Forum / Tribune

"This is not your grandmother's PLAR":
BC boldly creates a new learning culture

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Abstract

A broad range of British Columbia's educators and administrators convened recently to re-discover PLAR with a new energy, a new focus, and a new urgency. "This is not your grandmother's PLAR" became the battle cry of the British Columbia Prior Learning Action Network (BCPLAN) Summit gathering at which the BCPLAN was declared as a not-for-profit society. This paper describes and situates BCPLAN as an emergent PLAR entity and considers its potential success against a historical background and a range of current issues.

Résumé

Une gamme variée d'éducateurs et d'administrateurs de la Colombie-Britannique s'est rencontrée récemment pour redécouvrir l'ÉRA avec une nouvelle énergie, un nouveau point de convergence et un nouveau sentiment d'urgence. « Ce n'est pas l'ÉRA de votre grand-mère ! » devint le cri de guerre au rassemblement du sommet du réseau d'action British Columbia Prior Learning Action Network (BCPLAN) pendant lequel BCPLAN a été déclaré organisme à but non lucratif. Cet exposé décrit et situe BCPLAN comme entité naissante d'ÉRA et considère son succès potentiel en fonction des antécédents historiques et une gamme d'enjeux courants.

Introduction

A broad range of educators and administrators from every sector of British Columbia's labour force convened in April 2010 in Vancouver to boldly go where, in this case, they *had* been before. Unlike the space-frontier smashers in television's Star Trek, British Columbia's educational system has visited prior learning assessment's orbit in a prior life. However, as was clearly stated by one participant, and echoed by nearly 100 other attendees, 2010's prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)[1] impetus has a new energy, a new focus, and a new urgency. "This is not your grandmother's PLAR," became the battle-cry of the BCPLAN Summit gathering at which the British Columbia Prior Learning Action Network (BCPLAN) was declared as a not-for-profit society, the culmination of almost two years of organizational work by a group of the province's leading PLAR advocates. This discussion paper will describe and situate BCPLAN's recent breakthrough activities.

PLAR: Looking Backwards, Looking Forward

The PLAR groundswell in Canada prior to April 2010's Vancouver gathering has been marked by activity in numerous sectors. Conrad (2008) documented PLAR's history in Canada while suggesting that a flurry of PLAR-related activity in recent years was moving PLAR initiatives toward Gladwell's (2000) tipping point. Since then, a number of PLAR milestones have been reached:

- The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is celebrating the 15th anniversary of its first national PLAR Forum, which took place in Ottawa in 1995.
- Two Canadian universities (University of the Fraser Valley and Athabasca University) participated along with 48 American post-secondary institutions in a large Lumina Foundation-funded study of prior learning's effect on learners' retention and graduation rates (Klein-Collins, 2010).
- National interest in PLAR-related foreign credential recognition (FCR) and qualification recognition (QR) processes has continued to produce research studies.
- Thompson Rivers University's recently inaugurated Prior Learning International Research Council (PLIRC) is expanding the PLAR research agenda.
- Two Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) awards have been granted for PLAR research projects in recent national competitions.

Across the country, and over time, varying levels of PLAR government and institutional endorsements have given rise to diverse practices that have been largely idiosyncratic and sporadic (CCL, 2007; CMEC, 2007; Conrad, 2008). Nationally, the federal government has supported PLAR initiatives as a labour force development strategy since 1994, funding the first annual conference in Ottawa in 1995. Largely through the auspices of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) the Canadian government continues to fund learning and recognition-of-learning initiatives, often under the umbrella of foreign credential recognition (FCR) 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" (OECD, 2007).

But perhaps no Canadian constituency is more aware of prior learning assessment practice, history, potential, and politics than British Columbia. Having once already adopted innovative strategies for mature learners through agencies such as the British Columbia Open

University and the Open Learning Agency, British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) initiated a PLAR movement in the early 90s. Responsibility for PLAR shifted in 1996 to the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) and PLAR funding was provided to each post-secondary institution. By 2002–03, however, funding reductions and organizational disbanding led to the dissolution of PLAR working groups associated with C2T2.

British Columbia's PLAR Vision for the Future

In two days of meetings in Vancouver recently, BCPLAN Summit participants hacked out a strong vision for the future. In its invitation, the summit presented its intentions as "to inspire, engage and advance [British Columbia's] connections and potential for partnership and action . . . [by featuring] a number of innovative practices in the field of RPL." Extensive and detailed foundational material prepared by a steering committee apprised participants of BCPLAN's history to date and summit goals were declared to be (1) to commit to a provincial network and a formal organization, (2) to contribute to shaping a provincial strategy and action plan, and (3) to create mechanisms and processes for moving forward (action plans, working groups, and priorities) (BCPLAN, 2010).

