

## FROM LEARNING TO CREDENTIAL: PLAR

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

This paper will explore some of the problems, perspectives and practicalities surrounding Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

Cet article examinera quelques problèmes, perspectives ainsi que les détails pratiques concernant l'évaluation et la Reconnaissance des Acquis (l'ERA).

Our research for *Learning Labour: A PLAR Project* has caused us to consider a range of issues related to PLAR. It has also brought us into contact with PLAR advocates, many of whom are obsessed with the process and dismiss any criticism of PLAR as a basic attack on the principle. This is unfortunate. In our view a serious examination of such criticism can help strengthen the case for PLAR. If we can recognise the limitations of PLAR, then we can better focus on its possibilities.

There are a number of ways of assessing prior learning; these include challenge exams, portfolio assessment, and demonstrations of skills and knowledge (for a fuller definition see Thomas in Scott et al., 1998, pp.330/1). We will ignore transfer credit since this is essentially the transferring of credit gained from one institution's courses to apply to courses and programs to another. The essence of PLAR is the recognition of non-course learning, learning that is in most cases gained "experientially"<sup>1</sup>, perhaps as a consequence of other activity or sometimes resulting from private self-guided study. The recognition of prior learning can also include recognising learning in non-vocational, non-formal adult education and ascribing it credit.

At the core of many PLAR problems is a central contradiction of formal education that is writ even larger when considering experiential learning. The purpose of education is learning but the outcome of formal education is increasingly the credential. As a result many learners (and educators) substitute the credential for learning as their central objective. For those seeking PLAR credit recognition can become the only goal. Instead of using PLAR to focus attention on the gaps in skills or knowledge – what is yet to be learned – the emphasis is placed on maximising the number of courses the student can avoid studying. If it can be demonstrated that a student has knowledge of 60% of a course curriculum the PLAR advocate will argue they should be given the credit i.e. treated as a "pass." An instructor who responds by suggesting they should study the areas about which they have no demonstrated knowledge – the other 40% -- is dismissed as applying "double standards", for is it not the case that their students can pass with 60%?

There are lots of issues here, ranging from the minutia of how specific instructors grade and assess course content to the bigger questions of what is the purpose of course grades and what are they measuring? (For example, it could be argued that the formal education system simply provides a filter mechanism to grade future employees at public expense.) There are also implied questions about what exactly is being learnt; when an individual decides they need to know more about a certain topic in order to solve a particular problem, they are unlikely to be focussed on developing critical reading and writing skills. In most cases they are not going to seek out differing perspectives on a problem and then write an assessment of the arguments. In other words the kind of learning that is going on in most examples of experiential learning is different from course-based learning. It is not inferior learning, just different. That learning may well be

very valuable when undertaking course-based learning. But it may be quite legitimate to argue that the prior learning is sufficiently different that it cannot be credited as if the applicant had undertaken the course of study (for a more theoretical discussion of this issue see Briton et al., 1998).

From a traditional adult education perspective some of the issues involved are very familiar. If we take a broad sweep of adult education we find that credentialism has overtaken many formally non-credential adult courses and programs. Traditionally adult education could be defined as outside of the “post-secondary system”, courses were offered to achieve a number of purposes including social and community building, Canadian adult education can historically be defined as “education for citizenship” (Selman, in Scott et al., 1998). The outcome of the course was not to be measured by a “grade” but by the reflections and social actions of its participants. The learning could be individual and social but it was not assessed for the purposes of credit. As adult educators adjusted non-credit courses to allow for awards of credit they had to face up to many of the same issues that are associated with PLAR. A major challenge was to retain the social purposes and collective learning of traditional adult education practice while ensuring that the course would pass any external examination of its credit-worthiness. In some cases courses were abandoned or changed significantly in order to adapt to this new learning environment. It cannot be argued that in all cases this was “a bad thing” but it can be argued that, generally speaking, the learning objectives were changed to reflect what could be tested and credentialised. This same shift in emphasis -- from learning to credential -- can be observed in PLAR processes.

Although some critics of PLAR can be dismissed as elitists who argue that only course-based learning is real learning it is interesting to reflect on the PLAR process itself as one that only recognizes course-similar learning. When challenging for credit a PLAR applicant (sometimes misleadingly referred to as a PLAR student) will be counseled to emphasize the skills and knowledge areas that are similar to those that might be expected from a graduate of a particular program. If the applicant argues that she or he “has all this other experience, knowledge and skills and shouldn’t that count for something?” they will be politely told that that learning does not count; only the learning that can be credentialised counts. Similarly, if the academic assessor suggests that there should be recognition for this other knowledge they too will be told that can only happen if they can fit it into the agreed criteria.

