

Birthing pains: struggle and fulfillment in accrediting prior learning

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Outline

Where PLAR works well it has been reported to improve self confidence and access to training and education. However it has also been reported to be demoralising and that the processes of PLAR themselves can act as a barrier to take-up.

This presentation provides an overview of this issue focussing particularly on the literature that explores:

- The role of learning outcomes
- Assessment roles and relationships
- Assessment methods

The role of learning outcomes

Betts and Smith (1998, p90) see learning outcomes as facilitating PLAR as they are, 'sufficiently transparent for the student to be able to put the case and prove that the learning outcomes have been met.'

One PLAR student commented that although her tutor was supportive, he perhaps, *'didn't understand what PLAR was all about and if he'd say, well look, actually you have the experience and it doesn't exactly match but you've done more and I think that would balance it out so maybe it's their lack of understanding that makes it difficult for us'* (Pokorny 2006; p 272).

The role of learning outcomes

Tutors may perceive the function of learning outcomes to be 'just another bureaucratic reformulation of the existing term - study aims' (Rusakova and Rauhvargers, 2010: p129).

Allais (2012) argues against the notion that a NQF can capture the essence of what is taught across different learning programmes and that there is a 'sameness' across different disciplinary contexts which can be captured through statements of learning outcomes. Similarly, Hussey and Smith (2002) argue that the clarity and explicitness of subject specific learning outcomes are dependent on their being interpreted against a prior understanding of what is required.

The role of learning outcomes

Can learning outcomes provide transparency for those outside of the curriculum context? If so how?

A body of research clearly indicates that there will be issues for students who are working independently with learning outcomes as part of the PLAR process and suggests that it will be important in developing a dialogue around these learning outcomes between the assessor and student.

Assessment roles and relationships

Research has identified two distinct approaches to the assessment role monologic teaching and dialogic mediation.

I'm genuinely interested to read these things. It is a good system and a learning experience for me as well. I use Student X's work to say this is how it works in the real world and this allows me to be better at my job and so there's a lot of mutual gain in the process.

Of course there might be a learning objective in there that they don't understand, that they need clarification... that's when we sit down and go, well, what you're missing here is topic XYZ and I use my knowledge of all the subjects we cover on the course and then they get the idea of that in their own experience, they say, oh yes I remember when we had a Conservative sport policy and how X relates to that, so they can put it in that context so it's a process where it's tutor led but of course the body of work is designed by the student... (Pokorny, 2013)

Assessment roles and relationships

The research suggests that it will be important in the relationship to:

- Explore how different concepts and ideas from theory and practice may be represented in different contexts such as the world of work.
- Seek out novel and unfamiliar learning that may represent equivalent learning to conventional academic constructs (ie discuss issues, developments, constraints and activities from practice that can add to and enhance understanding from an academic perspective).
- Focus on artefacts, products and practices as resources for promoting dialogue (it is in the activities, products and practices that learning takes place).
- Embrace the language of workplace practice and respect this language in the representation of learning.
- Include the perspective of the student in terms of the ways in which the assessment process impinges on their meaning making (without this perspective the frustrations and anxieties of the student will go unattended and the opportunities for reciprocal learning will be missed).
(Starr- Glass, 2012; Pokorny, 2012, 2013, Peters, 2005)

Assessment roles and relationships

Dialogic mediation is more than sympathetic listening or talk.

Sandberg (2012) identified what he termed a 'caring ideology' where assessment relationships were based on the affective confirmations of the teachers. Teachers developed positive assessment relationships with the students who were interviewed and asked questions about their prior learning with the tutors making notes as they listened.

However there was no dialogue around meaning making and although they gained their course credits some students saw no relationship between the courses for which they gained credits and their own experience (Sandberg 2012).

Assessment roles and relationships

- Wallace *et al* (2008) describe the final product of a PLAR project which was to produce a series of PLAR guidelines for recognising and assessing competence in a range of literacies that recognised indigenous knowledge and competence rather than focussing on the overriding emphasis on Standard English Literacy.
- Aune Valk (2009) compared a number of European approaches to developing PLAR, she suggests that becoming a PLAR assessor is not simply a matter of acquiring skills but also demands a positive attitude and a willingness to adopt a different type of assessment and guidance role.

Assessment methods

Andersson (2006) differentiates two approaches to PLAR assessment naming them as the selection or transformation functions of PLAR with the focus or purpose being on either:

- the selection or educational measurement of individuals on the basis of their prior knowledge (typically by portfolio) or
- the transformation of individuals or their knowledge in the process of assessing prior learning (typically by integration into a learning process or curriculum of some sort).

Assessment methods – selection approaches

The portfolio is the predominant assessment tool for APEL. The APEL candidate collates evidence of prior learning mapped to predetermined learning outcomes and supplies a written narrative, relating this to their aims in compiling the claim.

Appendices to me aren't overly important but I think to the student they are very important ...I very much trust the people we have. I do believe if they said they've done it they've done it...

Assessment methods – selection approaches

Stenlund (2012) considered the applicants view of an e-portfolio process through administration of a questionnaire (n=328).

- Participants' with a negative view reported lower satisfaction with the in the amount of guidance received, a perceived lack of clarity about what was required by the process and how decisions were made.
- Some participants felt they were unable to describe all of their work related competence however the examples they gave were covered by the instrument indicating a lack of understanding by the participants.
- Some participants had little or no help in filling in the web based instrument. For some participants the time taken meant their applications were less thorough than they wished or incomplete.
- Many of these participants were also sceptical of the fairness of the process.

Assessment methods – transformative approaches

Andersson's (2006) definition of transformative PLAR processes can be seen to encompass models of PLAR that focus upon integration of prior and current learning within the curriculum. These models often draw on prior learning as a basis for the curriculum rather than require mapping of prior learning to an established programme. They offer a route into the HE curriculum for participants working in cohorts and may fit more comfortably within traditional HE contexts.

Assessment methods – transformative approaches

- Rudman and Webb (2009) working in South Africa researched the impact of a PLAR module upon the self-efficacy of in-service educators.
- Price (2009) reports on a school-university partnership on Christmas Island. Education Assistants (EA) from Malaysia were provided with the opportunity to enter an Initial Teacher Education programme through an Access course, and were awarded credit for their prior learning.
- Fejes and Andersson, (2009) refer to the case of an in-service training process for the Swedish care sector for elderly people based on the recognition of prior learning as a way for care workers to become assistant nurses, and gain a degree from the health care programme.
- Volbrecht (2009) also argues for an integrative approach to prior learning recognition based on the ‘Trojan Horse’ model presented by Harris (1999).

Conclusions

This short review of research into PLAR practice demonstrates the range of models and approaches that exist within a range of international contexts. The themes and issues are common to many and suggest that there is no one best model to be adopted but instead there are a set of key considerations around assessment processes, practices and assessment roles.

The research outlined at this summit provides some concepts and models that can support exploration of these considerations. Even so the field is relatively under-researched and it is incumbent on all practitioners to develop and evaluate their models with a critical perspective and keep adding to this body of understanding.

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