Adjusting the Fulcrum: How Prior Learning is Recognized and Regarded in University Adult Education Contexts

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Abstract

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) offers adults formal recognition for learning obtained through non-formal and informal means. The practice reflects both equity and economic development concerns (Keeton, 2000). In the field of Adult Education as a formal study, however, tensions exist between honouring the learner and honouring the curriculum. To resolve this tension, we have used 'dialogue' (Bohm, 1996) to explore the experiences of the first author, a former PLAR candidate and now a professor of Adult Education involved in using PLAR to admit students to a graduate program.

Introduction

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition)[1]) offers adults formal academic recognition for learning obtained through non-formal and informal means. A recent large-scale study in the United States (Klein-Collins, 2010) provided convincing evidence that in the postsecondary education context, adult learners who are able to utilize PLAR have better academic outcomes than those who cannot: more courses taken, better persistence towards degree completion, and a shorter time to degree completion. Other, earlier research has demonstrated that students who engage in PLAR achieve grades that are equal to or better than regular students (Aarts et al., 1999).

In the post-secondary context, nevertheless, PLAR remains a somewhat marginalized and underutilized practice around the world (Werquin, 2010), with the exception of the United States (Travers, 2011). Wong (2011) articulated some of the reasons why post-secondary institutions resist the introduction of PLAR. While these reasons include institutional factors such as funding issues, Wong emphasized the resistance of faculty members to the idea that learning occurring outside of the formal education system could be considered worthy of academic recognition. That is, while academics may concede that learning occurs elsewhere, they contend that the learning is different in substance than what is taught in formal education.

One might expect that the attitudes of Adult Education professors would be more receptive than those of colleagues in other areas of study. Two recent Canadian studies (Wihak, 2007; Wihak & Wong, 2011) found, however, that PLAR is not widely used in degree-level Adult Education

programs in Canadian universities. In the second study, faculty members' uncertainty about how to assess prior learning was cited as a reason why the process is currently underutilized.

In Adult Education, as a field of study in the university context, a tension may exist between honouring the learner and honouring the curriculum when PLAR is used to grant admission to degree programs and/or advanced standing (Fenwick, 2006; Harris, 2006). This tension arises because the Adult Education curriculum stresses honouring the learner while the university context stresses honouring academic standards. We need a way to approach PLAR that can, theoretically and pragmatically, reflect both of these influences for university-based Adult Education programs.

In this paper, we explore how to resolve this conflict through a process of 'dialogue' (Bohm, 1996, 1998). The first author personally benefitted from using a PLAR process to earn credit towards completion of her undergraduate degree and, shortly thereafter, to gain entrance into graduate studies with a focus on adult, community, and higher education. We present her reflected-on and meaning-making experience to represent the learning as an Adult Education student *but* with a second level of reflection from her current perspective as a professor in Adult Education. Through a dialogue process with the second author, we uncovered her tacit learning about how both the adult learner and the Adult Education curriculum can be honoured, simultaneously.

Theoretical Foundation of PLAR in Adult Education

The field of Adult Education is the natural home of PLAR theory and practice (Thomas, 2000). The idea that adults learn from life and work experience, and their reflections on that experience, is a central tenant of major Adult Education theorists such as Dewey, Freire, Mezirow, and Knowles (Conrad, 2010; Jarvis, 2004, Wheelahan, 2006). While this notion informs the general practice of PLAR, the work of Kolb with regard to the "experiential learning cycle" has been used extensively to provide specific theoretical justification for how experiential knowledge can be transformed into the type of abstract knowledge valued in formal education (Wong, 2000).

The relationship of experiential learning to learning acquired through formal education is, however, a problematic question in adult learning (Gibbons et al., 1994; Jarvis, 2004). Informed by post-modernist, feminist, and critical race theorists, Michelson (2006) argued passionately that experiential knowledge is 'situated knowledge', in contrast to the "disembodied and depersonalized" (p. 144) knowledge valued in formal education. To the extent that the PLAR process requires learners to make their knowledge conform to formal academic standards, their situated knowledge is devalued and ignored.

