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Valuing Diversity: Prior Learning Assessment and Open Learning

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Introduction:

Public expectations of education in the last decade have been shaped by falling job expectations on a global scale and a general longing for something better. Most universities in Canada are facing sharp cutbacks in government support, dwindling resources, growing public scrutiny, and student consumerism. Prior learning assessment (or PLA) is one of the many changes proposed for post-secondary education that has the potential of benefiting both adult learners who are in the workforce or re-entering the workforce as well as learners from the conventional age group of recent high school graduates.

The growing demand for colleges and universities to implement PLA systems is a reflection of the desire of adults to obtain recognition for learning that has been achieved beyond the confines of the classroom. This recognition is sought for the purpose of obtaining entrance into and advanced placement in various post-secondary education and training programs. This is a phenomenon that is not limited to Canada. Here in the United Kingdom, it is known APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning); in Australia and New Zealand, it is called RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning).

In Canada, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board has, in the past year, advocated the use of the term Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). PLAR is defined as "a process of identifying, assessing, and recognizing what a person knows and can do"; as a process, PLAR can "take various forms and the outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to the goals of the individuals, the labour market partners, and society at large." The Board sponsored the first national forum on PLA in the fall of 1995 and will be sponsoring a second forum in October 1997. Some adult educators (including the author) have some reservations about the proposed acronym PLAR, anticipating that the "IC" (recognition) component may dilute the empowerment potential of the process - PLA is a valuable self-assessment tool for the individual, regardless of whether (credit) recognition is granted.

The concept and the processes of PLA present to the higher education community many familiar issues about learner access and support in a somewhat unfamiliar form. This paper will attempt to summarize the concept and process of PLA and identify some of the common aspirations and challenges shared by the prior learning assessment and open learning movements.

PLA as a concept and process

Prior Learning Assessment, when applied to post-secondary education, is a systematic process to evaluate and accredit learning gained outside formal educational institutions, by assessing relevant learning against the standards required by post-secondary courses and programs. The

process enables students and potential students to obtain recognition for learning which they have achieved through both formal and non-formal learning, including learning achieved via work experiences and other life experiences such as self-directed learning, artistic and cultural pursuits, volunteer community activities or travel study.

The term "experiential learning" is often used in conjunction with the non-formal learning that adult learners achieve via concrete experience. Experiential learning has been prevalent in Europe since the dawn of Christianity. The most dominant modes included apprenticeship training by craft guilds, "chivalry training" held in courts, and private learning in monasteries and abbeys. These modes were slowly replaced by more formal systems as industrialism developed and modern occupations took the place of crafts. In the 1930s in North America, Dewey (1938) emphasized the need for experiential learning or "discovery learning" in the natural sciences. It was the returning veterans from World War II who put pressure on the formal education system in the United States to recognize alternative sources of learning. This pressure resulted in the development of standardized examinations to facilitate admission into higher education programs, namely, the College Level Examination Program. Following the recommendations of the 1971 Commission to Study Non-Traditional Education, a small number of universities and colleges in the northeastern United States co-operated with the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, N.J. to investigate a variety of means for the valid and reliable assessment of experiential learning (Keeton, 1979; Rose, 1989).

It is now commonly agreed that prior learning achievement includes all those things individuals know or can do at the point where they decide they wish to obtain recognition, that is, to become formally qualified in an academic or professional area through a credential awarded by a recognized post-secondary educational institution. The prior learning that is presented to the institution for evaluation can be categorized into two major forms of learning - formal learning and non-formal learning. The distinction between formal and non-formal learning lies primarily in the source of control and the degree to which the learners and community stakeholders are allowed to influence the production and transmission of knowledge. In formal university study, faculty traditionally evaluate learning on the basis of learning experiences they design and control.

