Revisiting the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): A Reflective Inquiry into RPL Practice in Canada

Dianne Conrad, Athabasca University

ABSTRACT

The recognition of prior learning (RPL/PLAR) has been on the margins of Canada's educational and economic scene for many years. A series of recent developments across Canada prompted this writer to reflect on whether a combination of forces may be moving RPL toward its "tipping point." In examining this possibility, the article situates the issue educationally, socially, and economically. A developing societal and educational trend is identified and the use of the portfolio as an appropriate response tool is considered. Concluding remarks highlight anticipated and existing areas of resistance to moving the RPL agenda forward.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis plusieurs années, la reconnaissance des acquis (RA / ÉRA (évaluation et reconnaissance des acquis) se plaçait dans les marges des scènes pédagogiques et économiques au Canada. C'est une série récente de développements pancanadiens qui ont poussé cet écrivain à réfléchir à la possibilité qu'un ensemble de forces pourraient être en train de pousser la RA vers son « point de bascule ». En examinant cette possibilité, l'auteur situe cette question au point de vue éducatif, social et économique. Elle identifie un nouveau mouvement social et éducatif, et considère l'utilisation du portfolio comme outil de réponse approprié. Quelques-unes de ses remarques, en conclusion, mettent en évidence des domaines actuels et d'autres où elle anticipe une résistance à pousser l'agenda de la RA vers l'avant.

INTRODUCTION

It seems odd now, in the early days of the 21st century, to watch actors in old movies light up unending numbers of cigarettes and drag deeply on them in scene after scene—in cars, houses, restaurants, boardrooms, and offices. Clearly, our perceptions of smoking have changed dramatically in recent years. In the world of education, supporters of recognizing prior learning, upon reflecting on the degree of change in the public's perceptions of smoking, might wonder wistfully if such change will ever work its magic on their cause. Or, perhaps, such change is already in the air.

This article examines and reflects on the state of recognizing prior learning (RPL) in Canada, with a focus on RPL's status in the post-secondary system. Within that system, practitioners of continuing education, specifically, should be sensitive to the theory and practice of RPL and its potential contribution to their clientele, who are often prime candidates for entering programs and/or receiving credit in programs via RPL. The issue is situated educationally, socially, economically, and nationally, while the portfolio—a key component of RPL—is identified as a vehicle for addressing this important societal trend. Concluding remarks are aimed at separating the smoke from the fire: What's really going on? And, specifically, what does the current state of RPL in Canada hold in store for Canada's adult learners, including those in continuing education programs?

THE DIFFICULTY OF LANGUAGE

The task of situating prior learning in Canada and describing current practice is difficult both practically and theoretically, in large part due to the lack of clear and consistent language with which to describe prior learning. There are several recognized points of contention about terminology in the field. Originally referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA), in recent years, it has become more popularly known as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), with the addition of the concept of recognition ("R") becoming a point of discussion among practitioners. The term "recognizing prior learning" (RPL) is relatively new to Canada but is making inroads as it is considered more inclusive than PLAR. The question of inclusivity, of course, depends on the meaning attached to each term. Using PLAR as the umbrella term, which has been the case in Canada, engenders confusion over the fit of credit transfer (CT) and qualification recognition (QR) processes because, in fact, both processes also address prior learning, although they are almost exclusively devoted to formal learning. Defining what constitutes formal, non-formal, informal, and experiential learning—traditionally, a major topic of discussion in adult education—continues to complicate prior learning definitions.

There is also a tendency in Canada for PLAR to be understood synonymously with the use of portfolios as an assessment methodology. Few Canadian universities currently practice PLAR, however, and among those that do, the term is used to describe a challenge-for-credit process. Challenge-for-credit processes allow learners to fast-track their attempt to obtain credit for a course; that is, rather than actually "taking" the course, they attempt to successfully complete some combination of requirements, usually by writing an examination or fulfilling a project assignment.

Figure 1 illustrates how I believe these terms relate to each other. This diagram could be (and has been) criticized by others who view the hierarchy of RPL/PLAR activities in different ways.
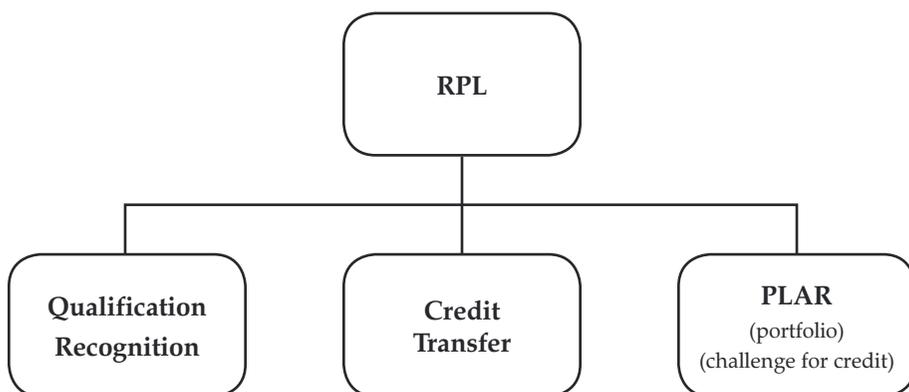
Figure 1: A Typology for Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL)

Meanwhile, other terms are used to describe the same processes in other parts of the world. RPL is more widely practiced in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa than in Canada, and it is called by many names, among them: Accreditation of Prior [and] Experiential Learning (APEL); Prior Learning Assessment (PLA); Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR); Assessment of Prior Learning (APL); Reconnaisance des Acquis (RDA); and Erkennen van elders of informeel Verworven Competenties (EVC) (Mitchelson & Mandell, 2004).

