



THOMPSON RIVERS
UNIVERSITY

OPEN LEARNING DIVISION

Thompson Rivers University – Open Learning

Competency-based Portfolio Assessment

June 2009

TRU - OL Competency-based PLAR Portfolio

A Message from the Director, PLAR

In reply to your enquiry about **Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)**, I am pleased to send you this *information package*.

In keeping with its belief in life-long learning, *Thompson Rivers University – Open Learning (TRU – OL)* recognizes that many adult learners have acquired training, skills and knowledge through education in non-formal, as well as formal settings: that is, in life and work experience, as well as in formal schooling. TRU - OL also recognizes that because many adults without a degree now find their professional careers threatened or restricted, they need a program designed to move them quickly to degree completion. TRU - OL endeavours to meet this need by providing such individuals with the opportunity to build upon upon previous learning and apply it toward the requirements of a degree.

To put this in more personal terms, **PLAR** offers you the opportunity to reflect on the learning you have acquired outside the traditional classroom and to describe this learning in ways that can be assessed for the possibility of earning course and program credit. Before committing to **PLAR**, you need to be aware that while the application process is exciting and rewarding, it can also be time-consuming and demanding.

The purpose of the package is to help you decide whether **PLAR** is appropriate for you, and then to help you prepare your application.

With Best of Wishes,

Christine Wihak
Director, PLAR
Thompson Rivers University

TRU - OL Competency-based PLAR Portfolio

Let us begin with the answer to three important questions:

1. What is PLAR?

PLAR – Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition – is just what the name suggests. It is a process to determine if university-level credit can be awarded to learning that has taken place before you enter your degree program. The primary sources of PLAR credit include:

- Vocational and trades certificates of qualification; workplace training programs; non-credit continuing education courses.
- Non-English language skills (e.g. Croatian, Spanish, French, Hungarian, German, Chinese, etc.)
- Informal learning derived from achievement and performance in the workplace and/or through community, artistic or other life experience.

2. How is PLAR Credit different from transfer credit?

Transfer Credit is granted for any course (or courses) you have taken from a recognized post-secondary educational institution such as a college or university. Transfer credit is evaluated on the basis of course description and the recognition of the course by other post-secondary institutions, and it is entered course-by-course into your program plan. **Since you have already received credit for this learning, do not include it in your PLAR application.**

PLAR credit is awarded for learning that has not been acquired through formal course work from recognized colleges and universities. You may, for instance, have taken non-formal or continuing education courses. You may have a vocational or training credential. You may have taken a series of short courses as part of your employment. Or you may have tackled tasks that go beyond formal courses you have taken, acquiring additional knowledge from work experience, from colleagues or from self-study. You may have also have acquired university-level learning through endeavours and achievements outside your workplace, including community service, participation in the arts, or other educational life experiences. These latter are all forms of informal or experiential (experience-based) learning.

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3. How Can I earn PLAR Credit?

As a student enrolled in a TRU – OL program, you can have your prior learning assessed by three methods.

Course Challenge:

If you feel that your learning is equivalent to a TRU – OL course, you can challenge the course by writing a special examination. The amount of credit awarded is equivalent to credits earned by successful completion of the course by regular independent study.

Portfolio Assisted Assessment:

If your learning is not directly equivalent to a particular course but is at the post-secondary level, you can compile a portfolio that will demonstrate that you have met a set of critical competencies. The rest of this handout offers information and guidance on developing your Prior Learning Portfolio.

Credit Bank Assessment:

TRU – OL has made special arrangements with some employers, private training organizations and Continuing Education programs to pre-assess courses and workshops for credit. Contact the PLAR Advisor for more information.

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Assessment by Portfolio, then, is a process that allows you to earn credit for various kinds of non-formal and/or experiential learning you have acquired through the venues described on the preceding page. You may earn lower and/or upper level credit through Portfolio Assessment, and this credit may be academic and/or applied. For many TRU – OL students, Portfolio Assessment has been a successful means of completing a significant amount of credit at the lower level.

Normally there are no official transcripts to validate this learning, and we turn to a different process.

The process is the preparation of a **Competency-based Portfolio** in which you demonstrate life-based prior learning up to the point of your entry into your TRU – OL program. Instead of formal transcripts, you present other evidence to support your request for assessment.

At the heart of the TRU – OL Competency-based Portfolio Assessment process is the evaluation of your **eight (8) “critical competencies”** – that is, the knowledge, skills and abilities that we believe characterize individuals capable of moving successfully through university degree programs. The eight areas include communication abilities, problem-solving/decision-making abilities and so forth. The information in the next section provides a detailed description of all eight competencies.

