

Breaking Down the Silos: An Interview With Bonnie Kennedy

Nan L. Travers and Alan Mandell, SUNY Empire State College, New York, USA

Bonnie Kennedy is the executive director of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), Canada's national organization for prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). She was the lead for PLAR at the Canadian Labour Force Development Board in Ottawa in the late 1990s and later became the interim national coordinator for the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC). Kennedy's background includes college faculty roles and special initiatives in women's programs, labor adjustment and recognition of prior learning (RPL). She is an active volunteer and community member, through past elected office and on boards of directors at the local and national level. We spoke with Bonnie Kennedy on 31 January 2014. What follows is an edited version of that discussion.

Nan Travers: Some of our readers will not know about CAPLA and some of the things that you have done, as well as the vision that you have for the future and how that interfaces with both higher education and workplace learning.

Bonnie Kennedy: CAPLA has always been a practitioner organization and it would be fair to say that it's the only national organization focused on PLAR. CAPLA appeals to stakeholders from different sectors because the overarching goals and messaging are really the same. It's about providing better access and opportunity to adult learners who want or need to have their prior learning valued and recognized formally. The organization has been about strengthening RPL in the country and strengthening peoples' attachments to the labor force so they can manage the inevitable bumps along the way that have been even more present when employment is as precarious as it is today. We gather once a year for our conferences to bring together stakeholders such as RPL practitioners, regulators, researchers, public policymakers, career practitioners, employers, immigrant integration and settlement counselors and indigenous educators, so we can all recharge our batteries and learn from each other. In this sense, CAPLA is one of those brokering organizations that has appeal to a broad network. We know that the fundamentals are basically the same: People want quality-assured processes, they want to have access to education and training, and all of us want to have our learning valued. For example, we know that career development is one of the most important areas that we need to be looking at because those employment and academic advising and counseling services are the first step in an effective RPL process. We also know that many adults need help in articulating their informal and nonformal learning so it can be assessed and recognized. For example, immigrants often get advice about education and work when they come to Canada, or sometimes even before they arrive. We also know that adults who lose their jobs and need to be redeployed into the labor force often require help. We know PLAR can be beneficial because it is a way of making invisible learning, visible. The familiar "iceberg metaphor" is great because it enables us to acknowledge all the hidden learning adults have, that lies beneath the surface. Recently, Nova Scotia supported a project in the field of career development that included RPL standards and certification for career development practitioners. We know that RPL is one of the tools that can be used there. By supporting the use of PLAR with counselors, it augments the work they already do for their clients, while also increasing the competencies within that group of professionals so they can add to their own learning repertoire. So among others, we have advisors in education, immigration, career development, industry and human resources management, all of whom are in key positions to provide advice on prior learning.

Alan Mandell: Can you help us understand CAPLA's efforts to link workplace learning and the recognition of prior learning?

B.K.: Throughout the 1990s, CAPLA focused a lot on academic areas, with the hope and promise that by recognizing the skills of adults within higher education, increases in uptake, opportunity and transferability would occur. We knew it would be useful for those individuals in the workplace to get academic credit, which in turn would improve their chances for a credential and ultimately, better employment. The fact that it did start within the academic community was a step toward better outcomes for both adult learners and job seekers. But I think the question here is about how learning that is acquired at work, in the community and through life experience is evaluated. It's fair to say that the evaluation of workplace learning may take place in a variety of ways. For example, employers may be interested in what kinds of credentials and levels of experience the job seeker might have, but the ultimate question is whether or not the person can do the job. As an employer, is the learning that somebody brings to me something that I can evaluate easily and effectively? Small- and medium-sized employers just don't have a human resources department in which some of this evaluation can take place. So our question is: What is available to the employer, especially when the employer is a small business person and has limited time and resources to assess skills and competencies? Our challenge is to find better ways to create a "fit" between what skills the employer is looking for and what the job seeker has – ways that can be meaningful and reliable so the employer truly knows what skills and competencies a worker possesses.

A.M.: What are those tools of evaluation? What is in that toolbox to which employers can turn if they want to do such evaluation?

B.K.: Likely an employer would use a resume and later a job interview. Some employers may be looking at learning portfolios to assess competencies or additional materials to augment the resume, in order to drill down a bit, which I think is an important enhancement. It gives employers a way to more effectively target the type of questions that they ask. This also can help more experienced workers who may not want to go back to the jobs they had in the past, but who possess "transferable skills" they want to highlight. Other useful PLAR tools available to employers include demonstrations, simulations, case studies and challenge exams.