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS: PAST AND PRESENT PERSPECTIVES ON RECOGNIZING PRIOR LEARNING

A lot has been happening in the RPL field in Canada and elsewhere, and to appreciate these recent developments, it is useful to understand some of the history of RPL. Conceptually, recognizing prior learning is not new.

Allusions to the wisdom of Aristotle and Pestalozzi in their valuing of experience preceded the seminal work of Dewey, who is known as the father of experiential learning. Geographically, RPL's "alphabet soup" (Mitchelson & Mandell, 2004, p. 3) of acronyms speaks as much to its global presence as to its myriad implementations. Yet, no matter what name it goes by, the process of identifying and then valuing in some way the past learning of adults is widely practiced around the world.

In Western cultures, John Dewey's voice is most often heard when tracking the history of prior learning recognition. Presaging the sentiments of many adult educators who would follow him, especially those adopting the humanistic stance shared by Carl Rogers and Malcolm Knowles, Dewey envisioned "personal development for workers as foundational to an informed and active citizenry" (Michelson & Mandell, 2004, p. 7). In his own words, Dewey (1938) stated: "The beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have . . . this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (p. 74).

Other noted Western educators supported the incorporation of experiential learning into adult education. Lindeman (1926), Knowles (1970), Brookfield (1986), and Kolb (1984) have all extolled the wisdom of valuing the uniqueness of "inner experience" (Michelson & Mandell, 2004, p. 13) and of recognizing its place in the development of autonomous and reflective learners.

Clearly, the recognition of prior learning enjoys a long history and a wide practice; it is enshrined in the educational and credentialization practices of many countries. In Canada, however, both recent and current states of RPL are less obvious. The following section reflects the erratic nature that has characterized the history of RPL in Canada.

Recognizing Prior Learning in Canada

Institutionally, the Ontario college system and Manitoba's Red River College have been RPL leaders in Canada. Following some early pilot projects at Mohawk College in Hamilton in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, as well as the introduction of a PLAR policy at Mohawk in 1985, Red River College in Winnipeg initiated several projects that resulted in institution-wide PLAR policy implementation in 1994 (Van Kleef, 2006). In 1995, the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN), a network of individuals interested in prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) practices, was formed. (The MPLAN website can be accessed at http://www.mbplar.ca/) Manitoba is still the national leader in PLAR policy and structure and has recently introduced a PLAR policy framework "based on three cornerstone service areas—post secondary, advisory services, and industry" (CMEC, 2007).

In other regions of Western Canada, British Columbia, which once adopted innovative strategies for mature learners through agencies such as the British Columbia Open University and the Open Learning Agency, re-established a provincial PLAR Steering Committee in 1993, which was followed by province-wide initiatives that offered PLAR services through various pilot projects. The formal closure of B.C.'s Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) in 2004, however, marked the end of an era of support for RPL initiatives. Currently, in both British Columbia and Alberta, PLAR practitioners are working to forge a new provincial framework for PLAR activities. British Columbia has surpassed Alberta's initiative, as it has funding in place for PLAR activity in post-secondary institutions, but Alberta's Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) has been a driving force for PLAR activities, commissioning a study in 2005 to inform policy development and working toward the establishment of a provincial PLAR framework through a series of government-hosted province-wide meetings. The province of Saskatchewan launched a PLAR funding initiative, in co-operation with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, in 2002; subsequently, Saskatchewan has embarked on a number of PLAR initiatives in the areas of human-resource planning, early education, and nursing.

In central Canada, PLAR policy became a priority in Quebec in 1985 and was supported by funding legislation. By 2003, Quebec's colleges received PLAR funding equal to standard course-delivery funding, and the province has recently introduced a new system to accommodate PLAR within its education system. A newly created centre in Montreal (Centre collégial montréalais de reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences), created by Quebec's 12 public colleges, will provide a direct consulting service that is dedicated to the preparation of resources and training of personnel for RPL. Additionally, the centre will negotiate partnership agreements with government, sector associations, and professional bodies (G. Fortier, personal communication, March 4, 2008). In Ontario, in addition to the PLAR work done at Mohawk College in the 1970s and 1980s, a series of task forces and reports throughout the 1980s resulted in the 1992 creation of a Prior Learning Assessment Secretariat, with a mandate to implement prior learning and assessment services in all Ontario colleges. In 2003, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities implemented a province-wide PLAR policy that included a funding formula for PLAR services.

In Atlantic Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador developed provincial guidelines for PLAR in 1998, while Prince Edward Island issued a public statement in support of PLAR in 2002 and tied PLAR to its apprenticeship system in 2004 to help alleviate skill shortages. As well as implementing a PLAR framework in 2005, Nova Scotia has benefited over the last 10 years from the existence of the Halifax-based PLA Centre, a community-based, not-for-profit agency that promotes RPL and delivers instruction in portfolio development.

Nationally, the federal government has supported PLAR initiatives as a labour force-development strategy since 1994, funding the first annual conference on PLAR in Ottawa in 1995. Largely through the auspices of Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), the Canadian government continues to fund learning and recognition-of-learning initiatives, often under the umbrella of foreign credential recognition or workplace-skills initiatives. Regardless, the outcomes are designed to realize "PLAR's perceived potential to identify and recognize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of immigrants who find themselves unemployed and underemployed in Canada's labour force" (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) 2007).

THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE: HAS RPL REACHED ITS TIPPING POINT?

In his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000), Malcolm Gladwell compared ideas to viruses in the way that combinations of factors can conspire to "tip" a new development into a critical mass of unforeseen popularity—or alarm. The notion that an examination of the current economic, educational, and social issues that inform the position of recognized prior learning in Canada could reveal Gladwell's "tipping point" as an imminent reality for RPL is presented next.

A scan of the horizon for "deliverables," ostensible evidence of something afoot, shows an increased level of energy in RPL publications and gatherings. Van Kleef et al.'s (2007) Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) report focused on issues of quality assurance in RPL. To gather this data, van Kleef and her team conducted several rounds of directed dialogue among key post-secondary RPL practitioners across Canada. Their study was the fourth major nationally funded study in two years to highlight RPL in Canada. Wihak (2006) similarly interviewed stakeholders across the country to produce a CCL-funded "state of the field" review of PLAR practice along workplace learning themes. In 2007, researchers from the Gateways Project (Arscott, Crowther, Young, & Ungarian, 2007) concluded their three-year HRSDC-funded study that followed the progress of almost 100 learners who had engaged in prior learning practices as they completed degree programs at a Canadian university. Finally, Work and Lifelong Learning's (WALL) David Livingstone and his pan-Canadian team of post-secondary researchers produced a series of working papers and, building on those documents, hosted a forum in Toronto in June 2006 where attendees from across Canada discussed issues of informal learning and its recognition in the work world (Livingstone, 2006).

A series of other notable gatherings has already occurred, and continues to take place, in various parts of the country. Of special interest was the January 2008 visit of a team from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to consult with groups of RPL stakeholders and practitioners across Canada. Shortly after their visit, a CCL-sponsored national consultation brought together approximately 40 RPL stakeholders, including representatives from the federal government and the Conference Board of Canada, as well as invited guests from Europe and the United States. Also early in 2008, RPL stakeholders from public, private, community-based, and volunteer organizations in British Columbia and Alberta met to discuss the development of a RPL framework for British Columbia. In March 2008, the "meeting of the minds" group convened in Vancouver to review the quality-assurance issues raised in van Kleef et al.'s (2007) report. Also in March, the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario, hosted a gathering of post-secondary Canadian Virtual University (CVU) practitioners to examine issues of PLAR, credit transfer, and resource-sharing among institutions. In Alberta, the Alberta Council on Admission and Transfer (ACAT) is the official "home" for movement toward recognizing prior and informal learning in the province's post-secondary system, and interest has been shown in developing a provincial framework. Similarly, in British Columbia and Ontario, groups of practitioners are working toward developing a provincial framework to establish some level of consistency in the handling of prior learning in the post-secondary education (PSE) system.

What's going on? Is Canada moving toward a tipping point for RPL? Much of this new activity is ad hoc, supplementing a very small number of broader, more established RPL organizations that have, until now, been the only Canadian venues and voices for prior and informal learning. Historically, an annual conference grew out of Paul Zakos's work with the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Belleville, Ontario; in 1995, the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) emerged from the FNTI group and directed its energies to promotion, marketing, and obtaining funding for various projects and research. Both FNTI and CAPLA now host annual events that attract national and international practitioners, scholars, researchers, and government stakeholders. Additionally, Joy van Kleef, long recognized as one of Canada's leading experts in prior learning, established the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) in 2003, and a research project with CAPLA produced Recognition for Learning—a comprehensive community of practice for both practitioners and learners.

The Recognition for Learning website is located at
http://recognitionforlearning.ca/index_e.php

The following websites also offer good information on RPL processes and practices:

- Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC)
  http://www.cicic.ca/412/
  prior-learning-assessment-and-recognition-(plar)-in-canada.canada
- Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)
  http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~plar/
- Athabasca University (Athabasca, Alberta)
  http://priorlearning.athabascau.ca/index.php
- Red River College (Winnipeg, Manitoba)
  http://www.rrc.mb.ca/index.php?pid=404
- Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops, British Columbia)
  http://www.tru.ca/prior_learning.html
- Manitoba Advanced Education and Training, Workplace Prior Learning
  Assessment and Recognition
  http://www.plarinmanitoba.ca/plar_main_e.html

Why a Tipping Point Now?
Factors Contributing to the Possibility of Change

In their report for the Conference Board of Canada, Bloom and Grant (2001) identified the recognition of prior learning as the key to a "brain gain," a phenomenon opposite to the better-known "brain drain." The brain drain refers to the loss of knowledge and the economic impact caused by emigration, while, according to Bloom and Grant, the brain gain speaks to the potential of a new and improved system based on those with experiential learning gained through work and training and those who have suffered from the lack of transferability of post-secondary learning between institutions and between Canadian jurisdictions.

Bloom and Grant addressed a number of tangible concerns that are now beginning to wreak havoc on Canadian society, specifically, demographic change, globalization, global competition for skilled labour, and the shift to knowledge-based economies. More recently, the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC, 2007) identified the same type of factors in their overview of activity in non-formal and informal learning in Canada.