Your **Competency-based Portfolio** describes your life-based prior learning up to the point of your entry into your TRU – OL degree program and draws on this learning to demonstrate your mastery of the eight critical competencies.

The assessment process includes four steps:

1. Your resume and program plan are reviewed to determine whether you may be a suitable candidate for prior learning assessment. You will be (or have already been) informed of the results of this review, at which point you will receive this information package and decide if you wish to proceed. On receipt of your **PLAR Application Fee**, your PLAR Advisor will arrange your admission to the **PLAR Competency-based Portfolio Blackboard site**, where you will find all of the resources and guidance you need to prepare your prior learning portfolio.

2. You then submit a formal **PLAR Portfolio**, prepared according to the guidelines described below and presented in detail on the website.
3. A **PLAR Review Committee**, consisting of TRU – OL faculty members, reviews your submission . The review also includes a **telephone interview**, which is an opportunity to validate and expand on the information you have provided in your written portfolio. The assessors award credit based on how well you have demonstrated the 8 critical competencies.
4. The **PLAR Credit** awarded is added to your **Program Plan** and to your TRU – OL **Official Transcript**

Part II

Portfolio Assessment: Guidelines

Critical Competencies:

There are eight (8) **Critical Competencies**. These describe the attributes and abilities that TRU - OL believes define a student who is capable of moving successfully toward degree completion. You should draw upon all relevant non-formal and/or experiential learning to provide the best examples and evidence of your mastery of the Critical Competencies.

Here is a brief description of each competency. More detailed information on the Critical Competencies and the criteria for their assessment (as lower or upper-level/applied or academic credit) is available to candidates on the PLAR Department Blackboard site, which you can access after you have made a formal PLAR application and paid the PLAR fee.

1. Communications Abilities:

Students demonstrate their ability to communicate clearly and effectively using a variety of modes in different situations (e.g., in professional and/or academic or creative writing, or in public speaking, lecturing, presentation of workshops, etc.) Both the *PLAR Request* and the *Telephone Interview* assessment are venues for providing evidence of common communication skills.

2. Information Organization Abilities:

Students demonstrate effectiveness in gathering, sorting, synthesizing and presenting a variety of documents and materials. The organization of the PLAR Request is one of several means of demonstrating these skills.

3. Problem Solving/Decision Making Abilities:

Students demonstrate that they have played a decision-making role in a work and/or community environment, or are able to sort through information, options and approaches to solving a problem or reaching a decision.

4. Numeracy Skills:

Students demonstrate ability to work with numbers and an understanding of basic mathematical skills. Evidence may be taken from a work and/or community environment and may include accounting experience, budget forecasting, projection of expenses, etc.

5. Critical Thinking:

Students demonstrate an ability to analyze problems and issues, read with comprehension, separate fact from value, and be open to alternative ways of thinking about issues.

6. Intellectual Maturity:

Students demonstrate personal development and growth by their participation in activities and endeavours that show a breadth of interest in the world, an ability to learn, and an ability to consider other points of view.

7. Independent Study and Learning Skills:

Students demonstrate initiative in seeking out and successfully completing independent learning opportunities. These might include non-credit/continuing education courses, web-based research projects, conferences/workshops/seminars, self study and/or reading projects.

8. Applied Knowledge and Abilities:

Students demonstrate strong knowledge or skills in work performance and/or life experience and activities.

Note: If you wish to petition for *academic* credits in a specific subject area or for a specific course, please contact the PLAR Advisor.

Portfolio & Interview: Guidelines

PORTFOLIO PREPARATION

The following are general guidelines on preparing your **Prior Learning Summary**, the key document in your Portfolio. You will find a *template* for the *Prior Learning Summary*, some sample portfolios and other documents, and a *Discussion Area* where you can ask questions on the **Competency-based Portfolio** website. **As an assessment candidate you will be given access to the website and will have a maximum of thirty weeks (approximately six months) to complete your PLAR Assessment Process.**

Prior Learning Summary:

1. Prepare **Part I** of your **Prior Learning Summary**. This will consist of a description of the *Subject Areas* of your learning, a list of the *Resources* used in your learning and a list of the items that provide the *Evidence* of your learning.
2. Prepare **Part II** of your **Prior Learning Summary**. This will be based on all of the *Subject Areas* described in Part I and will demonstrate how your learning has led to your mastery of the *8 Critical Competencies*, with a section no longer than **3 pages** (12 pt. font, double-spaced) devoted to each theme.
3. Please provide whatever documentation you feel will best support your competency in a particular area. It is essential to be selective. Note that one or **two items of evidence per competency** should be sufficient to make your case. Examples of *evidence* may include (but is not limited to) the following:
 - a report you have written,
 - a course that you have developed,
 - material related to business or work enterprises or records, e.g. financial records or board minutes,
 - copies of articles, reports, essays or other material you have written, either professional or academic/creative (a research paper, a play, a song, a poem, and/or a short story),
 - website addresses, photographs, audio tapes, videos, CDs, etc.,
 - Performance Evaluations or testimonies written by experts or other appropriate assessors.

