Recognizing Experiential Learning Through Prior Learning Assessment

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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 a wider and more diverse audience than did the bricks-and-mortar classroom structures in which most of us were raised. The commonly accepted ways in which open and distance institutions serve a diverse student population center around issues of scheduling and geography, typically allowing easier access to post-secondary education for those who have not previously enjoyed that option. Such opportunities for learner access address the situational, attitudinal, and institutional conditions that have long been described in adult education literature as the types of barriers that prevent adults from realizing their educational dreams (Cross, 1981; Wiesenberg, 2001; Mackeracher, 2005).

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. Recognizing learners' prior learning (RPL) may appear to provide solutions to many aspects of traditional, situational, attitudinal, and institutional barriers. RPL, for example, can help gain access to post-secondary study for learners who have been blocked by institutionally erected barriers that deny admission to "unqualified" learners. Such learners, however, may themselves harbor deep-seated and self-undermining insecurities that arise from their not having strong academic backgrounds. In turn, these learners bring that level of attitudinal diversity forward into the RPL process. In short, an uneasy type of teeter-totter balancing exists between the fact of open and distance access and RPL processes, exacerbated by even deeper and more riveting philosophical and social power relationships.

Athabasca University (AU), Canada's open and distance university, celebrates the diversity of its learners' knowledge in many ways, not the least of which is its system of RPL. As a result, its use of RPL processes confronts, and opens the door to, a network of resulting tensions. In this chapter, using AU as a case study, I will outline AU's

commitment to distance education, outline AU's prior learning policies and procedures, discuss the fit of prior learning into AU's spectrum of learning activities, and focus on the relationship of AU's prior learning systems to issues of diversity.

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY: COMMITTED TO OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The commitment to serving learners at a distance involves a great deal more than what is quickly and easily visible. While it may appear that the only difference between open and distance institutions such as AU and traditional universities is that ODL institutions do not have learners sitting in campus classrooms, in fact the entire ODL infrastructure is pitched differently in order to accommodate all the facets of distance education. Far-flung faculty often function in isolation, apart from each other and from the ease of handy administrative support. Governance structures must accommodate the physical difficulties wrought by distance that manifest in communication systems and travel arrangements. A justifiably heavy infrastructure handles every business item at a distance, and a justifiably extraordinary student support service arm provides distance learners with the semblance of "being there" through all stages of their programs.

Athabasca University made this commitment in 1970 and, in doing so, established itself as the largest single-mode Open and Distance University in Canada. Over the years, some of AU's counterparts, such as the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, have come and gone; conversely and more recently, other dedicated online institutions, such as New Brunswick's Yorkville University, have opened their doors. But 36 years after its incorporation by the Government of Alberta, AU continues to thrive and has doubled its student numbers in the last 6 years, currently serving 34 000 students annually.

Athabasca University's complex infrastructure is designed to oblige the many diverse needs of distance learners. It offers blended and flexible delivery models. Its individualized study courses permit self-paced learning and free learners from specified class schedules. Continuous entry offers year-round study opportunities. Anyone over the age of sixteen is eligible for admission to the University. Programs are designed to allow learners to maintain full-time careers while studying part-time. Study materials are sophisticated and carefully crafted. All student service transactions can be enacted electronically. All AU's library holdings can be downloaded onto mobile learning devices. Taken together, these innovations hallmark a progressive distance learning institution.

In meeting distance learners' needs through its extensive infrastructure and protocols, AU addresses the most obvious needs of its diverse student population. Inherent in its commitment to open learning, however, is another value system that is designed to address a largely unseen diversity – the very wide-ranging and unique educational backgrounds that its learners possess – or, more importantly, that they do *not* possess – as they attempt to move forward to pursue post-secondary university education.