- *An aging population:* Canada's population is aging while its birth rate is declining. The first wave of baby-boomer retirements has already begun, and the working-age populations of all provinces are currently declining or will decline by 2031. The population of seniors is rising and is poised to rise even more in the next several decades.
- *Immigration and internationalization:* Statistics Canada has forecast that Canada's immigrant population will increase by between 24% and 65%—to between 7 and 9 million people—by 2017, and projected

labour shortages will encourage more immigration to Canada. Although Canada's immigrant population is generally more likely to hold post-secondary credentials, having their credentials evaluated and recognized remains problematic for many reasons, including lack of time, lack of knowledge about the process, the need for just-in-time, job-specific training as a more immediate solution, and lack of funds (CMEC, 2007). Additionally, employer and regulatory bodies have, to date, not been proactive in making changes to facilitate the integration of immigrants into the Canadian workplace.

- *Economic development and skills shortages:* Canada's diversity and regional labour-market supply/demand characteristics have contributed to a persistent shortage of workers with essential skills, such as communication and management skills, teamwork and leadership skills, and numeracy skills. The continued rapid advance of the knowledge economy exacerbates Canada's skill shortage and the accompanying mismatch of skills to labour needs (Bloom, 2008 [as in Refs]).

If Bloom and Grant's (2001) call for the recognition of prior learning as a key strategy in stabilizing Canada's growing deficit in the knowledge-economy stakes is accepted, the RPL literature denotes a number of instruments that have been effectively used over the years to establish its presence and assess its knowledge value—whether it involves awarding a credential, admission to a formal program of study, or placement or advancement in a workplace. Typically, the methods of assessment used in RPL include examinations, demonstrations, interviews, or portfolios. Of the methods used to assess performance or knowledge, the portfolio is of interest to this discussion, as its increasing use for many educational purposes *aside* from RPL has moved the portfolio—as a learning tool—into the spotlight.[1]

There is also another reason to focus on the portfolio method of assessment. In Canada, the RPL community and its practitioners who seek the recognition of prior learning toward and within formally awarded credentials (often offered by university continuing education units) in post-secondary institutions tend to concentrate their efforts on prior learning that is defined as experiential and informal learning. Such learning results from the workplace, from community or volunteer work, from household-related work, from family responsibilities, or from general-interest activities; indeed, 96% of adults are engaged in informal learning activities (Livingstone, 2001), and this type of learning is normally assessed using the portfolio method.

The Importance of the Portfolio: A Symbol of Today's Society?

What is a portfolio? According to Barrett and Carney (2005), a portfolio is a compilation of work that a learner has

collected, reflected, selected, and presented to show growth and change over time . . . a critical component of an educational portfolio is the learner's reflection on the individual pieces of work (often called "artifacts") as well as an overall reflection on the story that the portfolio tells. (p. 1)

Barrett and Carney also addressed the difference between "high-stakes" portfolios and "low-stakes" portfolios, a distinction of interest to post-secondary PLAR practitioners. High-stakes portfolios represent a considerable investment by the applicant, specifically, investments of time and, more importantly, future potential. Using a portfolio to seek post-secondary credit is an example of a high-stakes investment. Using a portfolio to demonstrate your collection of poetry for discussion at a literary event would be classified as low-stakes. However, both high-stakes and low-stakes portfolios provide the means to enhance adults' access to learning.

The portfolio is put forward here as a symbol of our evolving society. Like society, it has the potential to not only accommodate but also promote growth and change. At the same time, the portfolio can serve as a vehicle for addressing our growing concern about Canada's need for brain gain, as defined by Bloom and Grant (2001). As such, it becomes a tool for responding to questions raised by emerging trends in educational and communications processes. The discussion that follows addresses the relevance of portfolio use within today's technologically and culturally important Web 2.0 landscape.

What is the Question?

Recent research commissioned by Microsoft indicated that this generation's "new kind of person" (Merchant, 2006, p. 235) is more comfortable using Web 2.0-style communication and social-networking tools than previous generations of users (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). This audience demands opportunities for "display," or self-presentation (Bean, 2007), but what does becoming a "display" society mean? It means that learners who are fluent residents of YouTube and Second Life are seeking opportunities to be heard. They seek not only to integrate their sense of self into their learning but also to present themselves to their co-learners. "To them, facts, explanations, tools, and reasoning are worth learning only insofar as they support [their] own, personal goals" (Prensky, 2007, p. 64). The users have indeed become the content, as McLuhan once predicted, and the facility of Web 2.0-type communications allows and encourages them to thrive on levels of self-created energy. As Merchant (2006) pointed out, "New tools for communication provide a context for new kinds of identity performance" (p. 235). Online learning, a foundational piece for today's educators and learners, provides a good example. Research on social presence and on learners' manifestation of the affective domain in online learning has revealed issues of identity and self-presentation (Merchant, 2006). Using conceptual rudiments

from Vygotsky (1978) and Goffman (1959), Snyder (1987) and Wolffram (1998) have determined that online learners care about how they present themselves to others, that they respond to social and external stimuli in creating a sense of self, and that they can and will construct multiple selves, according to circumstance.

How is the Portfolio the Answer?

Constructing a portfolio affords portfolio owners the opportunity to showcase their abilities, knowledge, skills, or performance. Several types of portfolios cater to various needs, for example, the need to demonstrate that you are worthy of being admitted to the University of Toronto Law School or the need to demonstrate to your employer that you are worthy of advancement.

Following the thinking of theorists such as Merchant (2006), Bean (2007), and Prensky (2007), the rising interest in "portfolios as expression" can be understood as a reflection of our fascination with exploring the self, perhaps one of many trends influenced by a combination, in the Western world, of the baby boomers' dominance of the current social scene and the recent emergence of a strongly technological society. Blogs, wikis, chat rooms, even cellphones—each innovative communication device has contributed to our ability and, in turn, our desire to express ourselves in tangible and public ways.

