

QUALITY IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION

A Background Paper

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Arhus, Denmark
April 21-22, 2010**

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INTRODUCTION

With increasing international recognition of the importance of lifelong learning in the development of healthy communities, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) has been proposed as a valuable way to recognize the knowledge and skills that people acquire outside of formal education. Over the past twenty years, government policies, academic research, community-based qualitative studies, and reports of real-life experiences have expressed general support for PLAR strategies. Yet we know that activity levels are low, and we read that this is in part due to questions expressed about quality - the quality of PLAR processes and the quality of non-formal and informal "prior learning". This paper will:

- ÿ Offer a practical definition of “quality” in PLAR
- ÿ Identify the pathways along which PLAR has evolved and the importance of quality
- ÿ Briefly describe the mechanisms that have been developed to promote quality and associated literature including documented concerns
- ÿ Introduce a broad strategic approach to PLAR using the concept of “communities of practice” to strengthen its quality

This paper is intended to serve as a background document to a presentation on operational strategies for quality in PLAR which will be made on April 21, 2010. For the purpose of this paper, *PLAR is defined as the assessment, validation and recognition of knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning.*

A PRACTICAL DEFINITION OF QUALITY IN PLAR

Attention to quality in PLAR has slowly grown in recent years as educational institutions, workplaces, professional bodies, and governments struggle to respond to lifelong learning’s increasingly global context, characterized by national qualification systems, increases in migration, and new practices in distance education and foreign credential recognition. But to date there is no general agreement on what we mean by “quality” in PLAR.

The literature of the European Union uses the term “quality assurance” to refer to mechanisms that will assure stakeholders of the quality of PLAR assessments. In this paper, I use the term “quality” for the simple reason that in some jurisdictions (e.g. Canada), “quality assurance” focuses on measures used to ensure continuing, in-service competence of individual professionals.

Thus here, the term “quality in PLAR” refers *to the establishment of an environment and the implementation of policies, processes and assessment practices that maximize individuals’ opportunities to fully and accurately demonstrate relevant knowledge, skills and competencies.* This definition is simple but not simplistic. It embeds important principles of accessibility, transparency, accountability, and validity. It implies that standards of knowledge, skills, and competencies will be used but it allows for the negotiation of what will be considered relevant. This definition focuses on the individual as the most important stakeholder. It can be applied to each of the pathways along which PLAR is currently traveling but some may say its weakness is that it does not intrinsically link these pathways.

PLAR'S HISTORICAL PATHWAYS

If we select the 1930's as the starting point for PLAR (i.e. France 1934), we can trace at least four pathways in its implementation. The first pathway is institutional development of processes, methods and tools for individuals to demonstrate their knowledge and skills for educational program admission,

academic credit or exemption. On this pathway, most educational institutions maintain their traditional control over what learning will “count” for formal recognition. For example, an individual with knowledge and skills in the field of early childhood education (ECE) might apply for exemption from part of an ECE degree program by demonstrating achievement of institutionally-established course or program-based competencies.

A second pathway PLAR is taking involves assessment and recognition of knowledge and skills in the world of work. It directly and explicitly involves third parties (e.g. employers) in negotiating the value of prior learning and the impact that assessment results will have. For example, an individual with competencies in early childhood education may apply for employer recognition through a national qualification competency assessment in the workplace.

A third pathway in PLAR’s evolution is, at least in Canada, in the area of professional licensing. Immigrant professionals seek to demonstrate knowledge and skills they have acquired primarily through work in their home countries in order to qualify to write Canadian professional licensing examinations. Control over what learning “counts” in these cases is firmly in the hands of professional regulatory bodies that set the standards and conduct the assessments. For example, a regulatory body for early childhood educators may use the occupational competencies created by the profession as the criteria for assessing whether immigrant child care workers’ knowledge and skills are equivalent to those required to graduate from Canadian college programs.

