

IS WORKPLACE LEARNING HIGHER EDUCATION?¹**Bruce Spencer**

Athabasca University

Jennifer Kelly

University of Alberta

Abstract

This paper explores the issues involved in granting college and university credits for prior learning, particularly informal workplace learning and workplace training. It argues for the recognition of the differences (but not the superiority of one over the other) between work-based knowledge and academic knowledge when granting recognition of prior learning. It criticizes exaggerated claims for, and processes used in the recognition of prior learning but defends a role for judicious use of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) within the academy. It further argues that traditional institutions of higher learning do need to change to accommodate adults within the academy and that PLAR has a role to play in that process.

Résumé

Cet article explore les questions entourant les crédits universitaires et collégiaux associés à la reconnaissance des acquis, particulièrement à l'apprentissage informel et la formation en milieu de travail. Il veut démontrer les différences (en non la supériorité de l'un sur l'autre) entre le savoir acquis au travail et le savoir universitaire dans la

¹ This paper draws from other work based on a four-year research project associated with the NALL consortium. Researchers included Bruce Spencer (coordinator), Derek Briton, Dylis Collier and Winston Gereluk.

reconnaissance des acquis. Il critique les prétentions excessives et les processus utilisés en reconnaissances des acquis, mais défend l'utilisation judicieuse de l'ÉRA (Évaluation et reconnaissance des acquis) par les institutions postsecondaires. Il va plus loin en soutenant que les institutions de haut savoir devaient changer leurs exigences d'admission pour permettre aux adultes d'avoir accès à leurs programme et que l'ÉRA devait avoir un rôle à jouer.

The Context

DaimlerChrysler decided that all higher-level supervisors and administrators in their Canadian plants would in future hold a university degree. They noted that the majority of the existing staff did not have a first degree and set about arranging for them to gain one. They linked up with Humber College and with British Columbia's Open University (BCOU) to grant credit for prior learning, including learning gained on company courses, and to provide a few credit courses. BCOU provided two capping courses and awarded the degree. This "120-credit degree" (4 years) could regularly be achieved with just five 3-credit college courses and in some cases as few as the two BCOU courses in addition to the supervisors' prior learning and transfer credit of company courses (Meen, 1999).

The presentation of the DaimlerChrysler scheme to a PLAR conference brought forth gasps of admiration for the revolutionary approach from much of the audience. But more cautious attendees wondered exactly what it was that these workers had achieved—was the BA General degree from BCOU really equivalent to a four-year degree? Had the "students" the opportunity to investigate significant areas of knowledge, interrogate ideas, arguments and their own assumptions and prejudices in the same a way as mainstream undergraduates? (This is not to argue that all traditional students accept the opportunity.) Why did the company not re-think its proposed change, if a majority of staff did not have a first degree but were performing at an acceptable level then perhaps a degree was not needed—why crank up the credential requirement? Perhaps what the company should have done is identify those attributes that lead to success in the supervisory and administrative positions and then consider how to assess those for existing workers and develop workplace learning and courses to achieve the desired outcomes for those who did not have them. Confusing the work-based learning with university education and with PLAR processes to gain a credential goes to prove what a complex web we weave when we believe the main purpose of education is to serve the needs of the economy. This example, although pregnant with educational possibilities particularly if it is

extended to all DaimlerChrysler workers (a stated company goal), who could be given access to educational courses that may not be work-related, does encapsulate the workplace learning as higher education argument. It is a pointer on a new educational compass.

No one reading the adult education literature can be unaware of the emphasis that is being placed on “learning” at work. Alongside this new emphasis is a demand that learning at work be recognized within the traditional educational institutions when learners seek to make the transition to formal education and training in colleges and universities. As more and more college and universities institute Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) programs, educators are increasingly confronted by the question of how to fairly and accurately assess the educational merit of informal learning and non-formal adult education and training.