The planning committee brought to the table recommendations that proposed a governance framework, primarily that a provincial non-profit society be formed, that the society be inclusive and transparent with broad membership including institutional and individual members, and that a leadership charter be developed to provide guidance and direction to the newly formed group (BCPLAN, 2010).

Is this the formula for PLAR success—finally? If BCPLAN's Summit is to usher in a new regard for PLAR, what factors constitute the tipping point?

Hallmarks of Momentum: Moving Forward

It was encouraging to see the broad range of sectoral representation at the summit and the corresponding degree of excitement was palpable. One working group's response to the posed question, Who are the PLAR stakeholders? named the following groups, configured to radiate, spoke-like, from a "learner's" centre: services (settlement, employment), regulatory or licensing bodies (industry and trade associations, sector councils), government (at all levels, including Foreign Affairs and Advanced Education, Aboriginal), advocacy (unions and labour federations, provincial associations, Aboriginal bands, Industry Training Authority (ITA), learner associations), education and training (post-secondary, public, and private, continuing education, school districts, community-based trainers, literacy and language practitioners), and, lastly, employers. It was noted that all stakeholders shared responsibility to commit to the value of recognizing prior learning and communicate those values, to respond accordingly, and to implement change. It was a strong statement of spirit and will.

In coming to understand the necessary inclusiveness and extensiveness of a PLAR system, participants noted that the degree and scope of buy-in to the summit plan represented huge gains for PLAR momentum. Given that PLAR is a process designed to honour learners' past learning and to expedite them through training periods or educational programs in light of their already-held knowledge or skills, it would seem, perhaps, a "no-brainer" to embrace such a system in times of labour shortages and looming economic uncertainty (Bloom, 2008; Morrissey, 2009; OECD, 2007). But this has not been the case in Canada (Conrad, 2008).

Addressing the critical issue of take-up, another summit task group outlined PLAR's perceived potential benefits to stakeholders, illustrated below in Figure 1.[2]
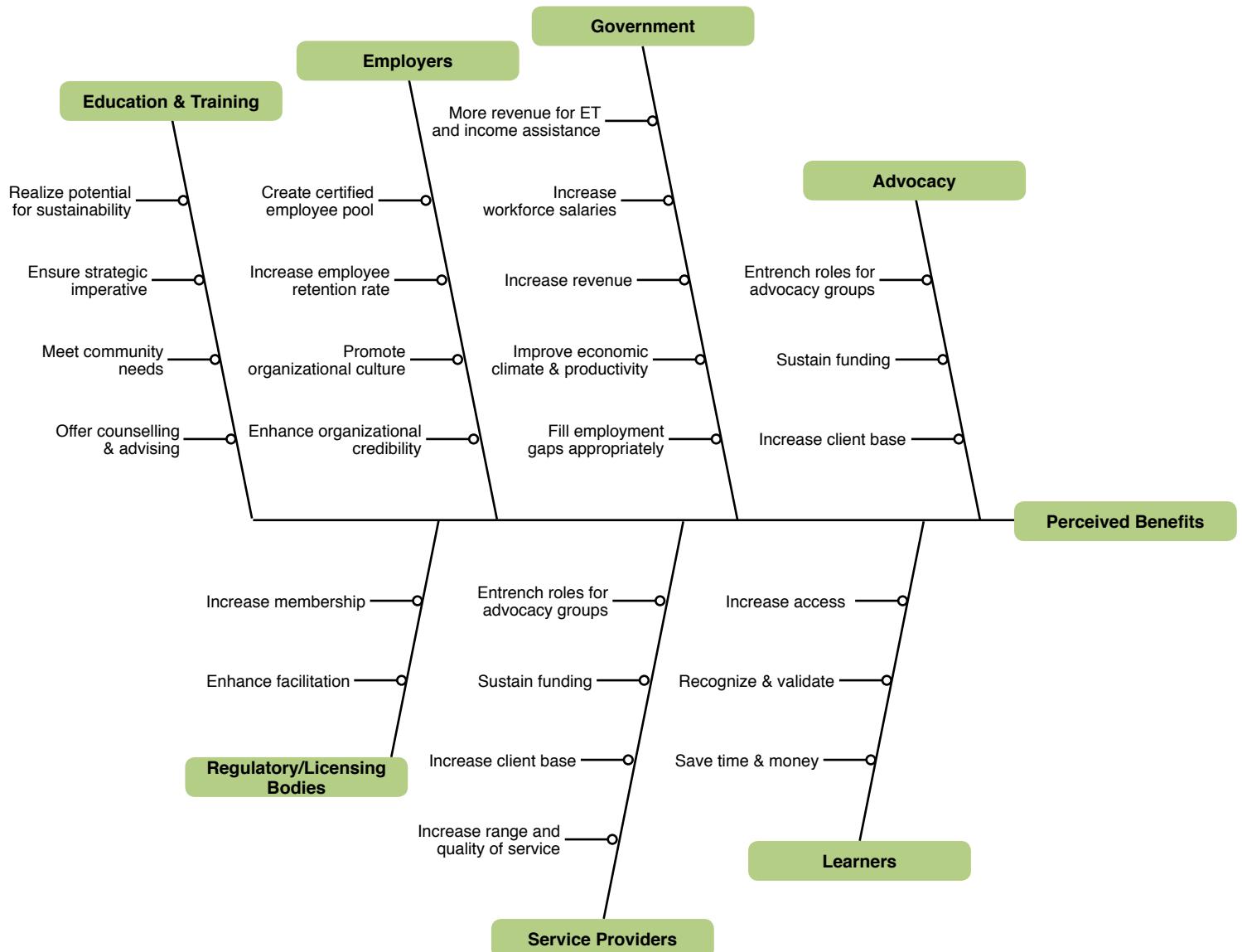
Figure 1: Perceived benefits of PLAR to a range of stakeholders

