS

In many post-secondary PLAR systems, the portfolio is the vehicle through which learners' prior learning can be assessed for credit toward a university credential. More broadly, portfolios serve as repositories of achievement and methods of celebrating growth for lifelong learners. Outside of learning venues, portfolios are used as performance assessment tools for those seeking advancement in the workplace; they also serve as showcase vehicles for those seeking recognition of their accomplishments.

### PLAR Paradigms and Politics

Universally, portfolios are being touted more widely than ever as an essential part of citizenship, personal performance, or learning. To this end, the European Union promotes the development of a personal portfolio for each of its citizens by 2010 (European Commission, 2005). Similarly, many post-secondary institutions now include a portfolio as an essential component for graduation from the institution. Such a portfolio would capture a graduate's entire learning history from the institution, featuring papers, assignments, reflections, triumphs, and struggles, as well as indications of present and future career aspirations. Barrett and Carney (2005) describe the many functions of portfolios in terms of low-stakes and high-stakes assessment. High-stakes assessments reap considerable rewards: learning portfolios that are submitted for university credit are prime examples of high-stakes assessment.

PLAR-by-portfolio generates controversy within the university culture, in part as a result of its existence as a high-stakes assessment tool that offers learners opportunities to sidestep course-taking or fast-track through university credentials, even though, in ODL institutions, meeting learners' needs in this way generally contributes to university mandates. More than that, however, portfolio assessment generates even deeper controversy around issues of power and voice (Harris, 1999; Michelson, 1996). Several questions arise: Who controls knowledge? How can those who step forward with non-university learning be expected to conform to the language of the university so that they can attain fair recognition

of their knowledge? Peters (2005) is among many who contest the ability of academic faculty to fairly assess portfolio learning.

Promoting PLAR to its critics depends, at a meaningful pedagogical level, on being able to demonstrate a system that is rigorous, sound, and capable of initiating self-reflection and critical thinking. To do this, it is necessary to return to PLAR's first principles on two levels, the first of which is recognizing the value of mature learners' prior learning. PLAR literature is indebted to Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) for their work on experiential learning and its value to individuals and their societies. Of no less importance, however, is the belief in a constructivist-based approach to learning. In this view, the portfolio process allows learners to begin at a point of their own choosing and to select and reflect upon learning that is important to them. Their learning challenge is to integrate that knowledge into the knowledge asked of them by the institution. Following this view, portfolio development would be analogized as a journey, complete with all the meandering, false starts, corners, surprises, and difficulties that any journey holds.

### PLAR Practice and Process

Using the metaphor of portfolio-as-journey, learners move along a route of portfolio preparation comprised of a number of cognitive stages. Somewhat glibly labelled reflect, select, connect, and project, each of these steps requires intense and laborious thought; each step may spark the "aha" moment that occasions learning. The process is described below.

#### Reflect

Among adult learners – and PLAR participants by definition are usually adult learners – learning is a voluntary action that centres around what is already known. From a starting point of personal meaning and relevance, adult learners enter into a relationship with their environment to construct new meaning (Angelo, 1993; Mackeracher, 2004). This process is one of thoughtful reflection, resulting in what Crites (1971) terms a movement from the mundane to the sacred – learning to understand experience beyond its isolated, secular level. Helping learners to settle at this level of interpreting their experiences is a process intended to elevate their stories beyond the confines of their own immediacy to more generic levels of knowledge. For example, a single mother who wrote about her demanding personal schedule, that included shuttling her sons back and forth to hockey practice and assuming multiple

parental roles, used those experiences to highlight her organizational skills and the resultant value that her inter-collegial skills brought to her workplace. As she worked through the process of reflecting on the lessons emanating from her household tasks, she drew new meaning from those tasks and learned that she had actually been honing new skills.

### Select

When preparing PLAR portfolios, applicants must mine their rich and varied learning experiences selectively for the events that can most effectively anchor the learning narrative that they are creating. Their selections constitute a type of scaffolding upon which they build the stories of their learning. In putting together this framework, they map both their histories and their futures in a form of strategizing, which is similar to the cognitive processes that would formulate the answer to an essay question asking, say, for a detailed explanation of the events leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall. In learning portfolios, however, the value and nature of the knowledge incidents are related to self; selecting them and denoting them as valuable labels them as integral pieces in the exercise of building self-knowledge.