Institutions which offer PLA services usually make use of three types of assessment methods. The three types can be summarized as:

Examinations: standardized
 challenge

Equivalencies course
 program

Portfolio-assisted PLA:

Documentation and demonstration of achievement via a portfolio, which can be supplemented by: interviews
 oral and /or written tests
 demonstrations

The first two types, examinations and equivalencies, have been used in post-secondary education for many years. They have been applied for the purpose of admission into a course or program, obtaining transfer credit from one program to another, or for gaining advanced standing in a program. The third type, portfolio-assisted PLA, is increasingly used to assess non-formal learning from work and/or life experiences. Compared to examinations and portfolios, course or program equivalencies do not provide for assessment of individual learners. It is the instruction in the previous course or program that is being evaluated or recognized. In Canada, there is increasing awareness that the recognition of foreign credentials is vital to the socio-economic integration of immigrants, especially those who have acquired post-secondary level education and professional training. Several provinces have set up foreign credential assessment services.

Portfolios are especially useful for documenting non-formal learning achieved in uncredentialed contexts. A completed portfolio indicates the learner's ability to reflect on and analyze learning experiences, to apply learning from specific experiences to new contexts, and to identify the relationships between the experiential learning and the formal courses. The process of writing and organizing a portfolio is developmental; it can lead to a deeper understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses and assist the learner in prioritizing personal and academic goals (Wong, 1995).

Different institutions may vary in their guidelines for portfolio development, but learners are usually expected to go through the following steps:

- Reflect on significant life events and activities that have been influential (e.g. personal experiences, work experiences, community service, artistic or cultural pursuits);
- Summarize these achievements in a written "autobiographical narrative";
- Prepare a statement of educational, career and personal goals;
- Identify learning outcomes from the autobiographic narrative and cluster them into areas of competencies;
- Review institutional calendars and course outlines for comparable expected learning outcomes and competencies;
- Match personal learning to a specific course or program;
- Describe or "delineate" each cluster of learning, summarizing what knowledge, skills and values have been acquired and how they have been acquired;
- Collect and assemble the materials that will be used as evidence of learning, including direct evidence (e.g. samples of work done) and indirect evidence (e.g. letters of reference; certificates of completion);
- Compile all of the above items in a binder (two or more copies may be required by the institution)-,
- Submit the portfolio to the designated institutional representative.

Many universities and colleges in the United States, particularly those that were created to serve adult learners, offer portfolio development courses for learners. Such courses are also offered by some Canadian institutions, on a more limited scale. Participants usually spend several weeks and sometimes a whole semester preparing and organizing a portfolio before submitting it for evaluation by one or more faculty assessors. Portfolio development courses can be of great assistance to those students who lack a knowledge of university writing conventions. By using the vehicle of the personal learning portfolio, individual learners can receive an orientation to

different fields of study, as well as develop skills such as defining problems and synthesizing material into coherent, critically interactive arguments.

Universities and PLA: challenges and opportunities

In Canada, the college sector has been much more active than the university sector in the implementation of PLA. This could be attributed partially to the fact that many college programs have a vocational focus and are structured with reference to competency-based standards. On the other hand, university programs are traditionally structured according to the overall architecture of the major disciplines, such as the humanities, the life sciences, and the social sciences. Curriculum development begins with a focus on what faculty ought to teach in terms of the major concepts, principles and methodologies of the academic area and the discipline. Many university faculty abhor competency-based standards, believing that true learning is holistic, not segmented into discrete facts and skills applicable only to specific tasks. Liberal arts education is, after all, they argue, premised on giving students a comprehensive foundation for lifelong learning upon which they can build the knowledge and expertise they may not, even at this point, know that they may need.

Supporters of PLA believe, however, that university faculty can re-consider existing curriculum content without compromising this underlying philosophy of a liberal education. Course and program structures and processes can be reconfigured to match the intent and spirit of PLA - that is, to recognize that adult learners can achieve academically relevant learning from several sources, from both formal study and the active use of relevant work and life experiences. For example, faculty can review issues such as:

- Are there alternative routes through the program other than the currently prescribed sequence?
- Are a subject's content and processes absolutely dependent on the prerequisites stated or are they merely a continuation of tradition?
- Are the courses described in terms of expected learning outcomes and are there clearly stated criteria for assessing levels of achievement?
- What options are there for students who successfully demonstrate mastery of skills commonly taught in advanced courses but do not have the theoretical underpinnings?