In its mandate and vision statement, AU outlines its commitment to reducing the barriers to achieving a university education. Following on this, it adopts as one of the key

pillars in its foundation a 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 various processes that constitute the RPL enterprise. The existence of such an internal and integrated structure makes AU somewhat unique among Canadian universities; the size of its operation places it at the forefront of university prior learning practice in Canada.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

The recognition of prior learning is practiced globally as a means of honoring and building on mature learners' past experiential learning. UNESCO provides this short and effective definition of RPL: "The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience" (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004, p. 55). Grounded in ancient philosophies, Western educators can look back to a more recent history in the work of Pestalozzi and Dewey, who presented sound pedagogical rationales 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" (Dewey, 1938, p. 74).

Dewey's advocacy of a progressive philosophy that promoted real-world learning echoes through the work of many adult educators. In Canada, Moses Coady, Jimmy Tompkins, and Alfred Fitzpatrick were among those whose parallel views were instrumental in bringing educational opportunities to the oppressed and poverty-stricken. Farther abroad, Paolo Freire's work with farm workers in South America rested on the foundational premise of their experiential learning. More recently, in exploring transformational learning across the span of adults' lives, Welton (1995) cited Mezirow's understanding of the role of educators in helping learners mine their past for reflexive learning. The educator's role, Mezirow holds, involved these three inter-related activities: (1) helping self and others engage in reflection; (2) helping self and others redefine premises; and (3) helping self and others decide how to act on new insights and understandings (Welton, 1995). In this declaration, Mezirow worked toward giving experiential learning value as an active-learning occasion by implicating the teaching role in the re-creation of learners' pasts.

World-wide, educators' beliefs in the value of adults' prior learning are reflected in the practice of RPL, also understood as accreditation of experiential and prior learning (AEPL) or the accreditation of prior learning (APL). Within the broad parameters of RPL, there exist a number of more specific procedures that address various types of prior learning. Adults' prior learning opportunities are generally classified according to their origins, that is, according to whether the learning has been obtained formally, at recognized post-secondary institutions, or whether the learning has resulted from situations or environments outside formal institutions (Selman et al., 1998).

Credentials obtained from study at recognized post-secondary institutions are usually considered for transfer credit or qualification recognition at other post-secondary institutions. Transfer agreements among institutions exist to standardize the movement of credit from one institution to another, usually simplifying, for learners, accessibility to post-secondary credentials within established jurisdictions.

Non-formal and informal learning acquired by learners through training, workplace offerings, from non-accredited institutions, or simply from life's lessons, is generally not recognized for transfer by accredited post-secondary institutions. It is this type of learning that provides the material for the sub-area of RPL that is generally referred to as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). In past years, PLAR was more commonly referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA). The addition of the "R" was designed to emphasize the final outcome of the assessment process through which learners' experiential learning is recognized – and, in that way, awarded credit toward post-secondary studies (Thomas, 1998).

The RPL and PLAR are large and complex concepts that currently do not enjoy much common understanding in Canada's post-secondary sector. The schema that is presented here, while fairly common, is not universally accepted. However, as this is the definitional structure on which AU bases its implementation of PLAR policy, this will be the understanding that frames the language of this chapter's discussion.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition at Athabasca University

Athabasca University's support of PLAR as a vehicle through which to recognize and accredit learners' prior and experiential learning is firmly rooted in the university's mission statement which captures its vision as an open and distance institution. As an open university, it is generous in its allocation of credit for formal transferred learning. AU also maintains a policy that guides applications from non-accredited institutions, largely private colleges and training institutions, through a rigorous process of evaluation.

The recognition of informal and non-formal learning, however, is addressed by AU's PLAR policy, with its focus on the assessment of learning. AU's implementation of PLAR through two channels, challenge-for-credit and portfolio assessment, reflect the field's general understanding of the two practices for PLAR implementation, challenge and equivalency (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001). Although many Canadian universities have policies that clearly outline their PLAR processes, AU is one of very few universities in Canada that actively practice PLAR and perhaps one of only three Canadian universities that support a central office to manage university-wide PLAR implementation.

