

# Crediting Adult Learning

Bruce Spencer, Derek Briton and Winston Gereluk  
Athabasca University, Canada

**Abstract:** *This paper reports on the uncertainties and dilemmas experienced by three researchers as they continue to explore how informal and non-formal union-sponsored learning can be translated into college and university credits.*

## The Context

Incessant “restructuring,” “downsizing,” and “right-sizing,” coupled with the promise of “high-tech” jobs in a brave new “knowledge economy,” are forcing adults to engage in further and higher education as never before. That every adult brings a wealth of experience to the formal learning environment is a central tenet of post-Knowlesian adult education. But *experience* does not always equate with *learning*, especially of the academic variety. And as more and more college and universities institute Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) programs, adult educators are increasingly confronted by the question of how to fairly and accurately assess the educational merit of informal and non-formal adult learning. Union or labour education (sometimes referred to as union training) is arguably the largest source of non-formal, non-vocational adult education available to adults in the industrialized world. As such, it provides an ideal starting point to investigate the question of how the non-formal learning that takes place in union-sponsored programs, and the informal learning that accompanies various forms of voluntary union service, can be justly and equitably assessed and then “translated” into college and university credits. Moreover, the issues raised in relating the learning involved in these programs, and in union activity itself, to formal college and university credits are common to other forms of informal and non-formal adult learning.

Increasingly, “learning” is being promoted as a solution to economic and social problems. “Learning” is replacing “education” as the term of choice by politicians and business leaders, as evidenced by such terms as “learning society,” “learning organization,” and “workplace learning.” It is a shift that spans international and political boundaries – Blair’s Labour Government in the UK has declared the next century to be the “learning century”;

Klein’s Conservatives in Alberta, Canada, recently merged the portfolios of K-12 and post-secondary education and established a single ministry: Alberta Learning. This shift in emphasis goes far beyond semantics, however, as evidenced by the number of profit-driven organizations (not to mention private and corporate colleges and universities) that have infiltrated the workplace and educational arena and transformed traditional, institutional sites of learning. The proliferation of these new learning sites has exacerbated the problem of how to calculate the educational worth of non-formal and informal learning when learners seek to make the transition to the realm of formal learning (the domain of traditional educational institutions). These events have spawned a renewed interest in prior learning accreditation processes, generally referred to as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in North America.<sup>1</sup> The fact that so many politicians and business leaders enthusiastically endorse and support PLAR initiatives suggests they may well view PLAR as the mechanism they have been seeking to “sensitize” the realm of traditional education to the exigencies, priorities, and interests of the “real” world.

## Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

The process of PLAR is most often presented as theoretically unproblematic: the vast majority of research focuses on how to measure learning’s worth with clinical precision. Once this technical problem is surmounted, most advocates of PLAR contend that all that remains is the practical problem of persuading traditional educational institutions to accept PLAR credits. But there are those who caution that “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” (Hanson, 1997. p.11)<sup>2</sup>, and that the matter of convincing traditional educational institutions to

recognize prior learning will involve much more than simple persuasion.

Should adult educators embrace the largely uncritical process of prior learning assessment and recognition that the majority of PLAR advocates propose? It is a tempting option, since the PLAR movement appears to have the potential to topple the windmills of a traditional educational establishment that adult educators have long tilted at with little success. This paper argues for a more critical response to PLAR – one that embraces its value but nonetheless argues for a greater sensitivity to and understanding of the theoretical and empirical problems associated with PLAR. Not least amongst these is the understanding that 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. It is important that adult learning not be co-opted into a corporate view of what is measurable, exchangeable, and credit-worthy; and that the complexities and nuances of learning itself not be corrupted by ingenuous and largely instrumental PLAR processes. Adult educators have a proud heritage of defending democratic and liberatory adult education practices, for individual and social purposes. It is not the question of how expeditiously PLAR processes can be instituted that should concern adult educators, but how PLAR processes can be used to promote and foster emancipatory and democratic educational practices in an increasingly credential obsessed “learning society.”

This paper is part of an on-going conversation among ourselves and the adult education community and reflects our hesitant complicity with the ideas, people and organizations associated with PLAR and informal learning. For example, in Canada the now defunct Canadian Labour Force Development Board (this was a government-sponsored tripartite body until the employers abandoned ship) organized a series of national conferences promoting PLAR. While there were clearly different interests represented at the conferences (the last conference PLAR 99, held in Vancouver, November 1999, attracted more than 600 participants), there was nonetheless an ideology promulgated at the conference that PLAR was a “movement” shaking the very foundations of the educational establishment. Some participants appeared to be trying to outdo each other with their stories from the frontlines – for example how they used PLAR to

reduce a four year degree to just 3 half credit courses! Any questions about the appropriateness of the project were simply dismissed as hostile attacks from ivory towers.