A fourth pathway that PLAR is taking has been less institutional and more personal - even private. It involves the assessment of self - individual reflection on one's experiences and derivative learning for the purpose of greater self-knowledge as well as personal planning and career development. On this pathway, the individual has control over what prior learning will “count” in decision-making. For example, an individual might develop a portfolio of learning achieved through work and personal study and through a process of assisted or independent self-assessment, decide to change career paths from early childhood education to geriatric home care.

These pathways represent contexts in which PLAR has been developed and decision-making on recognition has been dominated by different parties – educational institutions, workplaces, regulators of professions, governments, and individual candidates. Each of these stakeholders is likely to have their own ideas about what constitutes quality and its importance. The literature and research provide some evidence of why “quality” is important based on perceived benefits of PLAR to stakeholders.

IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY MEASURES IN PLAR

The best lens through which to examine this issue is a practical one that takes into account the values and actions of the stakeholders. Research and experience over the past 20 years have shown us that there is pedagogical, practical, and political value in investing in the quality of PLAR (Van Kleef, 2010).

Importance of Quality Measures in Employment

Our collective experience with PLAR in the workplace is more limited than in other contexts particularly education; consequently our knowledge base on quality measures is less developed. However, project-based qualitative research and some international practices suggest that workplaces are using PLAR to improve the size and quality of their existing workforces, and take greater advantage of the knowledge and skills of immigrants. In the National Qualification system of Australia for example, quality in RPL is addressed by clearly articulated competency statements, accreditation of assessors, direct involvement of the workplace in assessment, and the use of authentic assessment methods and tools that meet the principle of “fitness for purpose”.

Quality factors in PLAR are multiple and closely linked. There is a need for systematic analysis of current workplace PLAR practices, particularly in terms of who is designing and conducting assessments and providing candidate support, the criteria against which candidates are being assessed, the methods being used, and the medium and long-term impacts. These are among the most critical factors in evaluating the quality of PLAR in any context. Further, as workplaces become more familiar with PLAR and its reliance on human judgment, the extent to which it is used will depend in part on the level of trust developed among the relevant stakeholders.

Importance of Quality Measures to Adult Learners

Research particularly in the context of education, has shown that an overwhelming benefit to PLAR is the sense of value it gives to adults for learning they acquire through life and work experience. In a study of 1,000 community college students, Aarts et al. (2003) found that PLAR enhanced learners' self-esteem, confidence in their capacity to learn, and motivation to complete programs of study. It also promoted learners' access to postsecondary education. By awarding academic credit or advanced standing, it saved students time and money.

In a study of Canadian university students, Thomas, Collins, and Plett (2001) reported that PLAR was a significant factor in learners' decisions to return to formal education. Aarts et al. (2003) found that adult learners considered PLAR to be an important factor in their decisions to complete their college programs. This finding is supported by Pearson (2000), who studied several hundred part-time students who were eligible for PLAR credits over a ten-year period as a result of assessments of portfolios. Pearson's findings indicate a strong association between successful portfolio assessment and student persistence: PLAR doubled the odds of persistence for an average student.

Mullen (1995) found that students who participated in PLA had more effective study habits and attitudes than students who did not. Factors included in the study were promptness in completing academic assignments; lack of procrastination; freedom from wasteful delay and distraction; effective studying procedures; positive attitudes toward teachers and their classroom behaviour and methods; and acceptance of institutional objectives, practices, and requirements. Freers (1994) studied PLA at a community college in the United States and reported that 70% of respondents reported a greater number of employment opportunities as a result of the PLAR process and 55% attributed offers of better-paying jobs to PLAR. Furthermore, 69% anticipated an increase in the amount of salary that they would probably earn in their lifetime as a result of the process.

These benefits of PLAR to the individual are lost if the process is not used by individuals, their institutions, and their employers due to concerns about its quality and credibility. Further, PLAR candidates will be set up for failure if the quality of the process is deficient.

Importance of Explicit Quality Measures to Policy-Makers

From a government policy perspective, the value of PLAR rests in the opportunity it presents to accelerate labour market entry and employment, facilitate immigrant integration and social inclusion of marginalized groups, and promote strategies that support lifelong learning. These goals are unlikely to be met if the quality of PLAR assessment results are not trusted.