Making a related observation, Fenwick (2006) argued that the assumptions about learning and knowledge underlying contemporary PLAR practice were too simplistic. When knowledge is valued by institutional standards, learning becomes centered "in a rational, knowledge-making mind, somehow rising above messy bodily dynamics to fix both experience and a singular experiencing self" (Fenwick, 2006, p.287). This approach to recognizing learning perpetuates the disadvantaging of those who are already disadvantaged by gender, culture, or economics. Fenwick suggested that complexity theory may offer insights about learning and knowledge that would be fruitful in the moving the PLAR field forward in being able to appreciate the richness of embodied learning. In PLAR practice, the emphasis would shift from product to process. Alternatives to written representations of learners' knowledge, such as drawings and stories, would highlight how representation of any kind is always partial. These two suggestions for change entail a third: institutional PLAR processes "guided more by conversations and portfolios than written checklists" (p. 297).

Harris (2004, 2006) also critiqued the simple equating of experiential and academic knowledge but argued from the perspective of academic disciplines. According to Harris (2006), the idea that knowledge "can transfer unproblematically between contexts" (p. 14) is an assumption often used in theorizing PLAR, but is an assumption that must be challenged. In post-apartheid South Africa, Harris explored knowledge creation and transmission in the context of admission to a postgraduate diploma program in Adult Education, using Bernstein's curriculum theory (1999) as a framework. Although the PLAR project was intended to offer experienced adult educators lacking formal credentials an opportunity to enter the program, Harris, nevertheless, found that applicants were expected to conform their knowledge to the academic standpoints of the Adult Education curriculum. Selection processes gave advantage to candidates who already self-identified as lifelong learners, with developed skills in reflection and backgrounds in areas such as policy development or union activism. Candidates lacking such a background, (e.g. those trained in business administration), were disadvantaged by the selection process.

Harris' (2006) analysis showed that the Adult Education admission process "had a hidden curriculum which rewarded particular ways of thinking and acting" *(*p. 68) which compromised the goal of recognizing candidates' prior learning. Further, Harris realized that the program facilitators were unconscious of their tendencies to impose academic criteria on the candidates' prior learning, despite the fact that they held strong social justice commitments to admitting candidates who lacked formal credentials. Harris' work highlighted the importance of understanding the underlying knowledge structures in any discipline or field of study where PLAR is being considered. More importantly, for the field of Adult Education as taught in university contexts, it exposed the conflict in the PLAR process between valuing the learner's knowledge and valuing the body of knowledge and theoretical lenses conveyed in the curriculum.

Reflections

It is that time of year when reviewing graduate program applications will consume several weeks of my (first author) attention and focus. Some of my colleagues feel weighted down and fatigued by the energy required to review files and, at times, extensive portfolios submitted by those who wish to pursue graduate studies with a focus on adult education and adult learning. All of this coincides, and inevitably conflicts, with 'end of term' papers, grading, and preparing for the upcoming semester. We are united in our belief, however, that this commitment of time and attention is a critical aspect of our work and that our review and decision-making processes be guided by foundational adult education philosophy, values, and principles. Although graduate application forms are generic, ergo sterile, in appearance and format, we create spaces for applicants to include narratives and other artifacts by welcoming additional attachments to insert their own voice to share and describe experiences, insights gained, and knowledge acquired from what they have learned "along the way" (Bateson, 1994). These narratives and artifact spaces provide a thoughtful lens through which to better understand and appreciate knowledge acquired and an individual's readiness to successfully engage in graduate studies.

Catherine Bateson's work on learning from experience has significantly impacted my own as an adult learner, adult educator/practitioner, and as a tenured, associate professor in a program area focused on adult education and adult learning. This sequencing of roles is both intentional and significant in that it represents the spiraled and scaffolding nature of my own learning journey over the past thirty-plus years. Making reference to her work as an anthropologist, Bateson shared:

> …[we] are trained to be participants and observers at the same time, but the balance fluctuates. Sometimes a dissonance will break through and pull you into intense involvement in an experience you had distanced by thinking of yourself as coolly looking on. Or it may push you away when you have begun to feel truly a part of what is happening. (1994, p. 5)

These words carry deep meaning for me as I too struggle with tensions brought about by attempts to successfully navigate through and knit together how I have come to know what I know as an adult learner, adult educator/practitioner, and now as an academic. As I prepare to review applicants' files, I focus on "attending to catch every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar" (Bateson, 1994, p. 6). I experience being deeply drawn into the storied lives of others and to how deep meaning is made of their own learning journeys. Now, an academic at a traditional university, where I now find myself seated around an admission's table as one of those potential gatekeepers, I am compelled to reflect deeply on my own learning journey as an adult learner seeking PLAR admission in the early 90s to post-secondary studies. My dream at that time was to secure an undergraduate degree.