This article will begin with a discussion of PLAR and then move on to examine adult learning and knowledge, areas that are usually ignored in discussions of PLAR. Next it will attempt to tie together credentialism, educational purpose and PLAR processes before a review of what is workplace learning and what kind of work-related learning may be eligible for PLAR. The paper argues that mature student entry and the recognition of experiential learning will have an effect on those institutions that are open to these arguments and concludes by making the case for a sensitive less vitriolic discourse on the limits and possibilities of PLAR.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

PLAR is the preferred term in Canada others include: prior learning assessment PLA; accrediting prior learning/assessing prior learning, APL; accrediting prior experiential learning/assessing prior experiential learning, AEPL; recognition of prior learning, RPL. Although APL is sometimes reserved for transferring previous course learning, and differentiated from APEL, PLAR will be used in this article to represent all of these terms. The promotion of PLAR is at times almost “evangelical” with a “your either with us or your against us” attitude displayed by some advocates. PLAR has become a worldwide “movement” encompassing Australia/NZ, Southern Africa, Europe and North America with an International Consortium for Experiential Learning established after a conference in London in 1987. It attracts radicals who see PLAR as important for increasing access for previously disadvantaged groups and as a way to open up stuffy universities (Thomas, 1998; Peters, 2001) but also attracts politicians and business leaders which suggests they may well view PLAR as a mechanism that will help them turn traditional higher education towards meeting the needs, priorities, and

interests of the "real" world as they define it: that is, the interests of corporations and global capital. Adult educators have always valued student experience in the classroom and, while there is broad support for PLAR for adult students, there are also a number of concerns such as those about PLAR processes, the transferability of knowledge, and dilution of the critical, social, emancipatory purposes of education.

There are a number of ways of assessing prior learning; these include challenge exams, portfolio assessment (perhaps the most common), and demonstrations of skills and knowledge. Transfer credit is not included here since this essentially refers to the transferring of credit gained from one institution's courses to courses and programs of another. The essence of PLAR is the recognition of non-course learning gained experientially, perhaps as a consequence of family, volunteer or workplace activities or private self-guided study. PLAR can also include recognizing learning in non-formal adult courses including company training and ascribing it credit. There are perhaps three basic assumptions behind the PLAR movement:

- Significant learning can and does take place outside the classroom.
- It should be evaluated for credit by educational institutions and by the workplace for hiring and promotion
- Education and training practices that force adults to repeat learning are inefficient, costly and unnecessary. (Human Resources Development Canada, 1995, p.1)

The process of completing a portfolio is represented as educational in itself, helping students to reflect on experience, gain confidence and redefine goals (European Commission, 2002; Peters et al., 1999). The preparation of a portfolio takes time but it generally takes considerably less time than studying the courses for which credit is given. Similarly while the new knowledge explored via reflecting upon experience may be significant it is probably less than the new knowledge available from taking the credit equivalent courses. It also should be acknowledged that assessing portfolios is problematic and the credit awarded often hinges on the student's writing skills as well as their ability to translate experience into "learning." Many institutions are now offering a "PLAR portfolio" course to aid students in the writing of the portfolio—the students get credit for undertaking the course and submit the completed portfolio for additional credit.

The process of PLAR is most often presented as theoretically unproblematic: the vast majority of research focuses on the technical questions of how to measure learning's worth and also how to persuade traditional educational institutions, and "elitist" academics, to accept PLAR

credits (Thomas, 1998; European Commission, 2002; Peters, 2001). The case for PLAR fits best with technical training programs that have identifiable skills and abilities as the course objectives. Behavioural learning theories that emphasize “competencies” or “learning outcomes” best fits with this instrumental approach to training. Students are encouraged to match their skills to the course outline and outcomes and claim the credits. PLAR can also be useful for workers to demonstrate they have knowledge and skills that are needed for promotions or PLAR can be applied to “laddered” skills-based job categories (for example as used in Australia). PLAR meets most opposition as a method of gaining credit within academic programs (particularly in those programs that are not professional or applied); most courses in traditional academic programs are presented as non-instrumental since the knowledge areas, theories, and learning processes of critical reading and writing they concentrate on are outside of or beyond common discourse. Where PLAR is applicable to these programs it is often easier to grant generic course credits that match up with the broad program goals—similar to French practice—than to grant specific course credits (European Commission, 2002). (Mature student entry to academic programs has been around for some time and is generally a less contested use of PLAR.)