In New Zealand for example, strategies to ensure the quality of assessments have had a challenging history. In 1993, the national government adopted a policy that, in the interest of quality assurance, all qualified education providers must apply for special accreditation to provide RPL services. That policy proved unsuccessful and was subsequently revoked (Mills, 1996). In 2003, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) adopted the principle that skills and knowledge acquired outside formal

education and training must be recognized, and as a result, assessments of prior learning have been integrated into the processes that flow from the National Qualifications Framework. The NZQA relies on the accreditation of training providers and on audit and moderation processes to ensure that RPL is conducted with quality assurance. As is the case in most countries, PLAR assessors are not required to have special qualifications for RPL. Instead, they are recruited for their skills in selecting and using diverse sources of evidence for all kinds of assessments. In terms of higher education (excluding universities), individual institutions are also responsible for implementing RPL and ensuring its quality. According to the NZQA, RPL processes are rarely used (NZQA, 2004).

Social Importance of Quality Measures

In the field of adult education, PLAR is more than a vehicle for improving institutional access, granting academic credits or advanced standing, and recognizing occupational or employment potential. Thomas (2000) argues that the implications of PLAR are revolutionary because it highlights the difference between learning and education, and challenges the historic distinctions between the education of the young and the education of adults, and between formal and non-formal education. According to Thomas, PLAR acknowledges the creation of “important” knowledge outside the educational system and calls into question the previously exclusive right of closed systems to control the learning environment. The implications of such a change of attitude are far-reaching for society.

Michelson (1997) expresses a more radical view in the context of recognition of prior learning’s (RPL) potential to transform South Africa’s former epistemology of apartheid. Michelson argues that recognition of prior learning could foster radical social transformation “because it destabilizes the division between ‘intellectual’ and merely ‘manual’ labour and thus undermines the hierarchies of class, race and gender that support and are supported by that divide.” She contends that RPL recognizes that learning is acquired through immersion in human activity and not in socially isolated contexts” and “it challenges the monopoly of knowledge that is the hallmark of the traditional academy.” In other words, the value of learning is not solely determined by academia. Michelson and other critical theorists (Harris, 1999) are quick to observe however, that so far, institutional control of much of RPL implementation has not permitted this kind of challenge to traditional academic control.

Two of the four pathways of PLAR development described earlier here, fit snugly into Harris and Michelson’s descriptions of traditional control – the pathway led by educational institutions and the pathway led by regulated professions. Any measure of quality in PLAR that awards such control to organizations over individuals would be rigorously critiqued by critical theorists as a challenge to PLAR and its transformative value to adults, particularly in terms of the prevailing arguments in regulated professions that tight control of standards and processes is necessary to protect the public.

These philosophical debates have taken place primarily in the context of education. Their application to PLAR in the workplace and professional licensing remains essentially unexplored in the literature but they add another dimension to the discourse on quality – one that includes the candidate in the negotiation of the process – for example in determining what constitutes relevant knowledge, skills and competencies and what validation methods and tools are most appropriate.

The multiple contexts in which PLAR has evolved and the range of stakeholder interests in quality provide a reasonable explanation for different priorities related to quality. The fact that PLAR can serve multiple interests creates a challenging context in which to develop effective quality-focused mechanisms. The following provides a snapshot of the leading steps that have been taken to establish common approaches.

A PATTERN OF QUALITY-FOCUSED MECHANISMS

The quality of PLAR processes is not typically something that a government in Canada would get involved in. It is viewed as too operational - something that deliverers should be responsible for rather than policy makers. As a result, there has been no government participation in any initiatives that address standards or quality in PLAR. There are no specific national, provincial, sectoral, institutional, or occupational quality criteria or mechanisms. This of course, is a problem which leaves all existing PLAR processes vulnerable to criticism, skepticism, confusion, resistance, and disinterest. Why should any individual or organization engage in PLAR if the process does not have clear and specific quality mechanisms? Canada is not alone in this regard, but several other countries have taken different approaches.