The 'Equivalent' Clause

My parents had limited formal schooling. They were young adults at the onset of WWII. The economic, political realities at that time were not conducive to all youth completing high school, let alone pursuing post-secondary studies. When the war ended, my father was employed as a public servant, a junior engineer for the military. His employee file read "Grade Eight Level Complete". My mother worked at home raising five children. Over dad's thirty-five year career, he was regularly promoted under a clause that valued 'related work experience' as being equivalent to a university degree. This did not sit well with some of his degreed colleagues vying for promotion. By the time my father retired, he was supervising several credentialed engineers. Although he successfully navigated his career by linking experiences and knowledge gathered along the way, PLAR was not yet a part of the language used to affirm and validate alternate knowledge acquisition traditions.

Early Learning

Indeed, life does happen when making other plans. I was mid-way through grade eleven when a serious car accident turned my world upside down. My best friend was killed instantly and others sustained serious injuries. Although I escaped with little physical injury, I experienced survivor guilt and spiraled into a deep depression. I did not return to school that year. I was readmitted under a 'special circumstance' clause the following September and was allowed to take grade twelve coursework even though I lacked year eleven pre-requisites. I would be awarded automatic credit for year eleven if I passed my year twelve exams. Determined and highly motivated, I did pass my diploma exams but was still credit deficient to being awarded a high school diploma. I chose not to return to high school the following year. All my friends had graduated and many were university bound. I pounded the pavement looking for work, unaware that my decision would mark the beginning of my intimate relationship with PLAR.

Navigating Post-Secondary

I worked as a telephone operator and receptionist for a few years. Determined to further my education, I contacted a counselor at a local college to discuss my options. The interview went well. Even though I lacked a high school diploma, I was encouraged to apply for part-time studies as a 'probationary', post-secondary student. My probationary status would be lifted upon successful completion of three college courses. I was later informed that the admission's policy was somewhat relaxed when I applied. I suspect this was due to the college being in its early developmental stages; it had opened only a few months prior. I successfully completed the coursework and was offered full-time/regular student status. Again, the circuitous nature of life took hold and I soon discovered that I was pregnant. I put my studies on hold to secure full-time employment and to focus on being a very young, unmarried mom.

To enter the paid workforce in any substantial way, I needed to grab on to the 'equivalency' brass ring. I took a deep breath and applied for a government 'junior' social worker position. I argued successfully in the

interview that two years of volunteer work in a youth development centre provided me rich experience to draw from. The interviewer deemed this and my prior college coursework sufficient experience and I was offered the position.

I gave birth to my son at the end of that year and applied to the local university to continue my studies on a part-time basis. I was admitted under 'mature/probationary' status. I worked in the day, brought my baby to evening lecture hall, and studied in the early morning hours. This was my life – I remained focused and passionate. I was acutely aware that I was moving towards becoming a 'legitimate', credentialed professional.

My learning curve was timely! I thrived on applying theories and concepts that I studied in the evening to my daytime work. Flecha (2000) maintained that, "Reflection is vital in order to understand fully the tasks we need to accomplish and to use our creativity in finding new solutions to the problems that arise" (p. 16). In retrospect, and without a theoretical framework to articulate at the time, I intuitively understood that keeping a journal would help me successfully navigate the multiple roles I was juggling. One of my earliest entries read:

> I stayed after class to talk to my English professor. He supports my dream and believes in me. I am struggling with how long it will take to finish my degree. I shared my story of an incomplete high school, the car accident, my survivor guilt, being a single mom, and a non-credentialed social worker, I feel like an impostor! He said, "You carry around a lot of guilt. Finishing this degree will not be nearly as difficult as what you have already accomplished. Believe in yourself. I do! (personal journal, October 10, 1975)

In retrospect, this was my first experience of 'safe space' as an adult learner. His encouragement, instilling a modicum of confidence, marked a new beginning. He focused squarely on me as a learner and validated my experiences and learning. This was a pivotal point in my own learning journey and I vowed to one day have a voice in support of adult learners who worked to actualize their own potential. I knew nothing of adult education as a field of scholarship at the time. I also came to realize that alternate ways of knowing were understood and valued by only a few. Traditional, formal education was not always a single, accurate measure of personal and professional competency and potential. It took four-plus years of part-time study to successfully complete two years of undergraduate work. As year three required a full-time commitment to a practicum placement, this would have to wait. As single mom and sole provider, I could not leave my daytime job. Once again, I chose to temporarily retire my studies.