This may be all that can be achieved given, the limited purposes of PLAR and the restrictive nature of some programs of study, but it should make PLAR advocates reflect a little more on the processes they are advocating. The measure of the relevance of an individual’s learning is a measure against whatever it is the institution is teaching. The learning that is being valued is that which most closely matches course content. From this perspective PLAR evangelists should not be characterized as radicals about to rock the foundations of education (Thomas, 1998)<sup>2</sup> but rather as conservatives entrenching individualized learning goals, expressed in terms of specific skills and compartmentalized knowledge that is unrelated to broader experience and understandings of society and ideas. Having already lost adult education to credentialism adult educators are about to lose adult informal learning to the same scourge! To put a positive spin on it, the problem for learners, educators and adult educators is how to keep *learning* at the heart of what we do while at the same time exploring how the prior knowledge of adults can be

recognized in the formal education system and beyond. (This can be seen as part of the argument for *Adult Education as Vocation*, Collins, 1991.)

Much of the energy behind the recognition for prior learning is coming from the workplace. The argument for PLAR of vocational skills comes in many forms and from many different directions. In some cases unions are arguing that their members are undervalued, that their skills and knowledge are not being recognized or rewarded; in other circumstances, employers are pushing PLAR, arguing that with PLAR in place training and credentialising can be speeded up and unnecessary duplication avoided; from another perspective, individual employees may want PLAR to enhance their promotion possibilities. PLAR of vocational skills may seem obvious and essentially unproblematic but there are still issues that need to be addressed. These include some of the “tolerable contradictions” referred to by Alan Thomas (1998, op. cit.) -- who will decide what counts and what does not, and will college enrolments fall or will PLAR boost student numbers? Some of the issues become many-sided; for example, what level of competence equals what skill, what is the relationship between apprenticeship and PLAR? (Individual workers, different unions and different employers may line up differently on such questions.) Will PLAR processes be used to restrict worker access to educational and training opportunities or restrict workers to employer-specific knowledge? Is PLAR a vehicle for employers (and governments) to claim they have a highly skilled workforce without having to provide training courses to actually achieve that objective? Are some of the more broadly based college programs threatened by a narrow focus on specific skills? If so, is there a clash between the interests of some faculty unions (opposing PLAR) and private sector unions (wanting PLAR for their members)?

Many of the issues here go beyond the scope of this paper; our focus is on the impact of PLAR on educational programs with a more academic content, although there are clearly areas of overlap. Should traditional academic institutions recognize prior learning and, if so, how can they do so in a way that does not compartmentalize knowledge? Traditional post-secondary institutions focussed on recruiting 18-year-olds may choose to ignore PLAR. But as institutions open the door wider to include older “adult” students and as they begin to accept that part-time study is legitimate, it makes sense to review what they are doing and how they are doing it. Why, for example, even have admissions criteria? Why not have an open door policy; recognize that adult students’ experience to date qualifies them to enter courses or programs? When designing course work, why not do it in a way that allows students to skim or skip those sections where they have prior knowledge? When designing assignments, why not allow students to blend their studies with their prior and current experience? Why not make the timelines flexible so students can move as quickly or slowly -- as their prior knowledge (and time available) demands -- through a course or program? All of these kinds of mechanisms recognize prior learning and avoid the problems of assessment.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the above policies, it may be possible to institute forms of PLAR which do grant advanced standing/course credits to students through the recognition that their prior learning is extensive and deserving. The rationale for doing this is simple enough, most certificate and degree courses are designed to ground students in an area of knowledge and assumes *no* prior knowledge beyond what could be expected from a high school student. Even when targeted at more mature students, they are mimicked on

programs of study designed for graduating high school students. Adult students may not need to undergo the exact same journey to arrive at the overall understanding of a particular subject area. For example, a student who has held a number of positions in her or his union over a number of years is likely to have insights and understandings that go beyond those that can be expected from the average 18-year-old. Or, indeed, those from another adult student with no such experience. If they are all enrolled in a labour studies program, it is likely that the student with a rich life experience can demonstrate credit-worthy knowledge relevant to the program (even if it does not match up exactly with the courses offered in that program). A similar argument can be made for students engaged in other areas of study. In the case of the labour studies student, it may also be possible to grant some credit for non-credit union education courses undertaken. This may result in a student doing fewer courses, but they will still have to take some -- it does not exclude the student from undertaking the hard grind of course work; from the tasks of critical reading and writing that is associated with academic work. What it does do is accept that learning outside of the academy is valuable and relevant; it may be different learning from course-based learning but it can, nonetheless, result in valuable knowledge, some of which will be credit-worthy.