Personal portfolios, like blogs, provide opportunities for their owners to manifest their aspirations, accomplishments, thoughts, queries, and musings to the external world. Indeed, this type of portfolio is increasingly viewed as a necessary tool for capturing the essence of self, in much the same way that artists demonstrate their world view through creative portfolios. Many educational programs ask that students create a portfolio during their period of study so that it can serve as a record of accomplishment, a snapshot of that particular experience, or a statement of growth, maturity, participation, and citizenship. In some instances, this type of portfolio is initiated by educational institutions with the intention that young learners should continue to keep them current after graduation, thus allowing the documents to serve as "portfolios for life."

Similarly, many workplaces encourage employees to develop a performance portfolio. These portfolios highlight employees' skills and accomplishments and are used as evidence of promotion-worthiness. Applicants seeking new positions may take along a portfolio to demonstrate their suitability for the job. Immigrants seeking credentialization in their country of choice may depend on a performance portfolio to highlight their accomplishments as they seek entry into their chosen culture through education or the workplace. More and more, various types of portfolios are being put to use in societies that increasingly value a constructivist stance that permits creativity and the personalization of knowledge (Barrett & Carney, 2005).

   The European Union (EU) has stipulated that its citizens create and/
or be in possession of a personal learning portfolio by 2010. Like Canada,
the European Union struggles with a diverse population and the legislated
"marriage" of many distinct cultures. And like Canada, its current education-
related concerns include issues of economic uncertainty and labour short-
ages, worker mobility, and the portability of educational credentials. Unlike
Canada, the European Union's mandate has created many opportunities
for the creation of harmonies and accords whose purpose is to facilitate and
broaden access, first, to educational credentials, and second, to appropriate
employment. The EuroguideVAL Project is a good example of European col-
laboration. In place from 2005 to 2007, the project involved 10 EU partners
in a joint effort to improve the implementation of RPL services by train-
ing counsellors to advise and provide guidance to learners. Although each
member country is able to make its own decisions, collectively all EU citizens
are entitled to RPL processes, touted as "strategies for a changing world"
(Hemar, 2007).

   Europe's use of the portfolio as a "canary in the coal mine," or as an indi-
cator more generally, demonstrates its relative progress in connecting social
and economic measures to recognizing prior learning and the importance of
informal learning activities. Canada suffers by comparison. At the February
2008 consultation hosted by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), the
presentation of a suggested national framework for recognizing prior learn-
ing came to naught because of the perceived need for connecting RPL to a
pan-Canadian adult education approach. Issues of governance, structure,
and economics—in addition to the customary discussion of language and the
terminological difficulties related to defining RPL turf—effectively derailed
the proposition. In a similar vein, members of a visiting Organization for
Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) team investigating
Canada's positioning on issues of RPL noted the discrepancies, nationwide,
between policy and implementation of RPL practice, the difficulty in think-
ing about or formulating a progressive national framework or approach
to the implementation of RPL, and the impediment to learners and, sub-
sequently, to the Canadian economy arising from the lack of a unified and
coherent RPL process (OECD, 2007). The following analysis of the state
of RPL in Canada attempts to make sense of the realities described by the
OECD team.

Adult Learning and RPL in Canada: An Analysis

Despite its highly developed post-secondary system of education, Canada
runs the risk of falling behind other Westernized countries in grooming its
future labour force and in fulfilling its intention of becoming a knowledge
economy (Bloom, 2008). A number of identifiable factors hallmark Canada's

"inertia and lack of innovation and outreach among formal education and training institutions in the field of adult education" (PLA Centre Project Team, 2008, p. 7). The last 20 years have seen no significant increase in the number of adults seeking to continue their learning in formal ways, although, as noted earlier, over 95% of adult Canadians undertake informal learning projects through their work, community, and family environments. However, institutions, universities in particular, have not increased their adult-education offerings to mature learners nor have they moved toward acknowledging the value of adults' prior learning through the implementation of RPL processes. Workplace-learning opportunities for Canada's labour force are still considered inadequate and the fragmented dialogue between labour organizations and universities contributes, and is anticipated to continue to contribute, to a mismatch of skills to employment and employers' needs (Bloom, 2008).

In their discussion paper for a recent Canadian Council on Learning-sponsored symposium, the PLA Centre Project Team (2008) summarized the key adult learning challenge as

> not primarily one of institution building and greatly increased fiscal investments: the greatest priority must be placed on bringing the constituent parts together to work towards common purposes— governments, PSE institutions, employer and employee groups, learner groups and communities, and voluntary sector organizations. (p. 10)

With Europe offering a possible model of collaborative strategies and with the use of the portfolio, as a tool, converging with projected societal trends toward self-presentation, the recognition of prior learning may offer Canada's lifelong and adult learning community a viable path forward. There has been no shortage of RPL naysayers over the years, however; both supporters and detractors, in fact, have consistently maintained opposing views based on different assumptions about the purposes and processes of education (Wihak, 2006). Although the presence of tangible new RPL energies, outlined above, may complement the conceptual convergence of communication, societal, and technological factors into an era of readiness for change, the fact of opposing ideologies remains a reality.