I reapplied to university many years later only to be informed that my prior coursework would not be recognized as I had exceeded the non-negotiable, ten-year window for degree completion. A stringent admission's policy wiped away many years of hard work. I felt invisible and powerless.

Determined to navigate my way through institutional obstacles, and on the advice of a close friend (an adult educator at a traditional university where PLAR was not recognized), I contacted Athabasca University (AU). This university, non-traditional in its approach, provided a window of invitation and opportunity not governed by ticking time clocks and traditional admission's policies. Perhaps my prior coursework would be recognized and validated!

Valued and Validated

The admission's counselor explained AU's commitment to acknowledging the experiential, informal, and incidental learning of all applicants. Granted, some forms were completed. What I most recall, however, were the dialogues in support of personal reflection and articulating my learning and what I hoped to study at the university. I remember struggling to succinctly communicate what I had learned through my prior, paid work and volunteer experience. I was encouraged to share stories of my work, mentors along the way, and lessons learned. In retrospect, the focus was on my learning process and readiness for further study, not on prior course content knowledge. I did not speak the language of 'adult education' nor could I refer to theoretical frameworks or paradigms. This highly skilled and intuitive individual guided me through a reflective process in support of making deeper meaning of my learning journey. It is likely she kept notes throughout, although I don't have any recollection of this. I do remember her attentiveness, encouragement, and authentic, affirmative presence. I was elated to hear I could register in a course immediately, in spite of the review committee needing six to nine months to determine advanced credit. Nine months turned into eleven and I began my first course with AU the following month and completed two courses prior to receiving my formal, acceptance letter. I would be awarded two and one-half years advanced standing. I was told that, even though some of my earlier coursework was 'old' (taken more than 10 years prior), because I had worked as a social worker and then as an adult educator for an extended period of time, my work experience took precedent over 'outdated coursework'. I interpreted this to mean that my work experience was considered to be relevant and the equivalent to formal, university coursework that I might have otherwise completed in more recent times. I mentally calculated that it would take approximately one year to complete the requirements for a three-year undergraduate degree. Twenty months later, I stood proudly on the stage in my cap and gown feeling like I had just won the lottery. I was already pondering graduate school. I was navigating a path that excited and motivated me and I simply did not want to stop!

Graduate School

Shortly thereafter, I applied to graduate school at a traditional university. Lacking the four-year baccalaureate pre-requisite, I was once again immersed in PLAR processes and procedures. I recall walking into the interview with pride. I had a degree! This was the same university that had disregarded my earlier coursework for not having completed my degree within the 10 year window.

The program coordinator was welcoming, felt authentically present, and validated my accomplishments. Her presence contributed to another layer of confidence and I was better able to take ownership of knowledge I had gained. I was applying for admission to a Master of Education program in Adult, Community, and Higher Education. She was a skilled adult educator/facilitator and mentored me through a reflective process. She prompted me when I struggled to find the words to capture the essence of my learning. She held that critical space for me to reside within as I shared the story of numerous twists and turns I had navigated to arrive at the place and time. In retrospect, I believe that she was as interested in my overall readiness to pursue graduate studies as she was in determining my gained, 'content/curriculum', adult education knowledge.

Shortly thereafter, and on the recommendation of the Program Head, I met with the Graduate Coordinator. This brought a distinct shift in tone, expectation, and experience. I was asked pointed questions and felt that I was being observed and dissected through a one-way window. I felt pressured to justify why I was applying with only a three-year baccalaureate degree when the program requirements clearly asked for four years. I felt deficient and in a fishbowl as this individual appeared to be more interested in my content/discipline knowledge. With plummeting confidence I struggled to articulate my learning. This space felt void of authenticity and positive, respectful regard. It seemed that only knowledge acquired, via academic coursework from a traditional university, would be validated. Discouraged, I exited the interview with dim hopes of admission. In retrospect, there was a paradoxical tension at play. In essence, I spiraled from a belief in self, brought about by viewing my learning journey through the thoughtful lens of the program coordinator who was deeply immersed in adult education philosophy and practice, to deep self-doubt: being viewed through a traditional, academic lens contributed to my downward spiral.