Yet, it only takes a moment’s reflection to identify major problems with the notion of transubstantiating experiential learning into college or university credits. Most experiential learning is specific, related to a particular situation or problem adults are faced with, and does not easily translate into the kind of learning associated with academic courses. As we have argued elsewhere (Briton, et. al, 1998), experiential learning is not inferior to formal learning, it is different; there are times when it closely resembles academic learning, but there are many more occasions when it does not. How then do we measure learning in general? What are the standards? Can it be reduced to learning outcomes or competencies? Must we, in the process of establishing these measures, objectify learning, construe it in terms of measurable outcomes? In our efforts to grant credits for experiential learning are we turning its real, concrete worth (its use value) into abstract exchange value of little or no worth? If we add to this mix the idea that the beliefs and stated intentions of the parties involved are not a guide to what is actually happening then PLAR becomes theoretically problematic not the reverse.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of education is the promotion of knowledge, of learning, but it is increasingly becoming displaced by the need to have a credential. In an earlier paper (Spencer, et. al, 1999), we discuss a range of more practical problems associated with supporting the movement from “education to credential.” Learning, for instance, is undertaken informally to gain knowledge, understandings, insights and practical know-how. When such concrete, specific forms of learning are “assessed/translated,” they are turned into abstract, individualized credits that bear little or no relation to the concrete, socially-embedded practices from which they emerged. This mirrors the shift within traditional adult education that marked the demise of the non-credential course, perhaps with a social purpose, to an individualized credit-awarding alternative. Another often overlooked point is that most PLAR models only value informal learning that matches the formal curriculum. In this scenario PLAR does not become a process that helps focus attention on learning gaps but rather a process by which a potential student can avoid having to study

certain areas of knowledge. And of course the promotion of PLAR does nothing to resuscitate the democratic social purposes of adult education and learning. It has the opposite tendency, since it emphasizes the argument that learning should serve the individual needs of the global economy. That many PLAR initiatives are employer/workplace-driven and present a host of problems for workers is something else we explored in that 1999 paper.

### **PLAR of Labour Learning**

Moving from the general to the particular, we have noted from the beginning that we are not interested in PLAR of labour learning if that implies changing the social purposes of labour education or leads to an emphasis on individual participation in labour education and activity for individual gain. These issues are just some of the misgivings that PLAR projects such as ours arouse in most labour educators (Gereluk, et. al., 1998). Others include: if PLAR of labour learning is to be used to gain access to the colleges and universities will that simply result in incorporating their members into the mainstream ideology that emphasizes management and individual rights? Since union education is generally an enjoyable and liberating experience for most workers, what advantage is there, other than individual gain, to linking it into a system that sacrifices workers' interests for those of their bosses and the dominant patterns of control and organization at work? Many unionists, however, resent the fact that other forms of workplace learning, such as how to do your job more efficiently, or how to work in a team (or other aspects of the generally understood but rarely defined term "workplace learning") are readily transferable into college/university credits (often these kinds of provision proceed according to tried-and-true, formal education practices). This suggests that we need to establish a PLAR model that fairly assesses union provision without imposing the structures of formal learning on union programming. Such a model would have to be based on critically-focussed as opposed to traditional forms of formal education. The most obvious choice would be labour studies and labour relations courses at universities and colleges, or other critical social science and applied areas of knowledge. Labour studies and labour relations are rooted in practice and framed theoretically. The knowledge bases of these subjects are to be found in labour's experience at work and in society, therefore they are ob-

vious candidates for accepting PLAR credits.

Even in these circumstances, it may be that credit is used to give advanced standing rather than specific course exemptions—knowledge-type dependent. The point that should never be overlooked is that it is perfectly possible that an active union member and course attendee may not have considered all of the issues addressed in a *particular* university or college course. Although not specific enough for particular course-credit, such learning is of value and should be awarded some form of credit (in terms of elective exemptions or unassigned credit perhaps) that will facilitate the learner's advancement in college and university courses. This would allow critically-based but non-formally structured forms of programming to be assessed and granted credit without having to get into the theoretically questionable business of comparing "learning outcomes" between union and university courses. If the purpose of PLAR initiatives is to encourage working people to use the educational system their taxes support, we need to acknowledge that workers may have gained valuable knowledge and be willing to grant them some degree of formal standing. The merits of a PLAR initiative that affords workers the opportunity to transfer their socially- and critically-based forms knowledge into formal educational settings and, thus, to develop skills that will allow them to better contribute to their union and community should be obvious. This, moreover, is a pragmatic justification for crediting adult learning that is not based in dubious learning theory or in a zealot's advocacy.

### **Understanding Informal and Non-formal Learning**

One of the problems we have encountered when exploring PLAR issues has been a misunderstanding of informal and non-formal learning on which PLAR processes are predicated. Informal learning can be said to encompass all the learning that occurs when individuals or groups seek to achieve certain objectives. Tough (1979) tended to consider consciously-pursued learning projects as more significant than the incidental learning that occurs as a byproduct of other learning activities. Others give more credit to both conscious (explicit) and incidental learning but discount accidental (incidental and accidental are both deemed tacit) learning (see Livingstone, 1999, for a discussion of explicit and tacit learning). But could not all learning that occurs

outside of structured learning simply be categorized as informal learning, since how something is learned matters less than what is learned and what results from that learning. At an AERC plenary meeting in 1996, a somewhat exasperated Roger Boshier dismissed much of the literature on informal learning as “bullshit.” His point, it seems, was that lots of people learn lots of things during their lifetime, but so what? Mapping the incidence of adult learning moments tells us little about what they learned and what resulted from that learning. It also relies on self-reporting and is subject to suggestion when surveyed. Perhaps even more could be made of what is not learned, rather than what is learned, particularly in the realm of ideas and social actions. Absences can sometimes be more insightful than what is known.