Current prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) practice in Canada's post-secondary institutions is sporadic, fragmented, and marginalized, with a few exceptions. Ontario colleges, thanks to their government-mandated collaboration, support and offer an integrated PLAR system, while the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) coordinates PLAR efforts across its campuses. The Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN) offers practitioners and learners a chance to network and learn, although actual PLAR practice is limited to narrow

applications within Manitoba's universities (Universities of Manitoba, Brandon, and Winnipeg), where degrees of efficacy often depend upon staffing and the availability of expertise. Red River College in Winnipeg continues to be a leading PLAR force in Manitoba and in the country, offering courses for learners and practitioners and implementing PLAR practice within its programs. In Nova Scotia, the PLA Centre in Halifax trains practitioners and offers courses both on an individual basis and on contract to learners who want to prepare portfolios; it also seeks to establish collaborative agreements with post-secondary institutions that will recognize the results of those portfolio assessments. Similarly, the few Canadian universities practicing campus-wide PLAR implementation (Athabasca University and Thompson Rivers University and, to a lesser degree, University College of the Fraser Valley, Simon Fraser University, Ryerson University, and University of New Brunswick) must gain other institutions' acceptance of their graduates' PLAR-awarded credit. Many more colleges and universities practice PLAR in isolated, ad hoc, and situation-dependent ways.

Beyond the purview of post-secondary institutions, PLAR is often practiced under the auspices of funded projects in the literacy and employment-readiness sectors. The government of New Brunswick, for example, has been funding such projects to increase literacy rates and therefore employability among unemployed and underemployed workers in French-speaking northern New Brunswick towns. The PLA Centre in Halifax has received funds to assist the underemployed and unemployed with portfolio preparation in recognition of the portfolio's strength as a job-finding tool and as a vehicle to enhance self-esteem and process skills. Many colleges have entered into partnerships with business and industry, using RPL as a step to just-in-time gap training for workers.[2]

Canada's workplaces, however, are experiencing transition on many other fronts, with labour issues closely meshing with the realities of mid-career transition, demographics, and foreign credential recognition. Three noticeable demographic changes warrant attention.

First, the mid-career period, traditionally a stable period for adults in which they are able to consider "giving back" to society through volunteer work or through community or political commitment, has become a period of transition due to increasing rates of divorce, job loss due to changes in employment patterns and sectors, and demographic changes within families involving longer life expectancies and the effects of the "sandwich" generation. The age range of 30 to 50 years, where workers have traditionally moved into management roles, is predicted to experience a serious labour shortfall by 2020, resulting in a deficit figure of availability (Bloom, 2008; IFLL, 2008). Life-wide learning, which is defined as the ability of learners to expand their knowledge and skill sets beyond what they have previously experienced, will be especially useful to those adults caught in mid-career turmoil.

Second, Aboriginal peoples currently form the fastest-growing demographic group in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2005). The rate of growth in the number of young Aboriginal Canadians reaching their twenties and projected to enter the workforce in the next few years is more than four times the projected rate of growth among the same age group in the general population (OECD, 2007). Traditionally underemployed and undereducated, Aboriginal learners today comprise a greater percentage of college enrolments than they have in the past and they have significantly increased their apprenticeship numbers.

Third, an influx of foreign students and foreign-trained immigrants to Canada in recent years combined with the projected general increase of immigration to Canada has created a new urgency for educators and professional bodies. Generally better educated than Canadian-born workers, new immigrants are still challenged to find employment in their areas of expertise. Many are faced not only with the prospect of settling in a new country but also with the necessity of retraining in order to become employable by Canadian standards. In 2001, only 56% of immigrants reported having had their credentials accepted, and many did not even plan to have their credentials assessed (OECD, 2007).

The Canadian government, meanwhile, has allocated many millions of dollars over a five-year period to enhance foreign credential recognition. Additionally, Canadian post-secondary institutions and their funders have invested research dollars in supporting activities that investigate systems to improve both the current and the projected immigrant-education bottleneck. Yet, despite these efforts, the Conference Board of Canada projects that even the increased flow of qualified immigrants to Canada will not be able to maintain an adequate workforce by 2025 (Bloom, 2008).

The three demographic groups identified above will have a substantial impact on Canada's educational, social, and economic landscapes. Moreover, the members of each of these groups are touted as being ideal portfolio candidates. By bringing forward and demonstrating their knowledge, accomplishments, and employment-related learning in portfolio formats—be they high stakes or low stakes—these working (or potentially working) Canadians could better apply their talents to our gaping job market. Some current Canadian projects are doing just that. These include the Council for Advancement of Native Development Officers (CANDO), which uses PLAR for certification purposes; Edmonton's Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, which is developing a portfolio process for their clients; and the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organization's (SAHO) "career-pathing" project, which includes a partnership with the Northern Inter-tribal Health Authority (NITHA).

   Unfortunately, projects such as these, while creative and resourceful, often represent tentative and short-lived explorations into the potential of the recognition of prior learning. There is little harmony and rarely continuity. Campus Canada serves as a sad example of the lack of long-term projects. Incorporated in 2002 as a result of a request for proposals from Industry Canada, it had a mandate to "remove the barriers to post secondary education by providing an enhanced range of educational programs and support services to the adult learner" (P. Donkers, personal communication, 2006). By 2007, however, Campus Canada had exhausted its funding and had inadequate support to sustain the work it had begun on recognizing and assessing prior learning on a national and corporate scale.