The ghosts of PLAR's past—both real and those represented by failures to mobilize—hovered over summit conversations. Fortunately, while acknowledging historical realities, the energy of the group prevented the doom-and-gloom recalling of the past from impairing the envisioning of the present or the potential of the future. The vehicle for achieving this forward movement was addressing the tough questions head-on: How should a prior learning network be organized in order to be sustainable and successful? What governance model will best work? What business model should be adopted? How will the network engage post-secondary educators and practitioners? How will the network contribute to employment and labour environments through skills training and re-training?

A discussion of best practices was also among the many fruitful exchanges at the summit. The event itself featured a "showcase" section during which many innovative and successful PLAR partnerships and systems were demonstrated. Examples were highlighted from many sectors:

- Tri-Cities Intercultural Workplace Project—Together, Douglas College and 14 human-service agencies provided foreign-trained professionals with a "prior learning bridge" to proficiency in language and business culture.
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) Assessment Service—Douglas College, together with a daycare agency, assisted candidates in moving toward licensure in ECE.
- Multiple Assessment Pathways (MAP)—Several partners linked assessment approaches to occupational performance standards, matching authentic assessment to individual capability.
- University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) Continuing Studies and British Columbia Coastal Hospitals—This award-winning partnership helped unit clerks in British Columbia hospitals gain accreditation through a portfolio development process. UFV is currently extending this model to work with hospital partner in the Okanagan Valley.

For the most part, the many best practices that were brought forward by summit participants can be categorized as validations of PLAR's basic principles: learning can be and is acquired outside formal learning environments, such learning *can be* assessed in rigorous and appropriate ways, and it is reasonable, logical, expeditious, and financially prudent to do so. Articulated best practices resonated loudly with notions of respect, also inherent in PLAR ideology and its parent discipline, adult education: respect for the individual and for the individual's learning, respect for varying types of skills and knowledge, respect for cultural diversity, and respect for multiple ways of knowing. Ancillary to the concept of respect, the concept of flexibility also emerged as a best practice—flexibility of access and flexibility of programming and offerings.

However, are the *real* issues of flexibility resolved by offering a variety of accessible venues for learning to occur or by designing vehicles for multiple assessments to permit fair and equitable opportunities for assessment? Probably not. The real issues of flexibility—the sticking points—are lodged, as they always have been, in systems of credentialization and professionalization that are both encouraged and permitted to keep the gates to their domains closely and judiciously guarded. Of course there is justification for this stance. Commonly cited arguments are, Who wants a brain surgeon who only successfully mastered 50% of his training? Who wants a nurse who can't nurse to Canadian standards? Who wants an engineer who can't do math? The list of potential impairments to society and our standards of healthy living goes on. If these are the sticking points, how will the energy and resolve of the British Columbia summit get past them?