It would have been interesting to be a fly on the wall during discussions that followed between the Adult Educator/Program and Graduate Coordinator. As I was ultimately granted admission to the M.Ed. program, I assume that the Adult Educator must have had the final word. I completed my program within two years and continued on to successfully complete my Ph.D. in adult education; I maintained a straight A GPA. This journey was transformational in that my worldview had been significantly broadened and deepened. I now had a language to articulate my own learning journey. I understood paradigms, philosophical underpinnings, and theoretical frameworks that informed adult education and adult learning and I came to appreciate adult education as a field of scholarship *and* practice.

Professor of Adult Education

The year was 2004 and two weeks after convocation, I was being considered for a tenure-track, assistant professor position in the program I had just graduated from. As an adult educator, within the context and culture of an adult education program in a traditional university, I now sit at the admission's table reviewing PLAR portfolios from applicants seeking

admission to graduate programs in the area of adult, community, and workplace learning. I come to this table with both awe and humility, inspired by the often challenging and circuitous learning journeys and alternate knowledge acquisition traditions reflected upon and represented by the applicants. Awe speaks to evidence of commitment and creativity expressed and illustrated in applicant portfolios; humility, to my awareness of the power I hold as assessor and gatekeeper. External institutional pressures dictate that content knowledge be the primary assessment lens. This expectation often bumps up against my own experience of having navigated a non-linear, adult learning path into graduate school and calls forth a deeper level of sensitivity and intuitiveness, a deeper lens in recognition of the challenge for applicants to capture and show evidence of the knowledge they have gained along the way. I am compelled to revisit, reflect upon, and deconstruct my own adult learning journey, a journey significantly impacted by some wise 'Sages' who provided both formal and informal mentoring as I navigated my own challenging, sometimes uncomfortable, and unfamiliar terrain.

Holding that space. I now share in the responsibility, when meeting with individuals interested in pursuing graduate studies and when reviewing applications and portfolios, to hold and protect that space that seeks to understand, appreciate, and make meaning of learners' experiences acquired along the way. At this traditional university, PLAR is a term and evaluative process that conjures up anxieties and misgivings for most. Even within the context of my own program area in adult education and adult learning, many of my colleagues are hesitant to apply a PLAR lens during the graduate application review process. The expressed concern is that PLAR applicants lack the necessary, preparatory, foundational skills, and rigor to succeed at a graduate level. There are others, however, who admit to a tentative and shallow understanding of PLAR; they seek to learn and are willing to suspend tightly held beliefs and assumptions that have typically guided the application review process. Consequently, and on several occasions, I have been invited to share my perspective and to mentor others in the review and assessment of applicants to graduate programs who seek admission through alternate routes. Alternate routes may include three versus four-year baccalaureate degrees, or individuals whose work and life experience deserve recognition as being equivalent to an undergraduate degree. Progress has been slow but small steps are being taken to widen the window of understanding pertaining to how we come to know what we know in ways other than through formalized academic coursework.

As I reflect on some of the current PLAR literature, much has been accomplished as academics and practitioners continue to develop guidelines, templates, and strategies to guide the review and assessment process. I am struck, however, with how PLAR assessment continues to focus more heavily on content and curriculum knowledge. To elaborate, I see significant strands of a training and development model and approach to PLAR assessment, rather than evidence of a thoughtful lens and an adult education, facilitative approach that locates the learner and acquired learning processes on center stage. Through my own PLAR experience as

an adult learner, guided and supported by one-on-one dialogue, specific content/curriculum knowledge felt secondary to the awareness I had of my own learning readiness, style, and learning strategies. How I 'learned how to learn' was the dominant focus, coupled with my interest and confidence to continue along this pathway. A training and development approach to PLAR focuses heavily on the successful transfer of learning (content) from one context to another. Retention of information is paramount and learning outcomes and benchmarks for learning transfer constitutes a language for determining whether or not an applicant's acquired knowledge is deemed relevant to the program she or he is applying for. Indeed, assessment of an applicant's content/curriculum knowledge is relevant when one is attempting to challenge a course for credit where it is felt that this knowledge has been acquired by some other means. Within this context, the fulcrum shifts to the content side of the continuum and further away from other qualities and skills that contribute to learner success. To limit PLAR assessment and processes to this narrow, singular focus is to negate the broad scope and potential for learning and knowing that individuals gather and experience along the way.

