Community Service Learning (CSL) and Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR): University Engagement with Real-World Connections

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University support for experience-based learning outside the classroom

- A conundrum

- Community Service Learning (CSL) – growing faculty acceptance and increasing funding support

- Prior learning assessment & recognition (PLAR) – continued faculty resistance & lack of funding

Institutional Motivation for Supporting CSL

- Manifestation of the institution's outreach and engagement mission
- NSSE (2003): systematic data collection; publication of case studies – how institutions improve quality of undergraduate education
- Integration of effective teaching practices and enriching learning experiences – CSL promoted as significant contributing activity

Institutional Motivation for Supporting PLAR (CAEL 2010)

- provide time-saving avenue for degree completion
- fulfill mission of serving target population
- recognize value of learning outside the classroom
- provide cost-effective avenue for degree completion
- remove barriers to education

Community Service Learning

- A type of experiential education in which students participate in service in the community and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content and its relationship to social needs and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Butin, 2005)

J. W.McConnell Family Foundation (2005)

Funding for 10 universities to integrate CSL within their curriculum and to build strong partnerships with their local communities (BC, Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic)

Included both large research universities and smaller comprehensive universities

Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning (CACSL)

- St. Francis Xavier University (2001)
- University of British Columbia (2003)
- McConnell Family Foundation (2004)
- Establishment of CACSL (2004)
- Over thirty universities actively engaged in CSL (2010)
- Course-based CSL gaining support among faculty

Barrier to Faculty Engagement with PLAR/RPL

- Desire of universities to pursue higher rankings within global academia puts increased pressure on faculty to devote more time and energy to research

- Similar pressures reported in the UK, Australia, New Zealand where APEL/RPL has a longer history than Canada

- Lack of research studies to illuminate PLAR as a pedagogical innovation

Research by Colbeck in the US (1998, 2005)

- what 'counts' as research in research-intensive universities vs. comprehensive universities – original research among peers ('A list' journals); curricula innovation

- many early career academics required to fragment their work in favour of research

Language Matters in Recruiting Faculty Supporters

- Metaphor of four villages of experiential learning (Weil & McGill, 1989)
  - Village 1: assessment of experiential learning to increase access to educational institutions
  - Village 2: change purposes, structure, curricular of post-secondary education
  - Village 3: consciousness-raising, community action, social change
  - Village 4: personal growth & group effectiveness

Faculty Attitudes Influence Engagement in CSL/PLAR

- How academics conceptualize knowledge and teaching is central to their motivation for engaging in 'new' or innovative teaching practices

- Development of curricula and assessment strategies for experiential learning requires university teachers to appreciate different kinds of knowledge production and the circumstances in which learning can take

- University Centres for Teaching & Learning play an important role

Future of CSL & PLAR at Universities

- Depends on a achieving a critical mass of faculty who believe their engagement in the process will be valued and recognized

- Many faculty currently work in university environments that reward research over teaching

- More research to provide evidence to illuminate CSL & PLAR as credible pedagogical innovations

Challenge for CSL and PLAR Participants

- Connect experiential learning outside the academy to formal learning within the academy
- Learn to use disciplinary or professional frameworks as appropriate to examine and document their learning
- PLAR candidates face additional challenge
  - 'Fit' learning outcomes into a program post-hoc
  - Many expectations tacitly embedded in the perspectives and processes of the disciplinary areas in which recognition is sought

Metacognition

- Capacity to build mental maps within which one can locate one's learning and to which one can make explicit references in subsequent situations

- Learning from both the process and the outcomes of reflection on experience

Portfolios Increasingly Used by Both Students and Faculty

- CSL and PLAR both use learning portfolios for documenting
  - Observations
  - Reflections
  - Reconstruction of meaning
  - Proposals for experimentation and solution
- Faculty use teaching portfolios to support application for tenure and promotion
  - similar elements included

Learning Communities: Contributing to Retention & Success

- Most LCs incorporate collaborative learning activities & promote complementary academic & social activities beyond the classroom

- Can LCs be established and supported among adult learners with varied formal and informal learning experiences?

- Which institutional units can provide this support?

Linking Research to Stakeholders

- Students – effects of participation
- Faculty – members who elect to integrate experiential learning within their courses
- Institutions – under whose auspices CSL and PLAR are offered
- Communities – partners & agencies who become co-educators via their direct involvement

Sample Research Questions: Faculty

- Does involvement in experiential learning pedagogies, including CSL & PLAR, stimulate new interest and vitality for the faculty role?
  - Are there differences among different departments or across different disciplines?
  - Are there differences among faculty at different stages of their careers?

Sample Research Questions:
(continued)

- What are the dynamics of institutional readiness for change in terms of expansion of experiential learning pedagogies?

- How can faculty members collaboratively design assessment strategies that allow students to demonstrate their cognitive and personal growth in experiential learning rather than simply testify to it?

Sample Research Questions
(continued)

- Which units within the university can play a facilitating role in exploring and sharing these strategies?

- How can learners and community partners contribute to developing and experimenting with these strategies?