Athabasca University established its PLAR office as the Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA) in 1997. Working collaboratively with programs across the university, CLA's first director created criteria for program-based learning outcomes for all of AU's programs.[1]

During this process, each program determined the maximum number of PLAR-awarded credits that was judged to be appropriate, given the configuration of the program, its purpose, and the nature of its studentship. Therefore, while some 120-credit degree programs offer a maximum of 30 potential PLAR credits, other 90-credit degree programs may offer only a maximum of six potential PLAR credits. A consistent variance also exists between degree program requirements and requirements for corresponding post-diploma degree programs, thus addressing the fact that learners entering a post-diploma degree program have already been awarded up to a maximum of 60 credits toward their degree requirements for the diploma credential that they hold.[2]

The implementation of PLAR, at AU and at other educational institutions that practice PLAR, encompasses both portfolio assessment and challenge-for-credit processes. Diverse understandings of the PLAR lexicon result in different types of applications of these practices among institutions. At AU, the CLA office is responsible for the university-wide implementation, management, and marketing of PLAR-by-portfolio assessment. Challenge-for-credit processes are currently handled collaboratively by personnel in the Office of the Registrar and faculty responsible for the course about to be challenged.[3]

Portfolio-based PLAR

Applicants wishing to receive credit for their prior experiential learning may choose to present their knowledge for assessment in the form of a portfolio. With the use of guidelines, templates, and examples, applicants assemble portfolios in which they document their learning histories and display the knowledge they claim to have in text form, supported by well-referenced documentation. The many parts of the portfolio – including a learning narrative, a resume, and a statement of educational goals – create a large collection of carefully chosen artifacts and reflexive pieces. Candidates pursue either a program-based or course-based approach, depending on which program they are enrolled in or how they feel their learning is best demonstrated. The CLA provides learners with both information and coaching by means of paper and electronic materials.

When portfolios are received by the CLA, they enter into a long process that includes pre-vetting and distribution to a team of assessors who have been selected according to the subject expertise demanded by the contents of the portfolio. Assessors follow explicit criteria in making their assessments and return their judgments to the CLA for review and compilation. As a final part of the process, CLA personnel determine the "fit" of assessors' suggested credit awards into the applicants' AU programs, ensure that all program requirements are accommodated, and notify both learners and appropriate university departments of the PLAR decision. The entire process can take as long as 6 months and is subject to the appropriate appeals process if PLAR recipients are dissatisfied with their results.

Challenge-for-credit

Athabasca University learners may choose, instead of preparing, a portfolio that demonstrates their knowledge through the selection, reflection, connection, and projection of

learning artifacts, to target a specific course for which they feel they already possess the required knowledge or skills. Working with the course professor, they engage in a contractual relationship to meet the challenge conditions that have been pre-established for the course.

Both challenge-for-credit and PLAR-by-portfolio processes are well defined by AU policies and procedures. By university standards, both are generous in the opportunities they offer to learners as alternative avenues for achieving course credits. Each process is clearly designed to reduce barriers to educational accessibility and allow learners to progress toward their goals as quickly as they can. More than that, however, AU's prior learning options are testaments to its acceptance and recognition of the endless diversity manifested by its learners.

PLAR AND THE RECOGNITION OF DIVERSITY

As played out in classroom situations, diversities are most often recognized and acknowledged based on visual clues or other very tangible evidence. Racial, ethnic, and gender diversities are often not difficult to identify, although observing the fact of diversity is only the first step in comprehending how those diversities contribute to an individual's sense of self. Without prioritizing types of diversity, or their relative importance to each other, it can be said that some types of diversity are more difficult to identify. Social diversity may be outwardly identifiable by wardrobe or other items related to material acquisition. But evidence of cultural or political diversities may lurk, unseen or unheard, well hidden in the teaching – learning relationship among peers and instructors.

In distance learning situations, diversities are further obscured by the absence of visual and physical clues. In open learning institutions such as AU, the fact that there are no restrictions to entering the university community increases the potential for diversity even more. The PLAR option, constructed to provide maximum access to university credentials for eligible learners, implicitly invites applicants to bring forth experiential and cognitive diversities and pledges to accommodate those diversities to the degree that such recognition is possible within the university's policy framework.