PLAR assessment review processes that support a more balanced and holistic lens would have us take both ends of that horizontal line and reconnect the two ends into a more spiral shape and approach. In this way, a space in the middle would be created and held to explore and support the storied lives of individuals and the learning and knowledge acquired, above and beyond content/curriculum knowledge (Figure 1.)

DISCOVERY
READINESS
LEARNING TO LEARN

LOW
Content Knowledge

HIGH
Content Knowledge

Figure 1.

Within this held, honoured, and protected space, individuals are encouraged to reflect on their learning journey. How are experiences interpreted and made meaning of? What have they learned and how have they learned it? How is tacit knowing made conscious, taken from here to there, from the inside out? What connections are being made? How do past experiences, insights, and knowledge gained create a pathway for what the learner seeks to learn and accomplish as they pursue formal study? What resources and supports have been acquired, along the way that the learner can continue to draw from? And what is the level of confidence and resourcefulness that will help to construct a foundation for ongoing growth and success?

PLAR assessors, when opening this space to thoughtfully, intentionally, and purposefully encourage and guide this depth of introspection and dialogue exchange, draw from a complex array of skills, knowledges, and abilities. To hold this space for others requires having sat in this space ourselves and doing the hard and courageous work of reflecting in complex and critical ways about our own informed practice. Until we have uncovered our own blind spots, until we have revealed our own secrets of how we have come to know what we know as adult learners and educators, we will be challenged to engage within this space with another's reflective process. In other words, is it possible to hold a space for another to critically reflect on her or his own learning journey if we have not sat within this space ourselves as educators and assessors? If we are positioned around an application review table, as gatekeepers navigating the PLAR admission's process, without having critically reflected on our own learning journey that brought us to this place and time, we will surely miss particular, key highlights and elements in applicants' portfolios due to being restricted by our own secrets that have not yet been revealed and by our limited peripheral vision. This work demands that we probe and explore that which resides within the spaces of our unconscious.

To embark on this journey as educators and assessors takes courage and a surrendering of sorts, of tightly held beliefs, biases, and assumptions. Having experienced PLAR as an adult learner applicant, I feel a sense of comfort and commitment when supporting others through this process. Being steeped in the adult education field of scholarship and practice, I am on familiar terrain. In spite of being deeply socialized in this field, however, to write now about the PLAR process from an adult educator/scholar perspective, is difficult work. In a sense, I continue to struggle to articulate my own learning journey in a language that will connect and resonate with my colleagues. I suspect that this process carries deeper levels of struggle for those who are charged with the responsibility of evaluating PLAR applications and portfolios when they have not critically reflected on their own process or created their own lifelong learning portfolios.

A new lens. I often ponder how I would have reacted to being presented with PLAR forms and checklists, at the onset, in my quest for acceptance to university many years ago. In retrospect, I was unaware of any formal, prior learning assessment processes at work. Most of the assessment paperwork that found its way to my student file was likely completed after meeting with individuals from that institution. My need was to connect with someone who would recognize my abilities and potential. Through dialogue and reflection, I was challenged, within safe space, to dig deep to discover the learning there. Checklists and tightly structured interviews would have denied me the space needed to explore how learning acquired along the way might inform formal study within a traditional university context and structure.

