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

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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
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?