### Connect

The act of connection occurs both subsequently to, and concomitantly with, the act of selection. As in the example of the Berlin Wall used above, once the “knowledge items” have been identified, they must be linked or arranged into an order that serves the purpose at hand. Mackeracher (2004) cites the “basic learning cycle” that incorporates the work of Kolb (1984) and other theorists into five basic phases of learning. In brief, the five phases include a) participation in experiences and activities; b) making sense of experience by giving it meaning or value, using pattern recognition and other cognitive processes; c) applying meanings and values to problem-solving and decision-making processes to make choices; d) implementing action plans; and e) receiving feedback both from others and from self-observation. The integral theme of connecting experience to meaning recurs in situated cognition theory (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) and also in transformation theory (Mezirow, 1995). Using the same processes that Mezirow outlines for engendering transformational learning by critically reflecting on and modifying current assumptions and understandings, the PLAR process also asks learners to engage in knowledge-building activity.

## Project

The last step for PLAR applicants in demonstrating learning is to determine an appropriate presentation method – to project the evidence of their learning in a format deemed acceptable by the receiving institution. In conforming to a structured set of expectations, learners meet another set of learning outcomes by fulfilling process (or generic) outcomes that might be labelled thus: using and constructing documents accurately; communicating appropriately in text; understanding one's learning style; and adapting it to tasks at hand. The foundational importance of this type of learned skill is reflected in the compilation of national-level outcomes for all learners (Government of Canada, 2006).

The projection of PLAR applicants' learning, according to template-type guidelines, results in the production of a substantial portfolio document. The portfolio format itself is designed to triangulate learners' demonstration of knowledge, and in constructing such a document, learners are further encouraged to apply their organizing and prioritizing cognitive skills. The entire document should contain most of the following parts: table of contents, resume, narrative autobiography or personal narrative, chronological learning history, educational and career goals, demonstration of learning through learning statements, and documentation of learning. The documentation of learning often forms the bulkiest part of the portfolio as learners include many types of documents, including letters of attestation written by externals to validate their learning claims, and copies of credentials, awards, certificates, and other artefacts.

The heart of the knowledge construction exercise in this text-based portfolio method rests in the process of writing learning statements. Learning statements form the body of the demonstrated evidence of the learning that PLAR applicants claim to have acquired. The documentation described previously must support these claims. Based on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), which stratifies cognitive achievement into six hierarchical categories – knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation – learners compose statements that appropriately reflect the learning outcomes they feel they have achieved. The process of writing learning statements presents a vigorous cognitive challenge to most learners and most PLAR applicants struggle with this task. At the end of it, however, with the clarity that arises from successfully resolving a task, their reactions reflect both satisfaction with, and wonder at, the nature and extent of the learning that they realize has occurred.

## OPERATIONALIZING PLAR IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Recognizing learners' prior learning may appear to provide solutions to many traditional situational, attitudinal, and institutional barriers to learning; however, the relationship between the concepts of diversity, access, and the issue of facilitating adults' learning through the recognition of their prior learning is both complex and dichotomous. An uneasy type of teeter-totter balance exists between the fact of open and distance access and PLAR processes, exacerbated by the presence of philosophical and social power relationships (Conrad, 2007). As a result, the use of PLAR processes confronts, and opens the door to, a network of resulting tensions.

Online learning environments are also viewed as opening the door to educational opportunities where none existed before, and, in many cases, this is exactly what happens. Technology, however, brings with it its own set of encumbrances and difficulties, and its successful implementation requires careful networks of student support (Davis, Little & Stewart, 2008; Moisey & Hughes, 2008; Johnson, Trabelsi, & Fabbro, 2008). Superimposing the online learning environment on top of portfolio learning opportunities requires not only sensitivity and awareness, therefore, but an acutely informed understanding of online learners and the challenges that confront them. A discussion of these areas of challenge follows.

### Adult Learners, Andragogy, ODL

Not all online learners are adults, nor are all online learners mature.<sup>1</sup> That said, online theory supports the view that online learning holds the most potential for mature learners following a constructivist approach (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Experiential learning certainly favours maturity (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). Given the confluence of these two educational streams at the junction described in this chapter, it stands to reason that success in this domain requires a good understanding of what it means to be a mature learner in a distance learning environment, as regards issues of motivation, learning styles, community, and social, cognitive, and instructional presence. The pervasive problematic and underlying irony in the implementation of PLAR is that often it is not well understood in its role as a learning activity – a role that would bring into play all of the literature suggested above – and is instead relegated by both supporters and detractors to the purview of registrars, credit



transfer, and credit counting. Adequate educational foundations for PLAR's operation, therefore, are often missing.