When applying to graduate school, I was fortunate to connect with a practitioner, adult educator and scholar. Unlike Harris's (2006) reference to the South African RPL process, where faculty members were *unconsciously* exploring 'readiness' and 'learning to learn', I was guided by this skilled

individual who supported me to "reflect critically (and in a particular and complex way) on [myself] and [my] practice" (p. 67). I was encouraged to ask questions of myself and to connect my learning with/within different contexts that I had lived and experienced. In retrospect, this individual was informed and understanding of critical social theory in that she guided me to recognize having been empowered by different experiences along the way and how working through various dilemmas in my life and work world contributed to transformational learning moments. Through critical reflection, moments that might otherwise have been interpreted as limiting and oppressive were considered then understood as moments of personal emancipation. This dialogical process as I shared my learning story speaks to me of what Harris (2006) referred to as "sharing the 'gaze'" (p. 65). To further elaborate, it was years later I was informed that this individual, in spite of having navigated a fairly typical and traditional path through undergraduate and graduate studies, had developed her own lifelong learning portfolio when completing an Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.) in Adult Education at Nova Southeastern University in Florida. In those moments, when she held that space for me to reflect and explore, I was not aware of power differentials and role diversity. Nor was I aware that she had once resided and reflected in this space herself, when crafting her own lifelong learning portfolio. Together we were lifelong learners experiencing a "social solidarity" (Berstein, 1999, p. 160) of sorts, both supporting making my tacit knowledge explicit.

Extending the lens. In preparation for crafting this article, my friend and co-author encouraged me to "compare [my] current competencies against a comprehensive set of outcomes required by continuing educators" as set out by Sullivan and Thompson (2005, p. 72) in *The Development of a Self-Assessment Instrument to Evaluate Selected Competencies of Continuing Education Practitioners*. Recognizing that structuring PLAR processes and procedures has been a focus for many post-secondary institutions in Canada and beyond, we were interested in knowing how a formal assessment tool would compare to the more relational, dialogical process that I experienced as an adult learner. The competencies were compact and clearly defined. Three key questions guided my response: 1. How did I assess my learning regarding specific competencies? 2. How did I learn it? 3. And, how could I prove that I had learned what I said I had learned?

I experienced a distinct shift in focus when completing the checklist. With an emphasis on explicit criteria, performance elements, and evidence that comprised the competencies, I struggled to find spaces that invited me to 'feel deeply' about my learning. For example, although *Learning Environment, Facilitation, Critical Thinking,* and *Interpersonal Communication* competencies addressed knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired, a dominant focus on *outcomes* blocked any emotional connection to my learning, a connection experienced when sharing stories through interpersonal dialogue with another. Sharing stories also provided me the opportunity to revisit past experiences and to question and rethink some of the learning there. In the presence of another who expressed genuine

interest, insightful – reflective responses, and prompts, narrative sharing provided a space within which to explore embedded and embodied tacit knowledge tucked deep beneath the experiences.

After completing the self-assessment, I reflected on what my comfort level and ability would have been to articulate and self-assess acquired competencies when navigating entry into university as a non-traditional applicant. Did the absence of a category indicate a judgment that knowledge gained, knowledge not easily located within one of the competencies, mean that this knowledge was not valued or relevant? Did the absence of any emotional connection to evidence-based competencies contribute to a lack of recognition of some learning acquired but not captured by the checklist? Was it possible for a lengthy checklist to capture all relevant knowledge? Would this stance imply that adult educators were always 'ahead' of what adult learners had learned along the way? Was all that was to be known, already known?

I continue to reflect on my PLAR journey and remain grateful that formal documentation and checklists did not serve as the dominant backdrop to validating my experiences. In fact, shortly after being hired as an assistant professor, I reviewed my own student file only to find out that the program coordinator, who had been so attentive, present, and supportive, had actually completed extensive documentation. If I had been aware of this at the time, I may also have recognized and been impacted by a power differential if I thought I was being evaluated, primarily, through a 'curriculum/content knowledge' lens. I suspect that some feelings of 'being deficient' would have tainted my experience and my ability to take ownership of my learning.

My commitment extends to contributing to an ongoing dialogue with PLAR applicants to pay forward, the support, guidance, and mentoring I was gifted along the way. I am equally interested in how adult learners *connect emotionally* to their learning and how these learning processes will support ongoing learning and success as graduate students. I continue to share my story with colleagues and adult learners in order to better understand the critical importance of honouring the learner at the center of PLAR.

Rethinking Perspectives on Prior Learning

The first author's experience of PLAR -- gaining access to the post-secondary education which she was denied through other routes and simultaneously gaining strength, confidence, and validation for her experiential learning -- echo the benefits of PLAR described again and again in the research literature (cf. Aarts et al, 2003; Brown, 2002; Geerling, 2003; Thomas, Collins, & Plett, 2002).