There are five main mechanisms through which quality in PLAR has been addressed internationally¹:

1. legislation (Denmark, Czech Republic)
2. government policy (Australia)
3. collaborative mechanisms (United Kingdom, Scotland, SEEC)
4. institution-based mechanisms (United States, Canada)
5. indirect stakeholder support (CAEL, EU)

In some cases, these mechanisms are combined. For example, in Norway national legislation is combined with institution-based quality mechanisms; in Ireland national policy has established principles and operating guidelines and higher education institutions have been asked to use them in developing their own procedures.

Each of these five mechanisms plays a positive role in promoting PLAR quality but they are scattered and unexamined. Their content and specificity vary. Legislation usually expresses general statements of support and expectations for multiple sectors but provides little specific direction; government policies often take the form of principles and guidelines with plenty of discretion awarded to those who set standards and deliver assessments; in a few cases, policies are much more prescriptive, providing quality-focused committees and councils and accreditation requirements for practitioners in education and the workplace. These can be cumbersome and costly. Collaborative mechanisms tend to be in postsecondary education providing specific, operationally-oriented voluntary measures; and institution-based quality mechanisms are frequently but not always embedded in practice rather than explicit. Indirect stakeholders such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the United States provide the field with research-based recommendations for PLAR quality in education.

A closer look at the artifacts emanating from these mechanisms combined with some of the limited research literature on quality in PLAR helps us to understand the level of attention it has received to date.

ARTIFACTS AND LITERATURE ON QUALITY IN PLAR

The international literature on PLAR identifies quality as an important element that requires greater attention. However, it tends to focus on descriptions of current or proposed practice, and provides little analysis of current quality measures' contribution to organizational development or accountability, or their impact on practice and uptake. The literature can be loosely placed into three categories: policies and codes, qualitative and quantitative research, and training materials and resources for practice. The following examples collectively provide a picture of how quality in PLAR is addressed in many countries.

¹ See Van Kleef et al. (2007). Quality Assurance in PLAR: Issues and Strategies for Postsecondary Institutions

1. Policies and codes
 - *European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning*, (2009)
 - *The Covenant: A Quality Code for APL – Identifying and Accrediting a Lifetime of Learning* (The Netherlands, 2007).
 - *Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning*, Scottish Qualifications Authority (Scotland, 2004)
 - *Revised SEEC Code of Practices for the Assessment of Prior (Experiential) Learning* (England, 2003)
 - *A Framework for Quality in Irish Universities*, (2003)

2. Research (qualitative and quantitative)
 - *European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning - 2007 Update*, (April, 2008)
 - *Quality Assurance in PLAR for Postsecondary Institutions: Volumes I & III* (Canada, 2007)
 - *Quality Assurance Practice in the Provision of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Higher Education* (South Africa,, 2007)
 - *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: OECD Country Reports* (2007)
 - *AP(E)L in Irish Higher Education: Findings from an Audit of Practice Undertaken as an Activity within the Socrates-Grundvig Research Project VaLEx Valuing Learning from Experience 2003-2005*, (2004)
 - *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of PLAR* (1999)
 - *APEL for Post-compulsory Education and Training (PCET) Practitioners* (England, 1998).

3. Training and resources for practice
 - *Quality Assurance in PLAR for Post-secondary Institutions: Volume II* (Canada, 2007)
 - *Maximizing Confidence in Assessment Decision-making: Resource Kit for assessors*, (Australia, 2002)
 - *Prior Learning Assessment: A Guide for University Faculty and Administrators*, (Canada, 1996)
 - *Models of APEL and Quality Assurance* (England, 2002)

Despite the publication of these and other contributions to the literature, PLAR's limited uptake has been constrained by resistance from stakeholders expressing concern about the quality of PLAR and the quality of prior learning (Schlusmans, K., Joosten-ten Brinke, D., & van der Klink, M. , 2005). These concerns warrant closer examination.

CONCERNS ABOUT PLAR QUALITY

Who exactly has expressed concerns about quality in PLAR and what are they saying? Documented research on attitudes toward PLAR has been focused primarily in the education sector but it is instructive on what could equally apply in the context of employment or professional licensing.

