

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Guidelines for Effective Practices



What is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition?

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is a process that uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, describe and demonstrate past learning that has been acquired through independent study, work and other life experiences. PLAR allows the evaluation of past learning against established academic standards so that learning can be recognized and credit earned.

PROFESSOR OF THE 21ST CENTURY

The content of this Lifesaver is related to the following Professor of the 21st Century Teaching Competencies:

4. Evaluates learning using a variety of valid and reliable tools and techniques.

Assumptions

Learning

- Learning is a life-long developmental process.
- The products of learning are broad attributes and abilities, transferable skills, personal insights and understandings.
- Learning is a personal and integrated process.
- College level learning may be acquired through different experiences and in different environments.
- Learning outcomes can be documented, demonstrated, validated and evaluated against educational standards.

PLAR Applicants

- PLAR applicants are adult learners who come with unique sets of goals, attributes, experiences and learning styles.
- Applicants represent a wide ethno-cultural population.
- Applicants may or may not be enrolled in College programs.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

- Assessments will use challenge tests (written tests and performance tests) and portfolios as the primary assessment tools.
- Normally, learning is assessed to determine whether or not it is equivalent to learning in a given course.
- When applicants have extensive relevant experience, the assessment may be at an academic level or program level.
- Assessment techniques focus on valid and reliable measures of performance against academic standards/criteria.
- The criteria are the course learning requirements at the course level or the program outcomes at the program level.
- PLAR practices are consistent with accepted PLAR standards.

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PLAR Policies

Eligibility for PLAR

Applicants must be 19 years of age or a secondary school graduate.

Residency Requirements

Students are required to take twenty-five percent (25%) of the course hours required in their program at the College. Therefore, the maximum percentage of learning in any program that can be earned through PLAR will be limited to seventy five percent (75%) of the total program requirements.

PLAR candidates in the College Bachelor of Applied Studies Degree programs may be awarded no more than fifty percent (50%) of the total number of hours of the program of study based on prior learning assessment and recognition.

Fees

The PLAR fee is established by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and published on the PLAR website: <http://www.algonquincollege.com/lts/plar/>.

Transcription

Learning recognized through prior learning will be given a "CR" credit designation or a letter grade on the transcript, indicating that the course learning requirements have been successfully achieved.

The assessor will determine if a letter grade or a CR (credit) designation is appropriate for the course being assessed.

Failed attempts at a PLAR challenge will not be recorded on the candidate's transcript.

Common Terms Associated with PLAR

Challenge Process: A method of assessment administered by faculty to measure an individual's learning achievement in reference to the course learning requirements. It measures demonstrated learning through written and non-written evaluation, for the purpose of awarding a course credit without requiring enrolment in that course.

College Level Learning: Learning accomplishments that (1) are equivalent to the knowledge, skills and values expected from a college course, (2) contain an appropriate theory and practical blend and (3) are applicable in more than one context.

Degree Level Learning: Learning accomplishments that (1) are equivalent to the knowledge, skills and values expected from a degree course, and (2) contain an appropriate level of conceptual sophistication, specialized knowledge, and intellectual autonomy.

Evaluation: A process through which a value judgement or decision is made based on a variety of observations and the background and training of the evaluator.

Experiential Learning: Learning that has been acquired through self-directed study, paid and voluntary work, non post-secondary courses and other life experiences and which is not recognized through transfer of credit mechanisms.

Portfolio: A formally presented document which describes learning achieved from prior experience, links the learning to specific college course learning requirements, and shows validation or proof through third party documentation and other forms of evidence.

Portfolio Assisted Assessment: An assessment process which uses a combination of methods including the portfolio and selected oral, written, or performance tests and assignments.

PLAR Standards

For Quality Assurance in assessing and recognizing prior learning (adapted from CAEL)

Academic Principles

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for post-secondary learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The assessment must be made by experts in the appropriate subject matter.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is earned.

Administrative Principles

1. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
2. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.

Types of Challenge Tests (Some Examples)

Written tests may include Case Studies, Problem Solving Exercises, Essays and Short Answer questions.