A major task facing faculty who participate in PLA is to achieve balance - a balance between respecting the applicants' adult experiences and aspirations and effectively guiding them in their formal learning in a constructively critical way that maintains the standards of university education.

Examples of Canadian Initiatives

Several Canadian universities have initiated programs which respond to the adult learner demand for programs that are accessible and flexible with regard to location and scheduling, and programs that integrate a system of prior learning assessment. Various groups of learners have been attracted by the potential to achieve time and cost savings through verification and recognition of their knowledge and skills. Time savings can be achieved when these individuals are exempted from taking specified courses which offer similar content, thereby shortening the time required to obtain a degree or other credential. The potential for cost savings depends

largely on the fee charged by the institution for the assessment service and the exemptions or advanced standing granted.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, Simon Fraser University has developed a new Integrated Studies program within their Bachelor of General Studies degree program. It is a highly structured cohort-based program to meet the specific needs of specific student groups. In 1996, the participants included employees sponsored by CP (Canadian Pacific) Rail and BC Hydro. By building on varying levels of previous post-secondary education and related workplace-based learning, the program facilitates the completion of the degree program in less than the normal 120 credit hours. A strength of this program is the opportunity for institution-industry collaboration that could integrate the goals of learners, employers and institutions.

A consortium of western Canadian universities, including the universities of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Victoria jointly developed a distance-delivered program called the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE). Portfolio-assisted PLA is an option open to the participants, many of whom already have a degree but are now making a change into careers that are related to the facilitation of adult learning. Individual learners may choose to go through a portfolio-assisted assessment and receive prior learning credits toward the elective block of the program. At the University of Saskatchewan, where over 80% of the CACE participants live at a considerable distance from the university, PLA candidates receive an Application Guide which explains the process and provides guidelines and examples. Candidates are encouraged to attend a one-day weekend workshop which provides further demonstrations and small group practice. Individual coaching is provided at a distance until the candidate is ready to submit a portfolio. At the University of New Brunswick where a PLA option is provided for students in a Bachelor of Adult Education program, follow-up coaching is provided via group audioconferencing.

In the province of Ontario, ten schools of nursing jointly offer the Nurse Practitioner program, a post-baccalaureate certificate program. The ten schools began their collaboration based on their common need for quality assurance and improving access to continuing professional education, but were also motivated by the government's financial support for PLA. Portfolio-assisted PLA is an option available to nurses whose formal training matches 60 percent or more of the curriculum. Assessors of the portfolios are drawn from stakeholder groups in the community and must go through four days of assessor training. Each participating school is represented by one individual on the coordinating committee but the assessment process is centralized at the University of Ottawa.

PLA and open learning: common aspirations

The PLA and open learning movements share common aspirations in their efforts to persuade the higher education community to focus on the needs of learners as the pivotal point for planning student services. Supporters of PLA recognize that prior learning usually involves a blurring of the boundaries between formal and non-formal learning. Adult learners who request PLA will likely have acquired academically relevant learning from several sources. PLA is premised on the recognition of learning arising from both formal study and the active use of relevant life and work learning experiences. The focus of the assessment is on the *quality and level* of the learning, not *how and where* it was initially acquired.

Open learning is premised on providing a range of choices for learners - choices in terms of access:

where they learn (place),
when they learn (time),
how quickly they learn (pace);

and in the curriculum:

what they learn (content),
how they learn (methods),
how their learning is evaluated (assessment)

Both PLA and open learning recognize learner freedoms in terms of access to learning. Supporters in both movements hope to make higher education available to new groups of learners who may not otherwise consider entering post-secondary educational institutions. In Saskatchewan, these potential learners include aboriginal (First Nations) students, who make up the fastest-growing group within our schools. At the same time, both PLA and open learning aim to provide more flexible pathways to learning for both potential and existing learners. The latter group includes increasing numbers of conventional-age students who are taking fewer courses per academic year in order to work part-time to support themselves.