Although AU maintains the two "arms" of prior learning assessment – PLAR-by-portfolio and challenge-for-credit – through which learners are able to demonstrate their prior knowledge for university credit, it is the portfolio option that accepts most fully the scope and latitude of learners' prior knowledge. The challenge-for-credit option that is also available asks learners to bring forth their knowledge in defined packages that closely resemble the shape of the university's courses. The university professor responsible for a particular course is able to determine what particular package of knowledge will satisfy his or her definition of what the learning outcomes for that course should be. In other words, learners applying to have their prior knowledge recognized in this fashion are obliged to tailor their learning histories to fit into predetermined knowledge clusters that look like AU courses. While this is just one model of PLAR – and an acceptable one – it is not a model that gives learners the opportunity to celebrate or explore their diverse learning histories.

On the other hand, the portfolio approach to PLAR offers learners the possibility of a richer, more self-directed learning experience. Two caveats must be stated here: first, not all learners avail themselves of the pedagogical possibilities offered by the portfolio method. Secondly, the portfolio approach is necessarily guided by sets of university-provided criteria and outcomes. That said, portfolio criteria and outcomes serve as guidelines, as 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 in order to be successful in their petition.

Portfolio Assessment

In the portfolio process, learners undertake difficult and complex journeys as they mine the breadth and depth of their learning histories in bringing forward evidence of appropriate university-level learning. On the other end of the process, teams of content experts assume responsibility for assessing that knowledge and for determining its relevance to a learner's current program of study at the university. Assessors are also asked to respond narratively as fully as possible to the learner's portfolio presentation: What was missing? What strengths are displayed? How can the learner best complete his or her program in order to utilize past learning while at the same time remedying any perceived gaps in required knowledge?

As outlined by policy, assessors are looking for a minimum of a 60 percent overlay with either broad program outcomes or more specific course outcomes. The criteria that have been developed by each program contain levels of accomplishment for each listed criterion; roughly speaking, the levels of accomplishment mirror Bloom's Taxonomy. The benchmarks for meeting the stated outcomes reflect primarily the cognitive domain as most university-level learning that is put forward for assessment resides within the cognitive domain rather than in the affective or psycho-motor domains. However, at the program level, some programs have included more generic, or process outcomes, such as decision-making skills, critical thinking skills, or team communication skills.[4]

Assessors have a number of tools at their disposal to assist in the difficult assessment process. The relative ease or difficulty levels of their task hinges, of course, on how well learners have put forward their cases in their portfolios. Although a well-done portfolio can grow to become a formidable size, PLAR applicants are expected to have observed guidelines that caution again needless repetition, irrelevant documentation, or sloppy organization. It is incumbent upon the applicant to present a well-organized document that holds within it an appropriate structure and keys to finding one's way through that structure. To this end, portfolios currently end up often being three-inch binders with many colorful dividers and tabs to create direction and clarity.[5]

The central part of the portfolio comprises learners' collection of learning statements wherein, using Bloom's taxonomic verb structure, they arrange and display their knowledge in text form to satisfy the stated criteria. They meet the criteria using examples from their pasts that they have deemed relevant. Assessors triangulate learners' claims using a number of other documents within the portfolio: the resume, which outlines the learner's history chronologically; a statement of educational and career goals,

contextualizing past learning, present endeavors, and future aspirations; and the largest piece, the autobiographical narrative, in which the writer makes sense of his or her past experiences and links them to occasions of learning, to insights, and to the creation of the current career path. A transcript of past formal learning and program progress is also included.