### Assessment Methodology

There are many ways to assess prior learning. They include performance displays, interviews, examinations, projects, and portfolio assessments, as well as combinations of these various methods. The fact of a distance institution limits the choice, effectively ruling out interviews or performance displays, for example; Athabasca University chooses to use only the portfolio method of assessment. While not unusual in this situation, the use of only one method of assessment increases the importance of the structure and integrity of the PLAR process, specifically as it involves and relates to learners' and assessors' text-based abilities. The need for learners to be able to display their learning largely in a written format<sup>2</sup> demands a high level of communication structure, as discussed below.

### Communication

In many other venues, PLAR is conducted in informal or semi-formal face-to-face venues where applicants are able to engage in discussion with mentoring or coaching staff. Because of the nature of the task – helping applicants grapple with understanding the extent of, and the value of, their past learning – an iterative format is best, as it allows a level of deep understanding to evolve through reflection (Schön, 1987). ODL institutions that are not privy to face-to-face access must rely on a well-developed structure and responsive systems of communications in order to accomplish the interaction necessary for the successful management of a PLAR process. Facilitating such complex communication requires excellent and continual application of written and verbal skills, and the manufacture and maintenance of high-quality resources (see the section on Resources, below).

In another communication twist occasioned by a distributed environment, internal communications among staff and faculty must also operate at a highly efficient level. At Athabasca University, for example, where PLAR is integrated across all programs, a complex many-to-many system of interactions arises from each portfolio assessment. The potential of lost or misunderstood communications is high.

### Resources

It is well understood by online educators that not all learners want to forsake paper-based resources. The current generation of online learners,

at least, prefer to access their online resources in moderation.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with principles of access that attempt to provide maximum opportunity to its clientele, Athabasca University's PLAR system provides both paper-based and online resources for potential applicants. A large web site forms the online resource (<http://priorlearning.athabascau.ca/index.php>). A virtual portfolio located on the web site permits almost-hands-on access to the real thing. High-quality PLAR resources form one of the bases for the strong platform of support required by distance learners.

## Support

The need for generous provision of student support is well documented in ODL literature (for example, see Moisey & Hughes, 2008). Support for distance learners takes many forms, most obviously advising, counseling, coaching, mentoring, and supporting with technology and the web site. Within the pedagogy of online learning, the need for community support, also well documented, manifests itself in the form of learning communities, communities of practice, virtual learning environments, and applications of social software. PLAR learners require an equal amount of support for successful completion. While numerous material resources provide one level and type of support, an essential and more sophisticated level of support relies on human interaction, achieved through telephone and email contact. Ideally, collegial peer support involving those who are concomitantly engaged in preparing PLAR portfolios would provide a high level of effective interaction. Given the positioning of PLAR as a learning activity within the institution, PLAR learner support mechanisms should look no different than any other type of course-oriented learner support.

## INTRODUCING THE E-PORTFOLIO

What is the future of the e-portfolio in an ODL environment, therefore, given the conditions for successful management of a portfolio system, as described in this chapter? At Athabasca University, as in most post secondary institutions' high-stakes assessment portfolio use, materials must be assembled for the exact purpose of attaining credit at the institution. The learning portfolio described in this chapter

contains work that a learner has collected, reflected, selected, and presented to show growth and change over time. A critical

component of an educational portfolio is the learner's reflection on the individual pieces of work (often called 'artefacts') as well as an overall reflection on the story that the portfolio tells. (Barrett, 2005, p. 4)

From this rigorous structure that is defined by educational requirements comes a very targeted and precise document, the production of which encourages reflective learning activity in its participants and demands evidence of that learning. Does the electronic portfolio format permit learners to engage in the same type of thoughtful process? Tosh, Light, Fleming, and Haywood (2005) outline that, as with paper-based portfolios, the

e-portfolio is – or should be – part of a student-owned, student-centred approach to learning that makes it possible for students to actively engage in their learning rather than just be the recipients of information. This is consistent with constructivist theory, which argues students actively construct their own knowledge rather than simply receive it from instructors, authors, or other sources. (Jonassen, cited in Tosh et al., p. 90)