N.T.: What are the connections between that kind of interview, the identification of competencies and higher education? Many adults don't know what they know.

B.K.: I think that equipping people with the tools necessary to articulate their skills and competencies is a really important service we should provide, starting with the young, to prepare us for the seven to 10 jobs we will likely have before retirement. It is a good career self-management strategy for a lifetime of re-employment, unemployment and mobility within the labor force. I think the best way to do that is to create in everyone's mind an awareness of how to articulate and prove skills and competencies acquired at work and gained in other types of life situations, so people are prepared to manage their own attachments to the labor force in more effective ways. For example, we know that when we shared some of the competency portfolio ideas with local employers, they were enthusiastic because, in effect, it enabled them to skip a step in the hiring process. It allowed the employer to say: "This person not only has given some thought to what her/his skills and competencies are, but has provided evidence, both of which are steps well beyond presenting a simple resume."

A.M.: And then there is the tie to higher education.

B.K.: Yes: Once that work is done and an understanding of self-assessment processes and evidence-based skills and competencies is established, it can easily tie to higher education for the purpose of gaining academic credit for prior learning. A particular kind of thinking process, the gathering of the evidence, the awareness of skills and competencies can all be taken into account by a receptive higher education institution. Now, of course, that higher education institution must be aware and supportive of learning that took place outside the

classroom and have assessors who are subject matter experts, trained to evaluate non-classroom learning against course and program learning outcomes. Essentially it is the same dilemma for any credentialer or prior learning evaluator, be they employers, occupational bodies, academic institutions or licensing authorities: Are they ready to use RPL tools?

N.T.: Where has this kind of work been going? Are you aware of partnerships between higher education, the workplace and even with community organizations?

B.K.: In our work at CAPLA, those sorts of synergistic relationships and projects are often showcased as “promising practices” at our yearly conference. It always has been about partnership and breaking down the silos. It goes back to the early days of CAPLA. Even our first PLAR conferences were exactly that: trying to bring together all the partners and stakeholders to learn from each other, to have a meaningful conversation about how PLAR can benefit workers and learners by doing things differently and breaking down the barriers, so transitions between the workplace and the academy can occur more easily. I think that the recognition of prior learning is an important strategy to do that because all of these partners are really interested in the same thing – recognizing what a person knows and can do and assessing it against job requirements, academic outcomes or occupational standards. That is really at the heart of everything we do.

A.M.: This breaking down of the silos is often not so easy.

B.K.: I agree. For example, integrating PLAR in higher education is often difficult because higher education is typically based on course delivery and the funding model is tied to having recent high school graduates enrolled in full-time programs. That funding model is problematic for adults with prior learning who just need particular courses to augment what they already know and can do. If that youth cohort is the “bread and butter” for the institution, where do older, returning students fit in? How do we fund PLAR and support non-credentialed adults who may be interested in getting back into a credential-bearing environment? In other words, a person might think: “I can’t go back to school. I’m too old. I’m not smart enough for college because I never got my high school diploma.” Those doubts, that lack of self-confidence, is a big barrier and also speaks to social inclusion and access. How do we get that buy-in? How do we reach out, how do we get that groundswell of excitement and support for our learners coming into any kind of formal learning settings when they may have experienced failure and may have fallen off the grid for whatever reason?

N.T.: And it always seems to go back to the community.

B.K.: Without doubt, as much as CAPLA continues to increase awareness by having a variety of themes showcased at our conferences, it always ends up going back to the community and individual PLAR champions who work in their organization to make a difference in people’s lives. I think this is a point you have made, Nan, about community-based trainers. All of those RPL services would, I think, be attractive to community-based agencies and service providers, so if we all take a look at RPL, it will go a long way in enhancing awareness and improving the services we can offer people. But we need to speak in a language that makes sense. Let’s face it: when we talk about PLAR or RPL to employers, their eyes glaze over. Lay people don’t talk like that so we need to use terms like recognizing skills and abilities; that’s their lexicon. So, whatever we do, we also have to break down some of those communication barriers. I think this is really important.

A.M.: This issue of language is one that so many institutions struggle with. In effect, how do we create a language that has meaning and some critical potential and, at the same time, makes sense to the audiences to which we want to respond? It’s often very difficult because, in an effort to see ourselves as different from conventional institutions, we often create somewhat private languages that are alienating for a lot of the people we want to reach.