A large part of any portfolio is composed of documentation that learners use to validate their learning claims. Documentation can consist of copies of awards, certifications, commendations, and the like. The more telling documentation are the Letters of Attestation, which are templated letters written on behalf of the candidate by those in positions to speak to the learning or skills that the applicant claims to have. These are usually supervisors or mentors. The Letter of Attestation is critically important to assessment. Substantially different from a reference letter, it must speak clearly and with authority to the demonstrated ability of the applicant to perform or to have performed, using the knowledge in question. Using all these vehicles, assessors move back and forth through the portfolio, holding up the applicants' claims of learning against the body of evidence that supports those claims. They note areas of excellence and achievement as well as areas of "not quite" as they corroborate learning with learners' insights and reflections about their learning and how that learning has contributed to performance and to personal and professional growth.[6]

Ultimately, the assessors' feedback reaches the CLA office. In most cases, three assessors independently review a learner's portfolio. Their input will identify either specific courses for which they feel the applicant should be given credit or a course area for which they feel the applicant should be awarded credit; how much credit the applicant should receive; courses that the applicant should *not* take, considering his or her areas of demonstrated strength; or courses or areas of study that they feel the applicant should incorporate into his or her program. Assessors also provide narrative commentary on the portfolio.

RECOGNIZING LEARNING, ACKNOWLEDGING DICHOTOMY

The portfolio process at AU is rigorously designed and carefully executed. While the challenge-for-credit process has less "design" built into it, it too provides a much-used vehicle for honoring mature learners' prior learning. Still, underneath these attempts to give adequate voice to experiential learning sits an inherent contradiction that is well understood by PLAR devotees and critics alike. Validating learners' experience, Avis Warrants (1995), could actually be a "conservative practice". Avis is not alone in asking the question, how are learners positioned within [institutional] notions of knowledge, experience and practice? As a corollary to the issue of "fit" within the institutional paradigm, both Harris and Avis also acknowledge that experience is not neutral. "An alternative is to see it as partial, socially constructed, highly contextualised and as already embodying knowledge" (Harris, 1999). Further exacerbating the unevenness resulting from learners' disparate experiential bases are the various discourses within

which learners are situated. Harris (1999) explained the problems that her institution identified as a result of these conditions:

> In effect...we required candidates who could write with authority in distinct genres and who could hold to a reflective/academic discourse. Candidates with different holding discourses (for example, narrative, corporate, customary) or no particular holding discourse, were less successful. We expected that...we could "move the Diploma discourse into people's heads, experientially"...we also floundered because we did not have the tools, authority (or perhaps even the desire) to, in effect, re-engineer the Diploma curriculum.
>
> (p. 125)

Fenwick (2006) summed it up well with this analogy: "When learning is understood to be continuously co-emergent with persons and environment...it simply makes no sense to treat knowledge as a product that is carried around like a handbag, able to spill its contents upon request by RPL assessors" (p. 298). Similarly, Michelson (1996) reflected on the nature of the self in creating, from experience, appropriate demonstrations of learning for portfolio assessment: "Where, precisely, are we standing when we "reflect," and what kind of self is constructed in the process?" (p. 449).

In like fashion, at AU, where a PLAR process has been built to respect and accommodate diversities in applicants' educational backgrounds, it is likely the process itself invites the realization of more fundamental diversities among learners as they attempt to "spill" their learning into an institutionally acceptable discourse. The fact that the institution tries to make *explicit* the academic standard to which applicants are striving does not in any substantial way lessen the contradiction.

I have outlined, thus far, an ironic tension wherein a process that was set in place to accommodate diversity, in an institution that exists to celebrate and receive diversity, places learners in the middle of a philosophical debate around issues of social diversity, empowerment, and the nature of knowledge. What learner could possibly foresee stepping into this dilemma upon engaging in the PLAR process? More to the point, how does an institution such as AU that is committed to reducing barriers to access wrestle with an irony that potentially permits barriers to be erected on the shoulders of another type of less explicit diversity?

First of all, it should be made clear that there is neither surprise nor disgrace in the fact that a post-secondary system should exhibit some level of ambiguity. Shale (1987), when writing some years ago about innovation in open universities, observed rather presciently that "the very nature of the open learning enterprise has forced the universities associated with it to be innovative in ways and to an extent rarely realized in conventional universities". He concluded this line of thinking by outlining how actual innovations became juxtaposed with unintended innovations – a natural outcome of simply being innovative. Shale buttressed his argument by pointing out that pioneer distance educator Charles Wedemeyer held that "'openness' is not an absolute quality but rather a range of possibilities". Since, as an open university, AU encompasses a dramatic range of innovative features, it is not surprising that AU's move to diminish diversities among

learners has in fact uncovered further layers of diversity. Still, the question remains, what is the university doing about it?