   According to the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), "The field of lifelong learning remains a chief weakness in Canada" (p. 20). The council has identified the lack of a pan-Canadian educational structure as the primary source of the country's failure to move forward on lifelong learning. Although this structural lack has long been a topic of discussion among adult-education scholars, little progress has been made in recent decades to harmonize efforts among provinces or institutions. The 1995 declaration of the Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) provided for some general protocols around the transfer of credit but left adherence to the protocols to the judgment of each institution. The CCL (2007) report pointed to Canada's "lack of coordination and cohesion" (p. 20) and after highlighting and comparing Canada's performance on issues of quality assurance, funding alignment, planning mechanisms, and system-wide goals and objectives with six other countries (Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) and the European Union, pronounced its performance as distinctively lacking. Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2007 report on qualification systems in 15 countries does not include statistical data from Canada, although Canada indicated an initial interest in participating in the OECD study.

SUMMING UP: WHO'S VISIONARY?
WHO'S TUNNEL-VISIONED?
WHO'S WEARING ROSE-COLOURED GLASSES?

In a recent briefing on the future of lifelong learning, the Independent Commission of Inquiry for Lifelong Learning (IFLL) posed a number of questions designed to guide its inquiry, while observing this fact: "All countries are aware of the challenge to our education systems by demographic, social, and economic change, but very few are really committed to lifelong learning to meet these challenges at a strategic level" (IFLL, 2008, p. 1). Addressing this issue was also the task of an Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) team's recent visit to Canada.

What sense, then, can practitioners, academics, and observers of the current state of affairs surrounding lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning make of the events described in this article? Have we indeed reached a tipping point? Can RPL provide the answers for Canadian learners or for the projected impending state of economic uncertainty (Bloom & Grant, 2001; CMEC, 2007)? Naturally, there is no clear answer. As documented in this article, a very real sense of excitement and movement has been demonstrated across the country in a number of formats—meetings, consultations, symposia, panels. Federal monies have subsidized research, gatherings, and publications. The OECD is producing a global report on the status of non-formal and informal learning. Interestingly but not surprisingly, the audiences and participants at these occasions are often members of the same small but dedicated and persevering group of stubborn converts or early adopters. In order for Canada's RPL disciples to carry this energy forward to larger audiences, the sticking points noted below must be acknowledged and overcome.

Prior learning assessment, as a child of adult education, continues to suffer predicaments similar to those long endured by its parent field. Specifically, issues of language and divisiveness hamper the type of coherent unity that is needed to move forward. Unlike clearly definable fields such as medicine, nursing, or public-school teaching, adult educators have been unable to group together in harmony. In the late 1990s, the 60-year-old Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) collapsed, unable to sustain itself after government funding was withdrawn. Across the country, provincial associations collapsed at the same time, victims of the inability of their memberships—drawn from the public and private, literacy, post-secondary, community, and volunteer sectors—to coordinate their activities toward a common goal. PLAR practitioners, differentiating among themselves according to location of practice (university, college, industry, literacy) continue to struggle to speak to each other using the same language. On the language front, prior learning practitioners stumble over their own nomenclature, spending endless hours in discussion trying to get it straight. The most basic example is the fact that prior learning is still referred to as both PLA and PLAR in various circles.

Post-secondary educational structures and university mandates remain rooted, for the most part, in 12th century Renaissance traditions of didactic thought. The same thinking that has kept innovative continuing education programming pushed to the margins keeps RPL practices in the wings. Gordon Thompson, in his Foreword to his 1994 book *University Continuing Education in Canada: Current Challenges and Future Opportunities*, drew on Schön's work, challenging continuing educators to "break free from seeing and assessing our experiences through the assumptions which underlie our

conventional routines" (p. xiii). Thompson's challenge, though well debated and understood, still stands. The tendency of universities to adhere to historical modes is complemented by Canada's lack of unified strength or a coherent voice at a national level.

Professional bodies, one of the very markets threatened by impending labour shortages, are slow to relax their demands by accommodating alternative routes to professionalism. Although some progress is being made, for example, Ontario's 2006 Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act requires its 34 regulated professions to ensure clear, open, and timely licensing processes, accounting bodies (CA, CGA) remain unyielding in their designation of required university-completed credits and do not accept PLAR-awarded credit for demonstrated accounting expertise. Focusing on the inflow of immigrant labour, government attention is currently directed to foreign credential recognition; this represents one step toward addressing Canada's economic needs, but other legitimate paths to providing more flexible access to employment are being overlooked.

Canada's adult learners may have to wait a while before they can benefit from post-secondary recognition of their prior learning. What RPL progress has been made appears to have occurred in pockets arising from labour-driven partnerships. Despite the existence of RPL policies at both the provincial and the post-secondary-education level, implementation remains isolated. Colleges continue to be more receptive to policy implementation and partnership overtures than universities. Diehard RPL advocates, while continuing their work, can only hope that combinations of economic circumstances, consumer demand, and effective lobbying can increase adult learners' access to processes such as RPL, processes that permit them to display their knowledge or talents and thereby enhance their learning or employment opportunities.

ENDNOTES

1. One reason for the new focus on portfolios is the recent rise of the e-portfolio. Currently, the term "e-portfolio," both in Canada and globally, can mean almost anything that denotes a compilation of artifacts or documents. E-portfolios, however, may have been gratuitously invested with a usefulness and sense of power that flows from the technological advantage they are presumed to offer (see Conrad, 2006).

2. An example of this was the Daimler-Chrysler, Humber College, and Thompson Rivers University–Open Learning (formerly, the BC Open Learning Agency) partnership, where PLAR, combined with the accreditation of in-house training programs and the customized delivery of post-secondary courses, formed an integrated workplace-learning package for Daimler-Chrysler employees.