Many PLAR advocates are keen to reduce all courses to a list of “outcomes” or “competencies” because they share a limited behaviourally influenced view of education and learning. (See Briton et al., 1998, for a critique of these approaches.) The argument that a particular course has been put together in order to challenge a student’s understanding of a particular area; or to develop critical awareness around certain issues; or to deepen insights; leaves them cold. For some courses it’s the journey that is important not a specific outcome. For example, a particular history or literature course may consist of reading a set of texts, carefully chosen for differing interpretations and designed to bring out contrasting opinions. Such a journey is unlikely to be traveled outside of the course. PLAR advocates should just accept that such a course is outside their remit. This kind of caveat is not to suggest that PLAR does not pose fundamental questions for the formal education system (as argued by Thomas, 1998, *op.cit.*, amongst others). For example, what exactly are the “core” areas of knowledge that constitute a particular degree; what is the relevance of “residency”; and why is a first degree usually a four-year program? Many degree programs simply accept existing conventions while others have not undergone significant rethinking for years. Institutions favour conformity, a suggestion that one degree program should be 120 credits and another 111 and yet another 93 would create organizational apoplexy! Comparisons with other programs would become difficult to systemize. Apart from the general challenge posed by PLAR, what it also allows for is the individual candidate to challenge the course program and maybe make it fit better with the areas of skills and knowledge she or he needs, and maybe undertake a 93 credit, four-year degree!

### **Learning Labour: A PLAR Project**

The research project, based at Athabasca University (AU), is part of the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) initiative headed up by David Livingstone at OISE. It has also received funds from AU and HRDC. To date most of the fieldwork (undertaken by Winston Gereluk) has focussed on collecting and mapping course information from Canada’s unions. We expect soon to be able to make recommendations

as to the credit worthiness of these non-credit courses: by producing a matrix that labour studies programs can use for ascribing credit within their particular program. We do not want this process to corrupt the original intention of the union courses -- we recognize that those courses have a social purpose and that the knowledge gained by the individual course members is a kind of “side-product” of collective educational activity (Spencer, 1998, pp. 96-110). Our argument is that union activists should be able to get credit for their learning if they so wish, and that such learning is relevant to college and university labour studies and labour relations programs. The granting of advanced standing may encourage union students to enroll in labour studies/relations programs and eventually, the students’ knowledge may feed back into union activity and organization.

In addition to assessing labour education data the project has begun to look at how we may assess learning garnered from union activity. We have used a fairly standard portfolio process to assess this experiential learning. We still need to evaluate whether or not this has captured the breadth of union experience once those portfolios are submitted and reviewed. At this stage, we do not have any great insights as to how we might avoid the disaggregation and compartmentalization of knowledge discussed above. The project has generated a number of by-products, one is a better understanding of labour education in Canada (Gereluk et. al. 2000); another is a clearer understanding of the limitations and possibilities of PLAR -- as discussed here. (Readers have to decide for themselves whether this is worthy of credit or recognition!)

## References

- Briton, D., Gereluk, W. & Spencer, B. (1998). Prior learning assessment and recognition: Issues for adult educators. In *CASAE/ACEEA Conference Proceedings*. (pp. 24-28). Ottawa.
- Collins, M. (1991). *Adult education as vocation*. London: Routledge.
- Gereluk, W., Spencer, B. & Briton, D. (2000). Canadian labour education on the cusp. *CASAE/ACEEA Journal* (forthcoming).
- Selman, G. (1998). The imaginative training for citizenship. In Scott et al *Learning for Life: Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 24-34). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Spencer, B. (1998). *The purposes of adult education*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Thomas, A. (1998). The tolerable contradictions of prior learning assessment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas, 1998 op.cit. has suggested that all learning, including course-based learning, is “experiential”. We understand the point he is making but feel the differences between the kind of learning activity and learning outcomes associated with a course of study and the learning activity and outcomes generally associated with non-course learning are significant. We therefore retain the term “experiential” learning to describe non-course learning.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas refers to PLAR as the “most radical innovation in education” (330, 341) but considers that it can also be “an instrument of seduction” (342) into the existing education system. We would argue that many PLAR advocates are happy with this limited objective of recognition within the education system.

<sup>3</sup> All of above are also characteristics of Athabasca University. Athabasca is an open university using distance education techniques, essentially catering for part-time adult students. It offers both 3 and 4-year equivalent degrees -- 90 and 120 credits.