

PLIRC Database: A New Tool for PLAR Scholars, Practitioners and Policymakers

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In a context of global changes in demographics, technological advancements and regional shifts in economic conditions, our workplaces, educational institutions and communities are being transformed. Among these transformations is the evolution of national policies on lifelong learning coupled with the development of processes for prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). For example, as a mechanism that facilitates the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired outside of formal education, PLAR is involved in the design and implementation of national qualification systems in 60 countries across Europe, Africa and Australasia (Bjornavold, 2007; Werquin, 2010).

PLAR has an ability to mine available and unrecognized knowledge, and can contribute in meaningful ways to individual prosperity and economic competitiveness. However, high quality research is needed to serve as the basis for robust and vigorous PLAR policies, processes and practices.

Currently, there is limited theoretically-grounded research in PLAR and a general lack of international dissemination. A substantial amount of applied research has contributed to public policy developments in specific geographic regions, but this research is fragmented, often small scale, and neither peer reviewed nor published in scholarly journals. The result is, with few exceptions, a theoretical foundation for PLAR that has grown little over the past 20 years and a tendency to duplicate research rather than to consolidate or build on previous studies. Moreover, research has frequently been undertaken from different, sometimes narrow disciplinary perspectives and the field lacks a means of creating synergies that transcend such boundaries. These realities combine to create a field of scholarship that needs multidirectional linkages and enhanced knowledge flow.

To address these challenges, the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC)¹ at Thompson Rivers University, Canada, has entered into a partnership with the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) and SUNY Empire State College. The partnership is creating a single, PLAR-focused, full-text database to provide easy access to research studies and act as a link between researchers, public policymakers and practitioners. The three partners hope that this new resource will encourage more and better research and collaboration across jurisdictions and disciplines. The idea to develop this database is an example of the kind of collaboration that is possible when people in the field are aware of joint interests. As the lead organization for PLIRC, Thompson Rivers University is interested in encouraging scholarly inquiry and PLAR research in the international context.

SUNY Empire State College has established *Prior Learning Assessment Inside Out* to explore PLAR's theoretical underpinnings and help legitimize PLAR as an important and distinctive area of critical inquiry. Planned as a regular feature of *PLAIO*, a database news section highlights research findings of significance to the PLAR field. Through the publication of articles, reviews and resources made available through the PLAR database, Empire State College aims to inform the work of researchers, practitioners and policymakers in ways that have never before been possible.

CIRL, which also has a substantial collection of PLAR research, has successfully negotiated a no-cost

acquisition of the software on which the European Observatory on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning is based, and has agreed to contribute both its research collection and the software to the project. The European Observatory is a PLAR database recently established through collaboration by 24 countries in the European Union and coordinated by the European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN). The European Observatory contains a large and growing body of full-text documents on PLAR laws and regulations, statistics, policies, practices, case study research, descriptive national reports and relevant websites in each EU country. At present, it contains only non-peer reviewed literature.

The PLIRC partnership is modifying the European Observatory software to enhance the search capacity and create a database that will hold similar data but also incorporate peer-reviewed academic literature from the developing international PLAR research community. It is also expected that both databases will be linked virtually, and it will be possible for both groups to exchange research discoveries. Project development commenced in earnest in 2011 and will initially focus on pilot testing a common conceptual vocabulary using research from the countries represented in PLIRC. The addition of other resources from countries with emerging PLAR research such as Malaysia and China will also be explored. The partners also hope to continue their positive and cooperative relationship with EUCEN to support the building of an international community of scholars in the PLAR field.

Updates on the status of the PLIRC database will be posted at <http://www.tru.ca/distance/plirc.html>.

Note

- ¹ The Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC), established at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in 2009. PLIRC's mission is to stimulate innovative, provocative and rigorous research in PLAR. It brings together PLAR scholars from different countries (Australia, Canada, England, France, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden and the United States) and different academic disciplines (adult education, economics, educational psychology, educational policy, human resource development). TRU maintains a regularly-updated PLIRC website and hosts a members-only electronic Discussion Forum, as well as providing technical facilities and support for web-based virtual meetings.

References

- Bjørnåvold, J. (2008). *Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe: A snapshot 2007*. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP. Retrieved from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4073_en.pdf
- Werquin, P. (2010, February). *Recognition of non-formal and informal learning: Country practices*. Paris: OECD. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/22/12/44600408.pdf>