During consultations on Canada's study on quality in PLAR in education (Van Kleef et al, 2007), it was found that quality of the process was not a major concern of adult learners. Interviewees and focus group participants for example, tended to trust that their assessors were qualified to assess their prior learning. PLAR research has produced no evidence that candidates are looking for quick and easy ways to obtain credit or other forms of recognition.

However, deeper probing of the research reveals that a lack of confidence in the process has been a persistent concern expressed by post-secondary educators and researchers throughout the world. For example, in Australia Wheelahan et al. (2003) found that concern about quality in the outcomes of RPL assessments was the key anxiety among educators. Assessments were seen as too subjective and variable. Eighty per cent of teaching staff and 71% of administrative staff surveyed called for clearer quality assurance mechanisms. Hargreaves (2002) also reported a lack of confidence in the PLAR process and the high risks associated with invalid judgments as barriers to RPL implementation.

In the United States, apprehension about the quality of non-formal and informal learning has also been reported. A common concern is that recognition of prior learning will lower standards, and thus place institutional credibility and the integrity of credentials at risk (Butler, 1993; Halberstadt, 1986; Harriger, 1991; Merriam and Brockett, 1997; Preston, 1981) or set learners up for subsequent academic failure (Harriger, 1991).

Also included are the belief that postsecondary institutions are intended to focus primarily on teaching and learning and only secondarily the issuing of credentials (Swiczewicz, 1990); the belief that classroom experience is essential to college-level learning (Harriger, 1991; Swiczewicz, 1990; Topping, 1996); the belief that adult learners are no different from youth and require no special teaching and learning strategies (Topping, 1996); and apathy by faculty and administrators about accommodating the special needs of adult learners (Harriger, 1991; Raulf, 1992; Topping, 1996).

None of these concerns have been verified by quantitative or qualitative research. A number have been dispelled. For example, we know that successful PLAR candidates are successful academic performers in their subsequent studies (Pearson, 2000). The research also suggests that quality concerns impair the assessment process. Murphy (2004) for example, found that faculty concerns about the quality of APEL assessments can lead to excessive assessment and overly cautious policies and procedures that exacerbate already time-consuming, labour-intensive assessments. The study noted that academic resistance to APEL can lead to requests for unnecessary documentation and restrictions on the type of evidence accepted.

Although concerns about PLAR quality in the literature are focused primarily on the educational sector, their impact on stakeholders in other sectors should not be underestimated. Employers in some skilled trades for example, work closely with the education sector in developing standards and curriculum, and providing sites for work placements. The level of trust between these two sectors can influence the credibility of the PLAR process and its assessments. There is a need for a shared understanding of PLAR and the foundations upon which it built.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR QUALITY STRATEGIES

Fundamentally, PLAR's conceptual roots are found in constructivism – theories grounded in the belief that individuals construct their own knowledge through reflection and action. There are several areas of constructivist learning theory that are positively aligned with PLAR and have implications for quality assurance. Two of these relate to the role of experience in learning and theoretical perspectives on the assessment of learning (Van Kleef, 2007).

The conceptual links between experiential learning theory and PLAR are reasonably clear. Experiential learning theory contends that learning activities should reflect as closely as possible the real world settings in which practice takes place; so too should the assessment activities that verify learning. PLAR practitioners who use experiential learning theory to inform their practice attempt to simulate real life because they believe that the more authentic an assessment activity is, the more likely it is that a person will be able to display their learning in actual practice. PLAR assesses actual real-life learning, that is, competence developed through experience. Educators and employers who place a high premium on

experience as a source of learning are likely to find conceptual kinship with one another and with PLAR (Van Kleef, 2007).

Although there is little specific literature on quality in PLAR assessment methods and tools in the workplace or general engagement in civil society, we can draw on research literature to identify perspectives that align with PLAR in these contexts. Theories supporting authentic assessment are particularly supportive. Authentic assessment is the measurement of an individual's ability to use previously acquired learning to perform tasks or solve problems by applying essential knowledge and skills to real-life situations (Mueller, 2005). Mueller helps to establish authentic assessment by arguing that learners construct their own meaning of the world, and must have the opportunity to demonstrate how their constructed meanings meet learning expectations.