In articulating PLAR's best practices, summit participants captured not only the rudiments of PLAR's belief system but also presented concrete methodologies that provided both constructive how-tos and a reasoned type of lessons-learned thinking. Perhaps the breadth and depth of wisdom and experience at the summit table has written the recipe for successful application of PLAR theory and spirit. The ingredients are all there.

A Systems View: Shared Responsibility, Shared Outcomes

summit participants represented every sector of British Columbia's learning and workplace environments and brought with them the understanding of PLAR as a piece of a larger system. Neither a replacement nor a stand-alone, recognizing individuals' prior learning serves as a cog in the larger economic wheel of preparing learners and workers for productive roles in Canadian society (Bean, 2007; Livingstone, 2006; Morrissey, 2009; PLA Centre, 2008a). Prior learning processes should function, not independently within post-secondary silos, but as stepping stones to further education, remedial (gap) education, or licensing. Post-secondary collaboration with industry, business, and community was seen as essential to forwarding everyone's interests—the ultimate goal being fulfillment of labour market goals, preservation of economic standards, and opportunities for Canada's enhanced citizenry to give back to a beneficent, collaborative society.

A specific part of this view—admittedly rosy—involved post-secondary institutions rethinking themselves *away* from historical stances of gate-keeping and, at times isolationism, and toward capacity building and collaboration. Articulation, sharing of resources and supports, partnerships, training, and building on previous successes were some of the strategies outlined by summit participants, who included representatives of 13 of British Columbia's post secondary institutions and BCCAT.

A Societal View: Cultural Sensitivity, Cultural Competency

Although immigration alone cannot supply the labour pool necessary for Canada's future needs (Bloom, 2008; Morrissey, 2009), the expected influx of immigrants to Canada's workforce will continue to present educational, cultural, and professional challenges. PLAR supporters recognize the potential contribution of immigrants' skills and knowledge to the Canadian economy while remaining mindful of gaps or competencies that may need to be measured or met. The British Columbia Nurses' Union presentation at the summit highlighted their approach to measuring the proficiencies of internationally trained nurses (IENs) and demonstrated parallels to other similar projects being implemented or undertaken in Canada.[3] Similar types of inclusive thinking can also be applied to issues around Aboriginal education, curriculum, and culture.

A Policy View: Policy Supports and Permits Rather than Directs

Among the many benefits of the summit's broad sectoral representation was the call for a PLAR policy framework that would not just accommodate practitioners' specific fiefdoms but also encourage the establishment of integrated, transparent, multi-faceted, and portable pathways. Participants described the desired state in terms of flexibility, accessibility, equity, and user-centricity. Most tellingly, participants described a grassroots framework that would be neither government nor institutionally managed, but would instead reflect a democratic and shared collaboration of provincial standards of practice and competencies—a level playing field for stakeholders.

The existence of PLAR policy and PLAR practice, however, does not necessarily ensure an ideal state of praxis. PLAR policy, in fact, has long been in place in many Canadian post-secondary institutions, but examples of actual sustained and/or organized practice remain sparse (Barrington, 2005). Historically, the lack of a national educational framework, public policy, or organizing principle continues to frustrate PLAR advocates even while giving rise to attempts to create such instruments; and recently, the OECD's 2008 chastising of Canada's lack of progress in recognizing and accommodating learners' prior and informal learning spurred the Canadian Council on Learning's (CCL) investment in such an effort (Morrissey, 2009; PLA Centre, 2008a; PLA Centre, 2008b). Likewise, the formation of the New Strategic Advisory Panel on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in 2009, purported to respond "to suggestions by several

jurisdictions wanting CAPLA to strengthen its leadership role as a well-established and unique pan-Canadian network and community of practice for online RPL resources, research, information sharing and dialogue" (CAPLA, 2009).

The presence of policy as an encouraging force, a permissive force, a directing force, or even a forbidding force constitutes, perhaps, the central question mark for BCPLAN. In an organizational tour de force, they have drawn together impressive representation from all corners of the province geographically and by sector. In two days of intense meetings, they were able to create an agenda for moving forward and secure unanimous buy-in from stakeholders. Government representatives indicated support. Will BCPLAN see policy formation as part of their next-steps action plan?

