

**PEI Trades Initiative:
Assess Learning where Learning Happens
by
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PLAR Evolving

Crisis has been called the “mother of invention,” for many good reasons. One positive crisis outcome from the 1980’s recession in Canada was the development of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). Originally designed as a process for formal and non-formal learning to be assessed for the awarding of academic credit in a post-secondary institution, PLAR faced an up-hill battle in many institutions as they (institutions) searched for new approaches to the assessment of learning that happened outside their structured programs.

Three decades later, PLAR continues to develop and expand; even the term PLAR itself is now more commonly known as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to better reflect the desired outcome for the process of awarding credit for what a person knows and can do. Now, in 2009, RPL not only helps in academic credentialing but helps adults achieve recognition for formal, informal and non-formal learning through workplaces, sector councils, regulatory bodies, and organizations. Commitment of RPL Practitioners and their sharing of best practices continue to provide a solid foundation upon which all RPL initiatives move forward in every jurisdiction in Canada. RPL continues to offer a transparent, viable process for assessment to skilled adults so they can articulate and receive recognition for their skills and learning no matter where that learning has taken place.

Trades Learning

In trade occupations, 80% of learning happens in the workplace over a 4 to 5 year period. Through a traditional “completed “ apprenticeship process, an apprentice graduates from a pre-apprentice program at a post-secondary institution, studies under a Journey person in a specific trade, and logs the required skills and hours on the job to qualify for entry into an annual Block/Period/Level of in-school training. Upon successful completion of a series of Blocks, (*which can number 3 or 4, depending on specific trade requirements*) and completing the required hours of apprenticing in a specific trade, the apprentice is eligible to write an Interprovincial exam. If the apprentice achieves a mark of 70% or more, he/she is awarded a Red Seal Certification which is recognized across Canada as the standard for mobility within a trade.

A person may take a different learning path to Certification such as: leaving high school and working in a trade job; not completing all the in-school trades training in yearly succession; not completing all in-school trades training within a 10 year maximum time frame; deciding they want to pursue Red Seal Certification after many years in a trade. When these tradespeople believe they have achieved skills and learning that meet industry standards and have met the hours required in a trade, they can apply to “challenge” the Interprovincial exam. With these paths, trades people may not be successful in their exam challenge. Two factors that can impact this outcome are skills gaps in Essentials Skills (ES) and Technical Skills (TS).

PEI Trades Research Project

A new initiative on PEI is developing tools to support Essential Skills interventions and Recognition for Prior Learning.

Trade Essentials, funded in partnership by the Pan-Canadian Innovations Fund and the PEI Department of Innovations and Advanced Learning, is a three year research project. Outcomes include

- development of Essential Skills (ES) and Technical Skills (TS) inventory tools
- contextualized curriculum for ES interventions
- RPL tools and RPL process to assist apprentices in receiving recognition for what they know and can do.

The Essential Skills Inventory provides researchers with an indicator of ES gaps a learner may have in six of the nine Essential Skills identified by HRSDC: Math, Technical Reading, Communications, Document Use, Computer and Writing skills. The Technical Skills Inventory tool provides researchers with an indicator of any technical skills gaps a learner may have. This information is then used to develop an intervention for learners using ES curriculum contextualized to one of the 13 trades designated in this project; Automotive Service Technician, Cabinetmaker, Carpenter, Construction Electrician, Cook, Industrial Electrician, Machinist, Metal Fabricator, Oil Burner Mechanic, Plumber, Refrigeration and Air -Conditioning Mechanic, Steamfitter/Pipefitter and Welder.

Recognition for Skills and Learning (RSL) in Trades... a new term for PLAR

Although most of the required learning in a trade happens in the workplace, it is difficult for a tradesperson to articulate what they know and can do when they want to further their career. They may decide to challenge the Red Seal exam or enter the apprenticeship program after they have worked for many years in a trade. Problem-solving, learning from colleagues, industry based training courses and programs are just a few ways in which an apprentice learns his/her trade. But, how does an apprentice know what is included in the full scope of their trade? And, how can a Journeyperson mentor the apprentice in the full scope of the trade? Answers to these questions are in the National Occupational Analysis (NOA) for a trade. Through the Trade Essential (TE) project, it was discovered that very few tradespeople know of the existence of the NOA. *(Only 2 of the first 106 research subjects had prior knowledge of the NOA.)*

An NOA is developed under the guidance of the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship (CCDA) by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). An NOA is a comprehensive document that identifies and groups all the tasks performed by skilled workers in particular occupations in every province and territory. The NOA is primarily used to develop curriculum for programs and courses and to prepare questions for the Interprovincial Standards "Red Seal" exam. Red Seal endorsement facilitates the mobility of skilled workers in Canada.

Professional Skills Record (PSR)...a new assessment tool for trades

Through the TE project, a "**Professional Skills Record**" (PSR) has been created. The PSR is a self-assessment tool in which the content of the NOA has been used to develop measurable competencies so an apprentice and journeyperson can track and assess learning where it actually happens - at the knowledge and skills level in the workplace.

The PSR was developed and then tested with tradespeople who participated in Trade Essentials programs on PEI. “Their (apprentices) input and recommendations were incorporated into the development of the PSR. Now, each and every competency in all 13 PSRs is being validated by a team of Red Seal licensed professionals in each trade. The result is that the PSR is now a tool of the trade...developed with the assistance of apprentices and validated by journeypeople in a trade,” says Gaelyne MacAulay, Recognizing Skills and Learning Coordinator.

The next step in the project is the development of a new PLAR identity for trades, **Recognition for Skills and Learning (RSL)**. MacAulay states, “this term was adopted to better reflect and connect with learning terms in trades occupations. I chose to develop the assessment tool (PSR) first and the process after. This allowed me to focus totally on the learner (apprentice) and the assessor (journeyperson) and build rigor into the assessment tool rather than focus on rigor in the (RSL) process.”

Because the PSR is based on Canadian standards in the NOA, rigor built into the tool itself and then validated in industry, Initial response has been very positive. Based on the fact that a PSR exposes the learner to the full scope of the trade, other applications for the PSR suggested by reviewers to date include

- making the PSR available to people wanting to emigrate to Canada so they can identify any skills gaps they may have and can begin developing a learning plan to fill these gaps
- using the PSR in pre-apprenticeship and trades training programs as a knowledge and skills tracking tool
- introducing the PSR into the secondary-school system to students who choose to take a trades course in high school.

A dissemination plan is now being developed to share all materials and tools being created through the Trade Essential project with all jurisdictions. The TS project is scheduled to wrap up in March, 2010 .

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The Automotive Service Technician PSR Validation Team dedicated a total of 15 hours validating the AST PSR. Hard at work in the board room at Transportation and Public Works Board Room in Summerside, PEI are Licensed Red Seal ASTs Cecil Banks and Scott Bagnall from Hemphill GM and Glenn Ellsworth, AST Trade Essentials Instructor. Team facilitator is Gaelyne MacAulay, RSL coordinator with Trade Essentials and CAPLA Board Chair..