In accordance with these theoretical perspectives, the concept of quality in PLAR includes practices that embed a shared understanding of the academic requirements of educators and the real life needs of workplaces. Strategies that encourage positive relations between linked stakeholders can play a role in developing support for PLAR and trust in its quality. One of these strategies can be found in contemporary research on communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

PLAR: A PRACTICE WITHOUT A COMMUNITY OR A COMMUNITY WITHOUT A PRACTICE?

Lewin (1952) said, "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" and this is an appropriate time to draw on the practicalities of theoretical research on communities of practice and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to inform PLAR (Konrad, 2009). A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who engage in and learn about the same enterprise as they build relationships through regular interaction, and shared activities and information. CoPs are not intrinsically beneficial or harmful. They may be part of a larger community of interest. Building on Wenger's (1998) research, we can identify several potential communities of practice in the field of PLAR. For example, a group of PLAR assessors working in the same industry who engage with each other in their day to day work (consciously or not) and draw on one another as sources of learning create a kind of coherence that forms a community of practice. These assessors may also be part of a larger PLAR community of interest of practitioners, counselors, administrators and policy makers that takes shape as a network or an association.

Key strengths of communities of practice are their potential to develop shared understandings, consistent ways of doing and decision-making, and a sense of identity that provides incentives for learning. Communities of practice can facilitate problem-solving, initiate change and engender trust. Their strengths can also be weaknesses that can entrench negative behaviours and prejudice and create mistrust.

Nurturing positive communities of practice promotes their strengths, creating a loosely structured tool for communication and consultation and for the development of trust between communities. Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice have core participants (people performing the same activity), and peripheral participants (people on the margins who want to become core participants). I would suggest that they may also have intermittent participants – individuals who fully engage in a community for a particular purpose over an extended period of time, but do not carry out the practice that defines the community as a primary role. An employer group working with an assessor community of practice to develop, maintain and deliver appropriate PLAR methods, tools and venues is an example of an intermittent participant.

PLAR is well positioned internationally within a large community of interest. However, active communities of practice are a challenge to find; not because the practice does not exist, but because it is so often conducted in short-term projects or isolated contexts, with such small numbers of ever-changing

personnel, that the development of identity as a community (as defined by Wenger) is difficult to achieve. These contextual limitations also constrain PLAR proponents' abilities to establish lasting relationships with other communities of practice or with stakeholder groups that could develop communities of practice. The absence of these committed relationships limits the development of shared understandings and trust in the PLAR process. The four pathways that PLAR has taken are not intrinsically separate. They are linked through common policy objectives, stakeholder groups, methodologies and the trajectories of individual candidates. Negotiating broader social acceptance of PLAR and confidence in its quality may be enhanced through the proactive nurturing of communities of practice and the strengthening of links across its historical pathways.

SUMMARY

I have suggested through this paper that the importance of quality in PLAR is clear. Students need to know that they are adequately prepared for future study and employment. Educators need to know that academic standards are being maintained and that the process is an enriching one for students. As employers expand their use of PLAR, their investments in the process become more obvious and they will demand evidence that the quality of the process and its results are a priority. Workers want to know that the results of their assessments have value in the workplace and that the process will support them in planning for the future. Regulatory bodies must ensure that professional standards are met and that PLAR processes do not jeopardize public safety. All of these stakeholders must be able to rely on the results of PLAR assessments.

Several strategies have been used to promote quality in assessment. Current measures range from legislation to specific organizational practices. They are sometimes clear and straightforward and at other times vague or implicit. Although PLAR is aligned with contemporary theories and practices on assessing learning, expressions of concern about quality come primarily from higher education. While quality measures should not be undertaken only in reaction to concerns, they too must be addressed. Research needs to continue particularly with respect to quality in PLAR in the workplace. Social acceptance of and trust in PLAR might be advanced if positive communities of practice are nurtured. Societies that have histories of successful cooperation among stakeholder groups may be at an advantage in positioning communities of practice as sources of quality development and demonstration.

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