4. Please remember to provide examples that will ensure that we are not awarding duplicate credit; that is, you must not include the time spent on formal training courses that we have already included in your program plan.
5. Provide documentation from a person who can verify the evidence provided, or provide a reference name for us to follow up with as required. Sources to be considered include HR administrators, your own supervisor, colleagues in community activities.

PORTFOLIO SUBMISSION

TRU – OL offers two options for portfolio submission:

Electronic portfolio

- Submit via e-mail or on CD
- No additional fee
- Assessment completed within 30 working days (approximately 6 weeks) of receipt by PLAR Department

Hard copy portfolio:

- Must submit **3 complete copies**
- **\$50** shipping and handling fee
- Assessment completed within forty working days (approximately 8 weeks) of receipt by PLAR Department

Please read the submission guidelines for each type of portfolio carefully.

A. Electronic portfolio

1. You can submit these types of files: Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Adobe, jpg. For supported formats for audio and video files, please contact the PLAR Department by e-mail (PLAR_OL@tru.ca).
2. Documentary evidence to support your portfolio will need to be scanned into an electronic format and saved.
3. Name each file using this format: YourNamePLARxxx. Save each part of your portfolio as a separate file and identify it by replacing “xxx” with the following names:
 - CL (Cover Letter)
 - ToC (Table of Contents)
 - AR (Autobiographical Resume)
 - PLS1 (Prior Learning Summary Part One)
 - PLS2 (Prior Learning Summary Part Two)

- EV (Evidence supporting your learning)
4. You can submit your portfolio via e-mail if the files do not exceed xxx.
 5. If your files are too large, you will need to copy them to a CD. Make 3 copies of the CD and label each clearly with your name. Mail the 3 CDs to:

PLAR Department TRU - Open Learning,
BCCOL - 4th Floor
Box 3010, 900 McGill Road
Kamloops, BC V2C 5N3

B. Hard Copy Portfolio

1. **Do not send any original documents.** They will not be returned.
2. Make **three copies** of all parts of your portfolio, including any documentary evidence you are submitting to support your learning claim. If you want to use dividers and tabs to organize your portfolio, use them for all three copies.
3. Contact the PLAR Department by e-mail (PLAR_OL) to arrange for payment of the **\$50 shipping and handling fee.**
4. Mail or courier the three copies of your portfolio to:

PLAR Department TRU - Open Learning,
BCCOL - 4th Floor
Box 3010, 900 McGill Road
Kamloops, BC V2C 5N3

INTERVIEW

1. A *PLAR Committee* composed of TRU – OL faculty members will participate in the interview and assess your Portfolio.
2. The *Purpose of the Interview* will be a further exploration of your Portfolio. The PLAR Committee will ask you to walk through each competency and elaborate on the evidence you have presented. No additional preparation is required.
3. The Interview will normally last no longer than one hour. It will be by teleconference. Please make sure you keep a copy of your Portfolio for use in the interview.
4. In special cases, the PLAR Committee may decide that an interview is not required.

Attachment:

1. *Template for Prior Learning Summary (p.15)*

Prior Learning Summary (Template)

Date:

Name:

Student ID:

TRU - OL degree:

Credit Requests:

Part I: Description of Prior Learning

(Note that more than one segment from life- and/or work-derived learning may be included in this section. However, Part II, below, will draw upon all the learning described in Part I)

Subject(s) of Learning:

Venue of Learning:

Date and Duration of Learning:

1. Major Topics Covered in Subject Area:
2. Resources Used in this Learning:
3. Evidence in Support of Learning

Part II: Discussion of Critical Competencies

*This discussion should cover all subject areas described in **Part I**. Responses here should be concise but detailed, with discussions of three pages or less (12 Pt. font, double-spaced) for each of the eight critical competencies. Be sure to indicate which part of your supporting evidence illustrates each competency. Note that the success of an application for PLAR credit will depend to a great extent on this discussion, which should provide a strong demonstration that the candidate has mastered the competencies and therefore fits the profile of a student who is ready to proceed to degree completion. TRU – OL's eight critical competencies are described in detail on a separate handout: Communication Skills; Information Organization Skills; Problem Solving/Decision Making Skills; Critical Thinking; Intellectual Maturity; Independent Study & Learning; Applied and/or Academic Knowledge and Skills.*

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