B.K.: Absolutely. We know words like “credentials” and “qualifications” can mean different things to different people. For example, someone can be “qualified” for a job but not have any formal credentials. We also know that the absence of a credential such as a high school or college diploma can be used to sort job applicants, even though “equivalent” prior learning can result in the required skills and competencies to do the job. So the terminology is critical and the messaging must be appropriate for the audience. Just think about the number of times that we hear or read about “the skills gap” or the “skills mismatch.” When I hear those phrases, I wonder if we can legitimately talk about a skills gap when we often don’t know or go to any lengths to assess and recognize the skills adults have already acquired throughout their working lives.

N.T.: This issue of language and how we communicate (or fail to communicate) with the people we want to reach reminds me of something you said earlier in our conversation about the kinds of support systems that are needed in order to really encourage and provide guidance for those who need our support. It’s not something that is automatic!

B.K.: Absolutely, and employers play such an important role in this support system, as well. The HR community is really a key one. For example, companies have recruitment goals and in many job ads the word “equivalent” is used – “Postsecondary diploma or equivalent is required” if you want this job. So how does the employer or HR manager get at that word “equivalent” – what does it mean in relation to required skills and competencies? Is the applicant supported in trying to describe and prove his/her competencies, or is that word “equivalent” just left out there dangling. To your point, Nan, I think that employers are really fundamental in encouraging workers to go on. They (employers) can put all kinds of training opportunities out there, but if employees feel vulnerable and don’t think they have any knowledge and skills because they did not complete an earlier education program, then training dollars may not be utilized by those who need it the most. I think that the HR community could reach out in a really important way, with messaging such as “We know that you have knowledge and skills; we know that we need your skills. We will help you identify what you know and can do and supply training if you required it. ”

A.M.: It seems that the terrain is so tricky. We know that a terrific amount of support is necessary for working people, and we offer some opportunities for them to gain that support, but sometimes we blame them for not taking advantage of what is being offered.

B.K.: Apart from the issue of self-confidence mentioned earlier, I think we often provide support when people are in crisis – after they lose a job, when their jobs are threatened or when family circumstances change. The problem with some short-term employment programs is that they may not provide the depth to enable the client to uncover their hidden learning, transferable skills and personal and professional goals. I think if we look to the career development field for some advice and strategy on this, we could find more effective solutions.

N.T.: From the start of our *PLAIO* work, we have been aware that the material, the research and activities carried out in Canada have a kind of experimenting spirit that, for example, is less evident in what we see coming out of many places in the U.S. Do you agree that there are really interesting things going on in Canada now? Are you optimistic? What is your sense of the next stage in all of this work?

B.K.: I’m very excited and optimistic about the innovation going on in Canada and think that the experimentation and the spirit to which you refer, really speaks to the essence of PLAR. I don’t think that you will have that spirit unless you have people with a fire in their belly – PLAR advocates and practitioners are looking for a better way to get things done! That is really what blows me away when I hear what’s going on across the country. It’s exciting and entrepreneurial, yet at the same time often underfunded and very challenging. People know it’s important and know that the work would not get done unless they take it on. That, to me, is the spirit in both our countries: people do it, not because it is a popular thing to do, but because it’s the right thing to do. I once heard it said that you have to have thick skin to do this work because people don’t like you if you do

PLAR. It's not mainstream. It means change and change is uncomfortable. It is a fundamental shift from the status quo and from traditional ways of operating.

For example, take something like “badges.” The learning derived from badges can be evaluated using the same quality-assured PLAR practices we use in other education and training environments. They can be linked to other course and program learning outcomes, thereby creating a continuum of learning achievements potentially leading to other types of certification such as diplomas and degrees. These strings of informal and nonformal learning become meaningful because when they are evaluated and accumulate, their collective impact can be huge.

A.M.: It seems that everything we have been discussing is part of a larger social and educational movement – a movement for social change – that needs people to articulately champion the cause.

B.K.: I think leadership is really important and there are public policy implications that involve our politicians. We have seen that time and time again in our country and I am sure in yours. For example, when I read the CAEL newsletter and see how some state governors are publicly embracing PLA/RPL, it is inspiring. They have done so because they understand it is connected to vital social and economic issues. We have similar examples of PLAR champions in Canada at all levels. When decision-makers are onboard and PLAR practitioners are working hard on the ground, anything is possible.