British Columbia's neighbour to the east, Alberta, has recently been following its own PLAR-development path, a path that is markedly different in that it emerged, not in the grass-roots style of the British Columbia summit, but by government decree. Building on momentum and obvious interest demonstrated at a provincially led Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) forum in 2007, Alberta Education and Technology (AET) seconded a PLAR coordinator who then assembled a stakeholders' advisory committee and created an action plan for the promotion of PLAR activity within the province. The committee is, at the time of writing, engaged in bi-monthly meetings until 2011. Composed of representatives from many of Alberta's post-secondary institutions as well as representatives from the province's community adult learning centres (CALCs), the committee investigates and discusses PLAR-related issues with an eye to developing provincial protocols and liaisons between institutions and community. To date, one example of substantial progress is AET's recent decision to track and report PLAR-awarded credits through the provincial Learner and Enrolment Reporting System (LERS), thereby equating the value of PLAR-earned credits to credits earned in the traditional, course-taking manner.

British Columbia's government enacted a similar legislation when that province's prior learning initiative was in full swing. Nonetheless, the province's commitment to prior learning had diminished by 2003 in the face of budget restraints. This dramatic shift in British Columbia's PLAR history was never far from front-line conversation at the summit talks.

IN CONCLUSION:
QUESTS, QUESTIONS & QUANDARIES

Perhaps you asked yourself as you began this article, "Just what does 'this is not your grandmother's PLAR' mean, anyway?" As with most analogies using that punchy affirmation, the intended connotation is one of change, of energy, and of modernization. But has PLAR just been gussied up on its way to town for a Saturday night out? Is there substance behind the summit's enthusiastic chorus? *Is* the Emperor wearing clothes?

A quick Google search for the origin of the sentiment "what do we have if we don't have hope" located many fine quotes alluding to the nature of hope, the most popular being Pope's famous "hope springs eternal" couplet. And while it goes without saying that most initiatives carry with them some degree of hope on the part of their supporters, it would be melodramatic and somewhat anti-climatic to simply rest this discussion on the fact that, of course, British Columbia summit planners hope that their energetic initiative bears fruit. To sum it up, to date they have done all that they can do. They have conceptualized; they have proselytized; they have organized. In Tuckman's terms, they have formed, stormed, and normed. It is fairly clear that they will perform; the question is whether or not their performance will bring the desired and anticipated results.

British Columbia's assemblage of stakeholders exhibited a high level of results-driven motivation, which was framed by labour and economic realities. They also clearly articulated the pressing concerns: post-secondary concerns about quality and implementation; professional associations' concerns about rigour of entry to licensure; not-for-profits' concerns about their own viability in today's markets. But the overarching step forward—the step that may be the tipping point, the starting point—was the unison of sector voices that appeared to be listening to each other, respecting each others' views, and agreeing, in principle, that recognizing adults' appropriate prior learning could benefit everyone. And so, at the time of writing, the "ayes" have it; the spirit is willing and the "body politic" is actualized.

Strategically, the "A" in BCPLAN stands not for "assessment" but for *action.* Visit BCPLAN's web site at www.bcplan.ca to follow their actions and their progress.

Notes

1. Language is regularly identified as an issue in prior learning discussions. The author is using the acronym PLAR here in light of BCPLAN's current nomenclature. The author recognizes, as do members of the British Columbia group, that the acronym RPL (recognizing prior learning) is currently gaining popularity in Canada.

2. Thanks to Chris Brown, University of the Fraser Valley, for his assistance with this graphic.

3. There are many such examples, many arising from Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) projects. In a recent separate Alberta initiative, the Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council (ERIEC) examined the implementation of a PLAR-type portfolio system to assist professionally-trained immigrants in displaying the full breadth of their knowledge and skills, designed to hasten or improve their transition into appropriate workplaces.

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Biography

Dianne Conrad, director of the Centre of Learning Accreditation at Athabasca University, attended the BCPLAN Summit as an invited speaker from British Columbia's neighbouring province. She brought with her news of Alberta's own progress on the PLAR front and a perspective formed from her work in the PLAR's post-secondary trenches.

Dianne Conrad, directrice du Centre de reconnaissance des acquis de l'Université Athabasca, a participé au sommet de BCPLAN en tant que conférencière invitée de la province avoisinante de la Colombie-Britannique. Elle transmit les nouvelles au sujet des progrès de l'Alberta dans le domaine de l'ÉRA ainsi qu'une perspective formée par son travail dans les tranchés de l'ÉRA au postsecondaire.