A foundational contribution to this discussion recognizes the argument around social diversity, empowerment, and voice as emanating from the critical pedagogies and radical practices of educators such as Freire (1972) and Illich (1970) who worked for social transformation through changed social structures. More recently, Michelson (2006) and Fenwick (2006) have written compellingly on the role of RPL practices and their relationships to power and the place of experience in knowledge. Without debating the relative merits of radical pedagogy and pointing out their own tendency to silence other voices (Harris, 1999), it can be simply stated that most publicly funded Canadian post-secondary institutions do not operate from – and most probably will never adopt – this philosophical stance. In fact, instead of moving *beyond* "an alliance between the market, individuals and providers [and] toward a broader alliance with group and social interests" (Harris, 1999, p. 135), Canada's post-secondary system has been recently moving the other way, away from the heightened social consciousness of the 1930s and toward market demand.

The political reality of an institution frames, to a large degree, the possibilities that are open to an innovative strategy such as PLAR. Against the backdrop of many types of diversity, the implementation of PLAR has the potential for a wide range of applications. As Usher et al. point out, "it offers a contestable and ambiguous terrain where different socio-economic and cultural assumptions and strategies can be differentially articulated. As a field of tension, it can be exploited by different groups, each emphasising certain dimensions over others" (1997, p. 105). At AU, PLAR administrators work to diminish the effects of potential exploitation, of imbalance, and of exclusion. We do this by the following ways:

Being informed. Understanding the nature of the dichotomy is critical to informed decision-making. Similarly, understanding the nature of the institution within which we work provides another important source of data.

Participating in collegial, informed debate. The university provides democratic, multi-layered fora for discussion and the provocative airing of issues. Through various fora, it is possible, and essential, to keep diversity issues at the forefront.

De-emphasizing the "diarist" element of the PLAR process. There is a tendency, among certain PLAR factions, to over-celebrate the self through extensive personal history activity. That said, Harris (1999) spoke of the relationships between personal biographies for self-therapy and of connecting personal experience to social history in meaningful ways. The challenge lies in finding a balance between the two approaches.

Focusing on critical reflection and meaning-making. At AU, we have found that one of the ways to de-emphasize the diarist approach to portfolios is to structure PLAR instruments that foster critical thinking and encourage the connecting of experiential critical incidents to life choices, especially educationally and professionally. AU's PLAR process has introduced a portfolio component called "framing the issue" wherein applicants

are invited to focus critically on how they have come to be where they are – in their lives, in their work, and in their studies. This particular part of the portfolio encourages movement from what Crites (1971) has termed the "mundane" to the "sacred"; understanding experience beyond the isolated, secular level. Helping learners to settle at this level of interpreting their experiences is intended to elevate their stories beyond the confines of some types of diversity. For example, a single mother wrote recently about her demanding personal schedule that included shuttling her sons back and forth to hockey practice and assuming multiple parental roles. In her reflection, she used those experiences to thoughtfully consider the value of her organizational skills and the resultant value she brought to her workplace and to inter-collegial relationships in the workplace. The management-oriented assessors who reviewed her work were very pleased with the elevation of potentially socio-economic specifics to a more generic, and academically relevant, level.

Promoting the PLAR process as a critically reflective learning activity. As an open university, AU offers its students several alternate routes that include the range of RPL activities. Typically, not just at AU but at many post-secondary institutions that challenge traditional learning models, the differences between engaging learners in assessment processes and evaluating past learning for formal credit transfer are not well understood. Following on the establishment of the reflexive vehicle outlined above, by which learners are encouraged to find the "sacred" meaning in their experience, the CLA promotes this PLAR as a process that offers an alternate way of learning.