Oral tests may include One-to-One Dialogues, and Panel Interviews.

Performance Tests may include Simple Demonstration of Skills, Work Sample, and Role Plays.

Product Assessments may include Reports, Plans/Blueprints, Published Materials, and Photography.

3. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
4. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the function they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
5. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

Source: Whittaker, Urban. 1989. *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Preparing Successful Challenge Processes

Principles for Quality Assurance

- The type of test(s) (see TYPES OF CHALLENGE TESTS below) should match the nature of the learning being assessed.
- The tests should be carefully designed to elicit evidence of the essential learning necessary to receive credit in the course.
- Questions/problems should represent sufficient sampling of situations and embedded knowledge and skills to allow for a generalized summative judgement.
- Test questions, assignments or performance tasks should match course learning requirements.
- The passing score should be similar to the level of achievement expected of students enrolled in the course.
- A combination of evaluation measures should be used in order to promote validity, reduce the negative effects of anxiety and cultural bias and accommodate different learning styles.
- The construction, delivery, evaluation and storage of the results of tests should be secure.

Steps in Preparing a Challenge Test

1. Review the course and the course learning requirements to determine the essential learning to be measured.
2. Select the type of test(s) to be used (may vary for individuals).
3. Determine how the test(s) will be structured (format, timing, number of versions, number of questions, scoring mechanisms).
4. Create a table of specifications or test blueprint.
5. Develop the test questions (could use or modify already existing test items and/or share between faculty).
6. Remember to create test items that do not require knowledge of specific texts or in-class experiences.
7. Check test items to be sure they match course learning requirements.
8. Create answer sheet/guidelines.
9. Determine method of delivery (closed/open book, paper and pencil, computer assisted, timed, supervised, central or decentralized).
10. Field test (with learners already in program and other faculty), when possible.
11. Arrange for maintenance of test instruments and results.

Implementing a Challenge Process

PREPARATION STAGE

1. Provide applicant with information about the PLAR process.
 - Give course outline to PLAR student and discuss required learning as reflected in the course learning requirements.
 - The PLAR Office will provide the PLAR applicant with a current course outline when requested.
2. Describe challenge process to student.
3. Refer student to resources.
 - These resources may include reference to a text which is listed on the course outline.
4. Set a date and time for the challenge procedure.
 - Written challenge tests will be invigilated by the PLAR office on a regular basis. Alternatively, tests may be delivered within the academic department.
5. Refer the student to the PLAR Office to initiate application.
6. Have the student take the signed PLAR application to the Registrar's Office to pay the service fee.

ASSESSMENT STAGE

7. If a student is to write a challenge test through the PLAR Office:
 - Send the examination, instructions and test material to the PLAR Office.
 - Ask the student to contact the PLAR Office to book an appointment.

OR

If the student is examined in the Academic Department:

- Confirm the student's application and receipt of payment before giving the challenge test.
8. Evaluate the challenge test and submit results to the PLAR office.
 - Complete the PLAR Assessment Record form.
 - If a student is successful, complete the PLAR Notification of Course Credit Earned form.
 - Send above forms (and other written records of the challenge test, if relevant) to the PLAR Office.
 9. Notify the student of the results.
 - The PLAR office will advise the student if unsuccessful and explain reasons.
 - Recommend further action or help with educational plan if appropriate.

Common Problems Associated with Challenge Processes

- Confusing educational inputs (learning activities, teaching strategies, content examples) with learning outcomes.
 - Overvaluing the teacher's personal conception of the required learning.
 - Expecting higher achievements in PLAR than in the classroom.
 - Imposing normative grading on a standards based system of evaluation.
 - Undervaluing the candidate's unique learning accomplishments, styles and experience.
 - Inadvertently building in cultural and gender bias.
 - Failing to pre-test the instruments with an appropriate sample.
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Advantages to Portfolio Assessment

This approach to PLAR has two distinct advantages:

1. it enables articulation of learning from the learner's perspective – as he/she has experienced and internalized it.
2. it is the most comprehensive tool available for the assessment of prior learning.