In the PLAR field, transparency of the PLAR process is one of the ten founding principles articulated by CAEL (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning): "Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public." (Fiddler, Marineau & Whittaker, 2006). For example, Sullivan and

Thompson (2005) created a detailed statement of curriculum expectations for adult educators working in the field of Continuing Education. The statement reflected the learning outcomes of a university-based program in Adult Education, and hence could be used in a PLAR process. Nevertheless, reviewing these criteria from the stance of an earlier self, the first author observed that their use with regard to her admission to an Adult Education graduate program would have left her feeling disrespected as a learner, and hence would essentially be a violation of fundamental principles of adult education. How to resolve the conundrum between the requirement to have transparent prior learning assessment processes and the absolutely essential need to respect the learner at the same time?

The authors of this paper engaged in several dialogues in search of a deeper understanding of learner-centered PLAR processes. The first author's eventual revelation that the program coordinator did, in fact, complete extensive documentation while remaining supportive and present to her throughout the PLAR process proved the pivotal point in resolving the tension between honouring the learner and honouring the curriculum in PLAR. In essence, the program co-ordinator was using the PLAR process to predict the student had the potential to succeed in a graduate program in Adult Education. As Starr-Glass (2002) posits, this type of prediction requires a focus on "the ways in which knowledge is acquired, processed and utilized…" by the candidate.

During the process of mentoring the learner, a professor of Adult Education must model excellence in adult education practice by giving the learner space and time to find her or his own voice to express her or his learning (Conrad & Wardrop, 2010). Nevertheless, while assessing whether the PLAR applicant is likely to meet curriculum standards once admitted to a program, a professor of Adult Education must have a clear idea of what curricular outcomes are expected. This clarity is necessary to make the assessment process transparent, and avoid imposing a curriculum that is hidden as much to the assessor as to the candidate (Harris, 2006). At the same time, the curriculum outcomes need to be crafted to allow for the emergence of the complex knowledge that Fenwick (2006) described – knowledge that may be unique, astonishing, and extending beyond the known boundaries of the Adult Education field.

Indeed, frameworks that assess knowledge acquisition against target curricula competencies play a significant role in the PLAR process. For example, in the province of Alberta, PLAR processes and guidelines are being developed and seriously taken up to recognize experiential and non-formal learning as a pathway to further training and education. To elaborate, in 2006, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) took a strong interest in PLAR and commissioned a study to explore how PLAR was being taken up in Alberta Colleges. A two-day Forum was held to "engage in discussion with stakeholders [from across the province] to identify key issues surrounding the implementation of PLAR, possible solutions to overcome those barriers and next steps for all stakeholders in working toward those solutions" (p. 2). Several post-secondary institutions and Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training showcased PLAR best

practices and recommendations from group discussions emerged. These recommendations were intended to guide the development of a PLAR policy framework for the province of Alberta. Currently, several post-secondary institutions identify prior learning and assessment and recognition as a potential pathway to admission in some programs. Although relevant work experience is noted as being worthy of consideration, institutions still tend to focus primarily on honouring the curriculum with respect to prior coursework completed.

Seven years have passed since the 2006 commissioned study and critical questions continue to invite more focused attention and deeper exploration. How is learning defined and measured? What is most important? What and who do we honour? We assert that the answers reside in the application of the very principles that serve as the foundation for authentic adult education praxis. The paradoxical tension presented in much of the literature positions honouring the curriculum and honouring the learner as competing tensions across the assessment continuum.

We further argue that to apply a philosophy of science to the PLAR process, one that promotes a dichotomy between the subject (observer and curriculum) and the object (adult learner and acquired experiences) is a narrow lens and approach. To shift our thinking, a more multi-faceted, holistic philosophy and approach is needed that posits the adult at the center of the PLAR process. In this way, we hold that space where acquired knowledge is both assessed and recognized as an evolutionary, ongoing process. To do otherwise would suggest that adult educators know all there is to know about what constitutes credible and valid knowledge. We need to remain open to what adult learners have to teach us. Only in this way will we remain authentic and true to the principles that guide our field of practice and scholarship.

End notes

[1] PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition) is the acronym used in Canada for the process of assessing adult learning gained outside the formal education system and granting it recognition within that context. Other acronyms commonly used in English-speaking countries include AP (E)L in the UK, RPL in Australia and New Zealand, and PLA in the United States.

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