Developing target criteria that "speak" to a variety of experiential backgrounds. PLAR criteria, especially when expressed at program level, provide learners with a framework that should facilitate their move from Crites' "mundane" to the "sacred". The resultant expression of this deeply thoughtful and complex process is ultimately cognitive in nature. Using Bloom's Taxonomy, writers capture the essence of their learning according to stated criteria. In concert, then, the taxonomy offers the possibility of presenting a hierarchy of demonstrated knowledge while the breadth of well-chosen criteria makes possible the display of a wide range of diverse experiences and backgrounds.

Helping portfolio assessors identify and accept a variety of interpretations of learning. The last part of the portfolio process involves the assessment of learners' work by a team of content-knowledgeable assessors, working independently. Locating, training, and working with assessors are critically important, not only to the PLAR process in a logistical sense, but to PLAR's qualitative potential in addressing the existence of socially embedded diversity. By the very nature of their training, most academic assessors are poised to think about imparting knowledge through teaching. Traditionally, this university structure is framed by courses, course units, and topics; and benchmarked with assignments and examinations. Through exposure to PLAR literature and examples of well-prepared portfolios that have achieved the desired outcomes, faculty assessors can come to appreciate the "diversity and divergence of knowledges, experiences, and meaning…and inclusion, rather than alternative forms of exclusion" (Harris, 1999, p. 136).

Providing a mentoring process for PLAR applicants. The items outlined above include expressions of theoretical and ideal conditions as well as operational procedures. The need for a responsive mentoring process for PLAR applicants underpins many of the strategies and conditions mentioned above. While a combination of Bloom's Taxonomy and clearly defined criteria may provide appropriate guidelines to PLAR applicants, gaps may exist between applicants' grasp of their experiential learning and their ability to capture that learning thoughtfully and appropriately. It is critical to provide mentoring opportunities where learners can receive assistance in bridging those gaps (Arscott et al., 2007). Experience has shown us that the iterative nature of this process is time-consuming and arduous, but extremely valuable and highly appreciated by learners.

The measures described here have been put in place to make the best possible effort to make "the criteria of judgement visible, and therefore potentially negotiable: for whose knowledge gets to "count"; for who may judge whom, and on what basis; for the procedures whereby knowledge is rewarded; and whose interests those procedures serve" (Michelson, 2006, p. 157). In doing so, the processes of recognizing prior learning implemented at AU address issues of diversity as best they can, working within the confines of a structured and established power hierarchy.

DIVERSITY AND DICHOTOMY: A BIGGER PICTURE

Currently in Canada, national and government perspectives on recognizing prior learning are being driven by economic concerns surrounding issues of globalization, immigration, foreign credential recognition (FCR), and projected labor shortages due to the impending retirement of the first wave of baby boomers. These are international concerns that are shared by European and other Western and industrialized nations, and the linkage of PLAR – in its capacity as a training model – to the economy is not a new phenomenon. As Peters pointed out when looking historically at RPL in the UK:

> Prior learning assessment and recognition practices have, in many parts of the world, been loosely – or not so loosely – tied to economic tides. In the United Kingdom, in 1979 for example, APEL was first introduced [when], faced with a demographic downturn among 18-year-old school leavers, universities were looking for ways of attracting different people, particularly mature students.

> (2005, p. 273)

In Canada, government efforts are focused on the benefits that PLAR can bring to the workplace. PLAR literature emerging from government agencies highlights the engagement of various stakeholders from government, from the workplace, and from learning institutions and other agencies, including the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), Forum of Labour Market Ministers (FLMM), HRSDC (cited as leading on PLAR), CIC, Industry Canada, sector councils, apprenticeship networks, regulatory bodies, employers, the Association of Universities and Colleges Canada (AUCC), the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), and the Halifax PLA Centre (Lake, 2005).