REFERENCES

Arscott, J., Crowther, I., Young, M., & Ungarian, L. (2007). *Producing results in prior learning: Final report from the Gateways Project*. Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University.

Barrett, H. (2000). Electronic portfolios = multimedia development + portfolio development: The electronic development process. *electronicportfolios.org* website. Retrieved August 14, 2007, from http://electronicportfolios.org/portfolios/EPDevProcess.html

Barrett, H., & Carney. J. (2005). Conflicting paradigms and competing purposes in electronic portfolio development. *TaskStream* website. Retrieved August 13, 2007, from http://electronicportfolios.org/portfolios/LEAJournal-BarrettCarney.pdf

Bean, M. (2007, November). *Lifelong learning the key to survival in the 21ˢᵗ century global economy*. Presentation to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) conference, San Francisco, CA.

Bloom, M. (2008, February). *Broadening the skilled workforce: Recognizing learning, competencies, and credentials*. Keynote presentation at Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing Adult Learning in Canada, Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) symposium, Ottawa, ON.

Bloom, M., & Grant, M. (2001). *The brain gain: Economic effects of recognizing learning and learning credentials in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Conference Board of Canada.

Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2007). *Post-secondary education in Canada: Strategies for success.* Report on Learning in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Author.

Conrad, D. (2006). E-portfolios as new learning spaces? Portfolios, paradigms, and pedagogy. *Proceedings of Annual European Distance Education Network (EDEN) Conference,* pp.206–210.

Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC). (1995). *Pan-Canadian protocol on the transferability of university credits*. Retrieved March 28, 2008, from http://www.cmec.ca/postsec/transferabilit.en.stm#5

Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC). (2007). *OECD activity: Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL)*. Report on Provincial/Territorial Activities and Pan-Canadian Overview.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: MacMillan.

Gladwell, M. (2000). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference.* Boston: Back Bay.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Hemar, T. (2007, October). *The accreditation of prior experiential learning: The French experience*. Keynote presentation at CAPLA Fall Workshop, Toronto, ON.

Independent Commission of Inquiry for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). (2008). *The future for lifelong learning: An independent commission of inquiry*. Briefing #2. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

Knowles, M. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education*. Chicago: Follett.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2007). *Social networking websites and teens: An overview.* PEW Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved October 16, 2008, from http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp.

Lindeman, E. C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*. Montreal: Harvest House.

Livingstone, D. W. (2001). *Mapping the iceberg*. NALL working paper. Toronto: Centre for the Study of Education and Work, OISE/University of Toronto.

Livingstone, D. W. (2006). *The education-jobs gap revisited: Current research on underemployment and work alternatives.* Presentation at OISE Faculty Speakers' Series, Toronto, ON.

Merchant, G. (2006). Identity, social networks, and online communication. *E-learning, 3*(2), 235–244. Available from wwwords website, http://www.wwwords.co.uk/elea/content/pdfs/3/issue3_2.asp#9

Mitchelson, E., & Mandell, A. (2004). *Portfolio development and the assessment of prior learning: Perspectives, models, and practices*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). (2007). *OECD Activity: Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL) Report on Provincial/Territorial Activities and Pan-Canadian Overview*. Retrieved October 16, 2008, from http://www.cmec.ca/postsec/rnfil/00-CANADA_OECD_WEB_site%20_RNFIL_Overview_Report_en.pdf.

PLA Centre Project Team. (2008). *Shifting the discourse: Mobilizing adult learning in Canada.* A discussion paper for the Canadian Council on Learning, Halifax, NS.

Prensky, M. (2007). New issues, new answers: Changing paradigms. *Educational Technology, 47*(4), 64.

Snyder, M. (1987) *Public appearances/private realities: The psychology of self-monitoring.* New York, NY: W. H. Freeman and Company.

Statistics Canada. (2005). Visible minority projections. In *Canadian social trends, No 79.* Ottawa, ON: Author.

Thompson, G. (1994). Foreword. In *University continuing education in Canada: Current challenges and future opportunities* (pp. xiii). Toronto: Thompson.

Van Kleef, J. (2006). *Building PLAR through theory: A case for implementing prior learning assessment and recognition in adult education practice settings.* Unpublished master's thesis, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Van Kleef, J., Amichand, S., Carkner, M., Ireland, M., Orynik, K., & Potter, J. (2007). *Quality assurance in PLAR: Issues and strategies for post-secondary institutions*, Vols. 1–3. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning (CCL).

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wihak, C. (2006). *State of the field review: Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR).* A report commissioned by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). Ottawa, ON: CCL.

Wolffram, H. (1998). "The full monty: Academics, identity and the personal mode". *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 1*(3). Retrieved September 17, 2006, from http://www.nicola-doering.de/Hogrefe/wolffram.txt.

BIOGRAPHY

Dianne Conrad has been a practicing adult educator for over 25 years, working in adult, distance, and continuing education. She is currently responsible for implementing and managing prior learning assessment at Athabasca University's Centre for Learning Accreditation.

Depuis plus de 25 ans, Dianne Conrad est éducatrice des adultes pratiquante, travaillant à l'éducation des adultes, à l'éducation à distance et en éducation permanente. Elle est présentement au Centre d'accréditation de l'apprentissage de l'Université Athabasca et est responsable pour la mise sur pied et la gérance de l'évaluation de l'apprentissage des acquis.