Apart from these broader considerations, there remains the question of how to distinguish informal from formal learning. One leading educational researcher gave an example of informal learning taken from his experience in the following terms. He needed to take a particular course in order to gain entry to university, so he studied this topic in his own time, at his own pace, and outside of an educational institution. But is this informal learning? The curriculum was set, the learner had no say in what was studied, and had to sit an exam and be tested, as opposed to being “tested” by his experience. His purpose was not to advance his general understanding but to gain a credential. Clearly this is not an example of informal learning but of formal learning, albeit in an atypical setting.

Establishing a definition of non-formal learning has also resulted in some problems. The term is not particularly intuitive; its nomenclature is probably due to its juxtaposition to informal learning and formal education/learning. However its use in North America is widespread and causes few problems for adult educators, as it can be related to traditional understandings of what adult education is. Non-formal refers to not-for-credit courses and educational events that take place outside of recognized educational institutions and often have a social as well as an individual purpose. These historic forms of adult education continue in contemporary society. In a recent article Livingstone (1999, p. 50) argues that “three basic sites of adult learning are formal schooling, further education, and informal learning (see Coombs, 1985; Selman and Dampier, 1991),” effectively substituting “further education”

for non-formal learning/education, based on a misconstrual of a leading Canadian adult education text (Selman and Dampier, 1991). Livingstone fails to supply a specific reference but the section in Selman and Dampier that discusses “formal” and “informal” distinctions reads:

Current thinking about the way in which education, including adult education, is organized in terms of content and the relationship between the learner and the sponsor of activity sees the field divided into three main approaches, formal, non-formal and informal education. Such terminology is in use among educational planners at the national and international level. (1991 p.11; p.25 in the 2nd ed., 1998.)

In support of their position, Selman and Dampier footnote 2 sources, one of them being Coombs (1985). It is somewhat of a mystery why the term non-formal creates so many problems for those outside the sphere of adult education. The differences among informal, non-formal and formal learning/education are certainly not written in stone; nonetheless they are useful categories that make the description of our work easier. More importantly, perhaps, to describe labour education as “further education” is totally misleading.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Conversation to Date**

Our exploration of the theoretical and empirical issues surrounding PLAR has caused us to reflect on the nature of learning, the relationship between informal, non-formal and formal learning, and on PLAR itself. We find that although these reflections are worrisome, they have not discouraged us from believing that working people, their knowledge, and their institutions do deserve enhanced recognition and standing in the formal education system. Having extensively surveyed union education provision (Gereluk, 200; Gereluk, et. al., 2000) we are now even more convinced than ever of the contribution labour education makes to knowledge creation and democratic society. It challenges dominant ideology and in so doing it is both liberatory and emancipatory.

## References

- Briton, D. (1996). *The modern practice of adult education: A post-modern critique*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Briton, D., Gereluk, W., & Spencer, B. (1998). Prior learning assessment and recognition: Issues for adult educators. Paper presented at the *Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference*, University of Ottawa.
- Gereluk, W., Briton, D., and Spencer, B., (1998). PLAR of non-formal non-vocational education: Preliminary report on a labour education NALL project. Paper presented at the *Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference*, University of Ottawa.
- Gereluk, W. (2000). *Labour education in Canada: A field research report*. (unpublished, Athabasca University)
- Gereluk, W., Briton, D. & Spencer, B. (2000). Canadian labour education at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 14(1). (forthcoming).
- Hanson, K.S. (1997). A university perspective on PLA. *Learning Quarterly*, 1(3), 10-13.
- Livingstone, D. (1999). Exploring the icebergs of adult learning: Findings of the first Canadian Survey of informal learning practices. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 13(2), 49-72.
- Selman, G. & Dampier, P. (1991). *The foundations of adult education in Canada*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Selman, G., Cooke, M., Selman, M., & Dampier, P. (1991). *The foundations of adult education in Canada* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing
- Spencer, B. (1998). *The purposes of adult education: A guide for students*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Spencer, B., Briton, D., & Gereluk, W., (1999). From learning to credential: PLAR. Paper presented at the *Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference*, University of Montreal, 190-195.
- Tough, A. (1979). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in <sup>5</sup>adult learning* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Toronto: OISE.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the prevalent term in Canada; other terms 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.

<sup>2</sup> Such "technical requirements" are most often competency-based "learning outcomes," instruments that purport to measure the very "essence" of learning – that which all forms of learning supposedly have in common.

<sup>3</sup> See Briton (1996) and Briton et al. (1998) for a theoretical discussion of these issues.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of these terms see Selman, et. al., 1998, p. 25-26; Spencer, 1998, p. 23-24.