In the current initiative to populate a potential new workforce, government-backed initiatives are moving toward credentialing large numbers of under-employed and unemployed recently arrived – and soon to arrive – immigrant workers. The learning potential of prior learning has been overlooked in light of economic and political concerns. If the current emphasis on these activities successfully reflects the funding resources that have been put in place to ensure results (Goldenberg, 2006), the subsequent influx to the middle class should solidify a measure of citizenship that results from reputable employment and increased social responsibility (Selman et al., 1998).

It is ironic that the government's emphasis on the "credit exchange" (Trowler, 1996) model of PLAR offers the potential to diminish some measures of diversity among Canada's citizenry. Conversely, AU's educationally oriented attempt to obviate some level of diversity through the application of the developmental model of PLAR serves to surface more pervasive applications of social, political, and cultural diversity while the tangible outcomes of such processes are credit exchanges.

CONCLUSION

While the recognition of prior learning at post-secondary institutions in Canada is not widely practiced, it constitutes a solid plank in AU's mission as an open and distance institution. Although both challenge-for-credit and portfolio assessment strategies are used at AU, learners are best able to control their destinies and celebrate their diversities by engaging in the reflexive portfolio processes. As is exemplified by the onion in the familiar metaphor, however, peeling back the layers of RPL "demonstrates that RPL, like most apparently bounded educational practices, is also a lens for examining the most fundamental questions about the purposes and practices of education" (Young, 2006, p. 321). As demonstrated through literature and practice, there is little consensus to be found around issues of prior learning. Philosophical musings could conclude that, given its ambiguities, prior learning is well suited to an enterprise as fluid, mercurial, and diverse as learning.

The practice of recognizing prior learning will continue to challenge, and hopefully inform, post-secondary educators' perceptions of learning. At AU, the implementation of RPL will continue to give voice to both diversity and dichotomy as it offers learners an alternate vehicle through which to celebrate their learning.

NOTES

1. The completion of a current initiative to develop and standardize learning outcomes for all undergraduate courses at AU will put in place a seamless matrix of learning outcome literature, against which assessments of learners' knowledge can be made. The learning outcomes project is currently in progress.
2. This is a generalization that describes the majority of degree regulations. There are some credentials that vary slightly from this formula. Each AU degree, post-diploma degree, or certificate has been individually evaluated for its capability for advanced standing.

3. Policy is being brought forward to relocate a redesigned challenge-for-credit policy in the CLA.
4. Learning outcomes can generally be broken into two broad categories: those outcomes that reflect course content and those more tacit outcomes that are connected with generic learning skills. The generic learning skills resemble Canada's list of nine essential skills which in turn are often reflected in an institution's high-level listing of the kinds of employability skills they wish their graduates to hold upon completion of their program of study. In some programs at AU, the nature of the program dictates that these generic outcomes should be explicitly stated as learning outcomes. A good example is the Bachelor of Professional Arts in Communication Studies, where the ability to display well-developed communication skills is critical.
5. The portfolio process at AU is currently mainly paper-based. Electronic portfolios are accepted if the applicant has utilized a functional design. Materials on CDs are also accepted, both as the portfolio itself and as documentation for learning claims. Tapes, videos, and other examples of multimedia are also accepted as documentation.
   The university is currently moving toward the establishment of an e-portfolio platform for use in portfolios. It is anticipated that AU will be dealing with both paper portfolios and e-portfolios in the coming years.
6. Giving learners the opportunity to engage in this type of mature and intense reflection is recognized as a critical strength of the portfolio method of assessment. For PLAR to be recognized as a learning activity within the university, the generation of this type of reflection is essential. Here is one learner's feedback on this process:

> While I found the PLAR a very specific, detailed and time-consuming procedure, it was actually a piece of luck in disguise. Essentially it offered me, a part-time student, the following five advantages: an awareness of my previously acquired skills, improved self esteem, a better understanding of university programs and related coursework, possible future planning and most importantly, university credit.

> Using the PLAR procedure as an assessment tool allowed me to systematically order my formal and informal learning. Previous work experience, training, and education became *learning clusters* and, finally, *actual skills*. Numerous letters of attestation confirmed these skills.

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