

Back to Work: PLA/PLAR and Workplace Learning

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We must not forget the roots, the very origins, of the assessment of prior learning. The [first issue of this publication](#) focused on social justice, and how the recognition and assessment of prior learning, as part of a larger educational movement, has sought to provide redress and open access into higher education. In this new issue of *PLAIO*, we begin to explore another root of prior learning assessment (PLA): the recognition of verifiable learning gained on the job for both workplace credentials and for higher education.

Indeed, historically, and in many contexts, the recognition of prior learning actually began in the workforce development sector rather than in higher education. It has been the exigencies of the labor market – shortages in skilled workers and the increasing mobility of the workforce in particular, as well as the demand that what workers know and the skills they possess should be acknowledged and honored – that have driven the PLA/PLAR (prior learning assessment and recognition) movement. As Patrick Werquin has noted: The “... recognition of non-formal and informal learning is at the top of the agenda everywhere because countries are faced with the same questions and issues about the labor market: bad demographics, high unemployment, unqualified labor force ...” (Werquin as cited in [Mandell & Travers, 2012](#), para. 10).

Until recently, prior learning assessment practices for the labor market and for higher education were separated. These areas were seen to meet different and unrelated needs. However, as has become clearer and clearer across the globe, there is an even greater need to link these two contexts in order to help individuals qualify for the world of work, whether through workplace or higher education credentials. In effect, PLA/RPL has taken a more prominent role in responding to the lack of a qualified, more highly skilled workforce, and to the experience of many workers who seek formal recognition for their training and on-the-job learning.

This issue of *PLAIO* begins to take up some of the practices, research and theorizing about the recognition and credentialing of workplace learning. What is offered here is far from a complete picture of what is taking place worldwide; still, we hope these materials will provide a sampling of some of the efforts. We want these invited papers, interviews, peer-reviewed essays and practice articles to encourage others to think about PLA/RPL practices and opportunities in their own environments and to share these efforts and the questions that emerge from them. There is something of an underlying argument here: It is that the intersections of PLA/RPL in workforce settings and in higher education will become more obvious, more attended to, and seen as more critical, with the proliferation of efforts at every level of government and policy formation to increase both degree completion and employability.

PLAIO issue 4 includes two interviews with PLA/RPL leaders in North America: one with Pamela Tate, president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and the other with Bonnie Kennedy, executive director of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). Each provides background on projects in which her organization has engaged with PLA in the workplace that, together, reflect what Tate describes as a “changing landscape” inviting of the “promising practices” that Kennedy and CAPLA have championed. In addition, each offers her vision of a further coming together of workforce and higher education practices that identify competencies and recognize the value (for employers and employees)

of transferrable skills.

Leif Burglund's invited essay, "A Model Concerning the Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in the Workplace," builds on his research in Sweden that points to the tensions between "traditional" PLA/RPL practices and the efforts of organizations to develop meaningful workplace assessment strategies. Particularly valuable is the author's dissection of the very notion of "competency" with its "explicit and implicit fields" and his posing of a lingering question: What skills – if any – will, in the end, be "validated" by the employer?

The second invited paper is co-authored by Robin Millar and Sarah Miller. Their piece provides descriptions and analyses of collaborative work with two industries in re-tooling displaced workers. The authors focus on efforts to help workers (one example is of pulp and paper workers, the second comes from those involved in auto assembly) translate their experiences into the language needed for higher education to recognize that learning. What, they ask, is the role of higher education in "working with industry to prepare adult workers for education?" And, just as importantly, what can higher education learn from workers themselves about the often sophisticated learning that they have gained on the job?

Both peer-reviewed essays in this issue examine efforts at very different universities to help students articulate their work-based learning. Jessica Kindred from the School of New Resources of The College of New Rochelle in New York (USA) has done research using a sociocultural approach to portfolio development (including "turning Bloom's taxonomy upside down"!) in order to "harvest" the unique characteristics of work-based learning of her students. The second peer-reviewed essay by Jon Talbot discusses work at the University of Chester (U.K.) that has taken the assessment of work-based learning and combined it with an academic program for "integrative studies." This paper provides interesting insight into the development of a particular program, as well as strategies for adapting this process at other institutions.

In our "practice" section, this issue of *PLAIO* includes three examples. One by Diane Treis Rusk and Lauren Smith, from the University of Wisconsin System (USA), provides a useful description of their approach to bringing together 15 institutions within a single statewide system to embrace and implement PLA options for its students. Their work provides a model for any institution looking to reshape what had been a "piecemeal approach" to PLA/PLAR for widespread acceptance. Another practice article by Janice Karlen (LaGuardia Community College, New York, USA) explores the important role of faculty in "the development of internal articulation agreements between the workforce training programs ... and academic programs." And a third piece by Thomas Kerr (The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, SUNY Empire State College, USA) shares his experiences working with 13 members in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union, translating their learning into academic terms. These practice pieces are rich with experiences and provide many insights into the issues and solutions (however tentative they may be; the spirit of experimentation abounds) faced by everyone engaged in the recognition and assessment of prior work-based learning.

In addition to all of these materials, *PLAIO* issue 4 includes a journal review, an "Ask a Question" section (that includes the responses of six practitioners to the question of "current and future trends in the evaluation of workplace learning"), and our effort to continue to make an array of resources available to our PLA/PLAR community. As noted earlier, all of this represents only a sampling (we hope a provocative one) of topics, tensions and questions relevant to this vital area of PLA. In the coming years, debates on myriad issues related to workplace learning will, we believe, only intensify, as will the already heated discussions about the role of higher education and the complex relationships between the workplace and school. All of us need to be a part of this talk and this work.

We hope this collection will stimulate your thinking and encourage others to write about their practices, research and critical observations of the field. We welcome your comments within the journal. Please [register](#)

yourself as a reader in order to easily use the “Add Comment” function.

Reference

Mandell, A., & Travers, N. (2012). A second chance for qualification: An interview with Patrick Wequin. *PLAIO*, 1(2). Retrieved from <http://www.plaio.org/index.php/home/article/view/35/62>