Ideally, advocates of learning portfolios, whether paper-based or electronic, will strive to support the concept of learners' portfolios-as-learning while adhering to the rigours and accountability of high stakes assessment for the purpose of credit allocation. In fact, in fields that value computer, technology, multimedia, or design skills, learners' use of e-portfolios could provide not only a more engaging demonstration of skills, but also a more technically correct demonstration of skills. However, Tosh and colleagues' contention that e-portfolios offer opportunity for learner control and promote deep learning should be true of any good portfolio process and should be no less true of the traditional paper-based portfolio. The introduction of another layer of technology brought about by e-portfolio use, however, raises several concerns for learners and educators in online environments.

### Focus

If, as Barrett (2000, para. 3) suggests, "the e-portfolio draws on two bodies of literature, multimedia development (decide, design, develop, evaluate) and portfolio development (collection, selection, reflection, projection)," will the e-portfolio's necessary emphasis on software design potentially

lessen learners' attention to content? Is there the potential of e-portfolios favouring form over content?

### Assessment Equity

On the other side of the equation, will the e-portfolio's emphasis on software design potentially lessen the assessors' attention to content? Will assessors searching for an individual's learning story feel less attuned to the applicant who submits an electronic portfolio?

In a similar vein, e-portfolio technology has the potential to alienate assessors. Universities such as Athabasca University use assessors who tend to be academic faculty; they have the time and the inclination to contribute to the PLAR process because they are older faculty members, secure in their positions. Cumbersome as paper-based portfolios often are, some faculty prefer them due to the increased computer usage that e-portfolios require.

### Diversity

Issues of diversity reshape themselves when technology is added to the portfolio mix. As outlined in the discussion above, a number of types of diversity already exist within the portfolio process; it is naïve to consider that access to PLAR offers a level playing field. Similarly, relying on technology or introducing a technological platform to the production of a portfolio privileges some learners above others. That said, critics argue that a paper platform also disadvantages some learners while privileging others.

### Pedagogy

Tosh and colleagues' (2005) assumption, based on the adult education premise that learners engage more successfully when they have control (Ramsden, 2003), skirts the deeper cognitive issues of how learners connect to, or feel ownership of, their learning. Do today's learners feel more connection to electronic portfolios? Research maintains that as the number of learners who can be labelled "digitally native" increases over time, e-resources and e-materials will rise in popularity among learners (Eshet & Geri, 2007). Currently, however, as manifested in similar discussions of the merits of print-based journals versus those of e-journals, each option has supporters and detractors.

## CONCLUSION

Nowhere does the practice of prior learning assessment and recognition make more sense than in the adult learning environment. That said, theory also supports the integration of PLAR processes into the online teaching and learning environment, and current practice confirms that ODL institutions, such as Athabasca University, are leaders in the implementation of PLAR at the university level.

As demonstrated through literature and practice, however, consensus remains to be found around issues of prior learning. The practice of recognizing prior learning will hopefully inform post-secondary educators' perceptions of learning while it continues to offer learners fertile ground for cognitive and personal growth.

## NOTES

1. The issue of maturity is hotly debated among adult educators, as is the complementary issue of defining the term adult. Generally, a psycho-social definition that outlines individuals' acceptance of social roles in terms of their society's expectations is what is used to define adulthood. In a learning context, maturity is understood to entail responsibility and some degree of control and self-direction. While institutions and agencies are often required to attach an age to adult learner status, it is understood pedagogically that age alone constitutes arbitrary and somewhat artificial boundaries.
2. Although portfolios are classified as text-based, in reality, material may be presented in other ways. A portfolio, for example, will often contain graphics or pictures, and may contain CDs or audio recordings of some sort. A portfolio may be submitted on a CD, although it will still comprise mostly text. Some of the issues that surround the introduction of web-based e-portfolios are discussed later in this chapter.
3. Internal studies conducted by Athabasca University's Institutional Studies unit have produced statistics to support external research, which shows that learners still prefer paper-based resources, or that they are willing to spread their resource menu among various modalities. Other external research shows that learners' level of comfort with online resources is dependent on their status as digital natives;

in the future, this figure is expected to rise accordingly (Eshet & Geri, 2007).

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