Practitioners in PLA and open learning share a common challenge - both movements need large numbers of faculty and staff who understand the concept and the processes and are personally committed to first, participate in professional development activities, and then, to contribute their expertise and experience in enabling the adoption of innovations. It is fair to say that Canadian universities are far from achieving a critical mass of faculty and staff who are knowledgeable and supportive of PLA. Faculty and staff development workshops in PLA are beginning to be a feature in instructional development programs at some Canadian universities. While most faculty agree that academic structures that create flexible learning pathways for students is a laudable goal, in reality, the mindset of "if you didn't learn it from me, you never learned it!" is still strong. One strategy that has been quite successfully is to get the members of an academic department to reflect on and discuss a set of questions related to their own learning and the assessment practices in their subject areas (Wong, 1996). For example:

- How did you learn what you need to know to teach the subject you are teaching now?
- How did you learn what you need to know to fulfil your other academic roles such as research, professional practice, administration, and public service?
- What do you notice about the balance between formal and informal learning?
- In your subject area, what are the relationships among the formal curriculum document, the usual teaching/learning practices, and the current assessment practices?

Even as progress is being made in getting more faculty and staff on side, an equally important challenge is to get learners to commit themselves to preparing and submitting a portfolio of prior learning for assessment. While many learners are attracted by the potential of getting recognition for prior learning achieved elsewhere, relatively few complete the rigorous steps of portfolio preparation. Many students choose to take additional courses rather than to go through the process. Likewise, where open learning is available, many students find it easier to attend traditional lectures than to make decisions about what, when, and how they learn.

Conclusion

PLA share with open learning the potential of simultaneously addressing a whole range of issues, including access for diverse groups of learners, course and program content and structures, modes

of teaching and learning, modes of program delivery, assessment procedures, and the nature of evidence of learning.

PLA, when applied to post-secondary education, places emphasis on the reliable and valid assessment of learning as a prelude to giving recognition. The energies of faculty are directed to finding ways of assessing what has been learned outside the educational institution and making judgements on whether the learning is relevant and equivalent to the content and processes that students are expected to learn in specific courses and programs. In making decisions about giving recognition for prior learning, faculty assessors are concerned about issues such as:

- What is the nature of the learning?
- What evidence of learning is available?
- What strategies are appropriate to evaluate the learning?
- What criteria should be used to judge the quality and level of the learning?
- How much credit should be awarded?
- What is the relationship of the award to the degree requirements?
- How should this decision be recorded?

When faculty and administrators systematically and sincerely respond to these questions, they are more likely to shift away from traditional modes of practice and service provision. The exercise of drafting an institutional policy on PLA can provide the impetus for a review of program delivery and administrative systems that are more learner-centred. This is a potential outcome that will, in the long term, strengthen the acceptance of open learning systems.

In Canada, where distances between large (and small) population centres are vast, distance education is a more familiar term than open learning. Educators generally understand distance education to refer to the methods, technologies, and support services used to deliver education to students who for various reasons cannot attend classes on-campus. Current PLA services such as portfolio-development courses stand to gain grassroots support if the methods and technologies of distance education were used to make the services more accessible. Audioconferencing and computer-mediated communication are both widely accessible among Canadian institutions, but the latter is hampered by the lack of a common platform used by materials development teams.

PLA is receiving increasing attention from both the federal and provincial governments because of its potential impact on workforce development. Several provincial governments have drafted or are in the process of drafting policies on PLA. However, the limited number of university pilot projects to date indicate that the post-secondary system as a whole needs to be much more flexible or "open" in order to facilitate large-scale implementation of PLA. In the U. K., the open learning movement appears to have gained strong support over the last two decades. It may be timely for supporters of the PLA movement in Canada to learn from the U. K. open learning experience strategies for recruiting allies and champions.

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