

Navigating the Complex World of University Learning: Insights for PLAR Practitioners & Advocates

Angelina T. Wong, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita
University of Saskatchewan



Purpose of the Presentation

- ◆ Raise awareness of PLAR advocates and practitioners about the cultural values and practices of university academics – understanding enhances capacity to support PLAR candidates
- ◆ Discuss strategic recruitment and development of a critical mass of faculty committed to adopting PLAR-friendly assessment, teaching, and curriculum development practices

My Background & Interest in PLAR

- ◆ PLAR at the University of Saskatchewan 1992 to 2006 – policy development, faculty development, research during sabbatical leaves (Australia, U.K.)
- ◆ PLAR as component of distance education projects – Mozambique, Palestine
- ◆ PLAR and social justice – Myanmar

Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition

- ◆ Value attached to higher education increasingly seen in economic terms
- ◆ PLAR provides a mechanism for potentially reducing the resources (time, money) needed to obtain a credential
- ◆ Early adopters from technical & vocational colleges
- ◆ University credentials – under authority of academics with centuries-old traditions

PLAR at Canadian Universities

- ◆ Cool reception and fragmented presence since the 1990s
- ◆ Special funding stimulated wave of interest; quickly dissipated when funding dried up
- ◆ Universities given the authority to be gatekeepers of credentials reflecting the achievement of specific levels of knowledge and skills in disciplinary-based areas of study – formal curriculum seen as core of undergraduate experience
- ◆ Policies not enough; need critical mass of supportive faculty

KING



**The Count of
Commerce**



**The Duchess
of Arts**



**The Duke of
Science**



**The Earl of
Engineering**



**The Countess
of Nursing**

Academics' Identity

- ◆ Identity associated with having unique knowledge and skills in association with a particular reference group
- ◆ These groups form the basis of disciplinary areas within the university – e.g. natural sciences, social sciences, applied sciences, humanities
- ◆ Individual *knights* charged with telling the stories of their disciplines and upholding the standards of knowledge and skills

Motivation Linked to Identity

- ◆ Motivation to engage in alternative approaches to assessment, teaching, and curriculum development related to academics' identities as researchers and teachers within their institution
- ◆ Most universities have privileged research excellence over teaching excellence in tenure and promotions decisions
- ◆ What counts as research? (mirrors what counts as learning?)
- ◆ University reward system needs change

Challenges Facing PLAR Candidates

Academic Reality

- ◆ Most faculty tend to value learning from formal curriculum above learning obtained in non-academic settings
- ◆ Expectations – some explicitly stated, many tacitly embedded in the way instructors apply specialized vocabulary and modes of inquiry

Verifying Learning

- ◆ Portfolio-assisted assessment requires individuals to write out their learning while knowledge and skills in the workplace are transmitted orally and through observation
- ◆ Reversing the flow (J S Brown)
- ◆ Learning communities

Indicators of Learning in Higher Education: Cognitive Outcomes

Knowledge outcomes

- ◆ General content knowledge – common across disciplines
- ◆ Domain-specific or subject-specific knowledge (commonly thought to be most important)

Skills outcomes

- ◆ Generic skills – verbal & quantitative reasoning, comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving
- ◆ Domain-specific skills – different thinking patterns used in different domains & may not be transferable (e.g. writing in the humanities vs. the sciences)

Thinking Processes Valued in Higher Education

(Janet Donald, 2002)

Common across disciplines

- ◆ Description – context, assumptions
- ◆ Selection – relevant information
- ◆ Representation – organizing elements
- ◆ Inference – conclusions, propositions
- ◆ Synthesis – whole from parts
- ◆ Verification – results, feedback

Discipline-specific validation of knowledge

- ◆ Natural & Applied Sciences – evidence matched to theory in physics, biology
- ◆ Social sciences – test results in education, inter-rater reliability in psychology
- ◆ Humanities – internal consistency rendering work plausible in English literature

Finding Friendly Borders to Cross

- ◆ Recruitment of PLAR assessors a continuous challenge
- ◆ Strategy: collaborate with faculty already engaged in university-sponsored experiential learning programs
- ◆ Examples: practicum in health sciences, internship in social sciences, community service learning – learners as novice members of a community of practice
- ◆ Village metaphor – contexts of practice, approaches to championing experiential learning

Common Ground between Experiential Learning and PLAR

- ◆ Both CSL and PLAR participants required to connect experiential learning outside the academy to the formal teaching and learning within the academy – reflection is key
- ◆ Both learners and faculty develop appreciation of different kinds of knowledge production and the circumstances in which it can take place
- ◆ Both academics and PLAR practitioners contribute to nurturing of learning communities

The Four Villages

(Weil & McGill, 1989)

- ◆ Village 1: Assess and accredit experiential learning as means of gaining access to educational institutions, employment, professional bodies
- ◆ Village 2: Change purposes, structure and curricula in post-secondary education
- ◆ Village 3: Apply experiential learning to stimulate consciousness-raising, community action and social change
- ◆ Village 4: Engage in experiential learning for personal growth and development

Questions for Exploration

- ◆ How can community-based and university PLAR advocates collaborate to facilitate the adoption of non-traditional pathways to the achievement of university credentials?
- ◆ How can community-based PLAR advocates help to build a critical mass of faculty committed to PLAR-friendly assessment, teaching, and curricula development practices?