Portfolio development engages the applicant in a process of self review before beginning a program of study at the College. From this perspective it enables

- self discovery and recognition of achievements;
- self-esteem through affirmation of personal competence;
- development of academic skills – analysis, articulation, organization, documentation;
- orientation to the College and its resources and expectations;
- personal consolidation of career goals and development of a career pathway; and
- theoretical and practical understanding of the learning process.

There are many types of portfolios. Usually, targeted portfolios are assembled to document learning so that it can be

Resources

Individuals looking for more information may find the following resources useful:

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL): www.cael.org

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA): www.capla.ca

Professor's Resource Site: <http://www.algonquincollege.com/lts/profres/>

Fenwick, Tara, & Jim Parsons. 2001. *The Art of Evaluation*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

PLAR Office, WO C-102c.

assessed to determine if it is equivalent to the course learning requirements for a specific course.

Portfolio Guidelines are available in the PLAR Office.

Types of Evidence

The purpose of the documentation section of the portfolio is to provide evidence of the learning acquired through work and life experience. Just as students in a classroom must provide evidence of their learning in the form of book reports, oral presentations, research papers or examination results, so too, evidence of prior learning must be documented in a portfolio.

Documentation may take many forms:

- Course materials from workplace training.
- An official transcript of a company training course.
- A videotape.
- A letter from an employer (current or past) outlining job responsibilities and describing performance.
- Diskettes or web sites showing your computer skills.
- Pictures, blueprints.
- Other products of work.

Documentation usually falls into two categories: direct and indirect.

Direct Documentation: refers to products the applicant has created, performances given, reports written, marketing plans produced, and so on. In most cases, direct documentation serves as the strongest evidence that candidates really do know what they say they know or have the skills they claim to have. Candidates must be prepared to prove, however, that the evidence or product was created by them. Original signatures, printed acknowledgements or accompanying letters of confirmation may provide that validation.

Examples of direct documentation include management reports the applicant has compiled and written, in whole or in part. Video or audiovisual tapes of speeches, talks, training or performances given. In all of these forms of direct documentation, there must be some form of validation that the photograph or tape or computer program is really the applicant's or a clear indication of the part actually played in the preparation of the whole. Original signatures, printed acknowledgements or accompanying letters of confirmation may provide that validation.

Indirect documentation is usually information about the candidate and his/her accomplishments. It can take the form of

- letters written on behalf of the applicant by employers, co-workers, business partners, business consultants, teachers, church, community or government leaders, or professional association members;
- commendations received (awards, medals, official recommendations).
- official personnel evaluations by a supervisor;
- transcripts showing test results or documenting completion of a training program;
- program notes from performances given or exhibits in which work was shown; or
- trade industry or newspaper articles about the applicant.

Weak sources of documentation, which should be avoided, include

- letters from family members;
- newspaper clippings about events which do not mention the applicant; or
- job evaluations that are not specific about what one actually did or what skills one exhibited. An evaluation that merely states one was a good employee, or even a superb employee, is poor documentation of skills and learning.

Assessing a Portfolio

Step 1:	Read through the portfolio to understand the learner's unique experience and achievement – obtaining an overall view in an initial reading.
Step 2:	Identify and analyze the documented learning achievements and compare them to the course learning requirements.
Step 3:	Validate the documentation for appropriateness, authenticity, and credibility.
Step 4:	Make a tentative judgement based on your understanding of course learning requirements.
Step 5:	If necessary, interview the candidate to verify the judgement and/or seek further information.
Step 6:	Assign the grade and transcribe using the established process.
NOTE: Added tests or interviews may be used to supplement the portfolio assessment.	

Learning Contracts in PLAR

Learning contracts are useful when the

- candidate has achieved most of the course learning requirements;
- remaining course learning requirements can be achieved through independent assignments/activities; and
- learner agrees to a self-directed, time based process.

The credit is withheld until the learning achieved through the contract is demonstrated and evaluated.