Adult Learning and Knowledge²

Adults learn for a whole variety of reasons and in a complex web of settings—the purposes of such learning may be communal or social as much as personal. Adult learning is in danger of being co-opted into a corporate view of what is measurable, exchangeable, and credit-worthy; and the complexities and nuances of learning itself may be corrupted by ingenuous and largely instrumental PLAR processes. The question of how or if PLAR processes can be used to promote and foster emancipatory and democratic educational practices in an increasingly credential obsessed “learning society” has been largely ignored. The argument for PLAR also raises the question of whether all adult learning should be viewed in terms of what is measurable, exchangeable, and credit-worthy? For example, Derek Briton has argued that the “use value” of certain knowledge is being confused with its “exchange value,” what is very useful in one situation may not be “exchangeable” into course credits (Briton et al., 1998). It also “undervalues” experiential learning

² For a more extensive theoretical review of the issues discussed in this section see Briton, 1996; Briton et al., 1998.

that cannot be transferred. This is not to claim that one kind of knowledge is superior to the other but different. When an individual decides they need to know more about a certain topic in order to solve a particular problem at work, they are unlikely to be focused on developing critical reading and writing skills. In most cases they are not going to seek out differing perspectives on a problem and then write an assessment of the various arguments. Experiential learning can be useful when undertaking course-based learning, but it may be quite legitimate to argue that the prior learning is sufficiently different that it cannot be credited as if the applicant had undertaken the course of study. In these situations accelerated courses suited to mature adults may be most useful. For example, many individualized distance education programs allow for student self-pacing.

At the core of many PLAR problems is a central contradiction of formal education that is writ even larger when considering experiential learning. One aim of education is knowledge exploration and creation; the gaining of insights and understandings (in short, learning) but the outcome and importance of formal education is increasingly seen as the credential. As a result many learners (and educators) substitute the credential for learning as their central objective. For those seeking PLAR credit recognition can become the only goal. Instead of using PLAR to focus attention on the gaps in skills or knowledge—what is yet to be learned—the emphasis is placed on finding the fastest route to gain a credential (how many courses can the student bypass and how many does the student have to do). For example if it can be demonstrated that a student has knowledge of 60% of a course curriculum the PLAR advocate will argue they should be given the credit i.e. treated as a “pass.” An instructor who responds by suggesting they should study the areas about which they have no demonstrated knowledge—the other 40% -- is likely to be dismissed as applying “double standards,” for is it not the case that their students can pass with 60%! There are lots of issues here, ranging from the question of whether the applicant has 100% knowledge of the 60% claimed, to the minutia of how specific instructors grade and assess course content (for example, many instructors set assignments to sample from *all* sections of the course and require a “pass” in *all* sections) to the bigger questions of what is the purpose of course evaluation and grades and what are they measuring?

PLAR emphasizes specific and generic skills as the “outcomes” of learning rather than the gaining of insights and theoretical understandings around a particular area of knowledge. But the transference gained through PLAR into academic (as opposed to applied) credits is mainly based on what

knowledge has been gained. Amongst adult education scholars the usual starting point for a discussion about knowledge is Habermas (1972)—for example as used by Mezirow in his theory of perspective transformation (1981). Habermas considers knowledge as the foundation of culture and identifies three forms of knowledge growing out of human activity and interests in work, in communication, and in freedom of thought (linked to an understanding of unequal distribution of power and the role of ideology). Habermas' model recognizes the importance of beginning with an empirical-analytic framework and of moving beyond that to transforming and liberating the consciousness—hence the importance of critical social sciences (Waters, 1994). It's clear that using this framework would lead to an understanding that knowledge gained through work could be limiting. However claims have been made about new forms of work requiring new forms of knowledge (discussed below) and that corporations are looking for “critical thinkers” in their organizations (Boreham et al., 2002). However such claims have to be balanced with an understanding of how firms want new recruits to be “on the same page” (Spencer, 2002) prior to in-house training and how the “leader's” or “coach's” (i.e. manager's) job is to “help people restructure their views of reality” (Senge, 1990).

We also need to note a distinction between “critical thinking skills” and “critical thought” (for example, as promoted in Critical Theory). Critical thinking implies such important abilities as recognizing faulty arguments, or generalizations and assertions lacking evidence, or truths based on unreliable authority but it does not necessarily imply critically examining life itself or an examination of power and authority or the role of ideology. Whereas critical thought, according to critical theorists, begins by questioning belief systems and by asking who benefits from dominant ideas: its project is educational *and* emancipatory (Burbules & Berk, 1999). Some authors may claim these two overlap and it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which a critical thinker also becomes self-analytical and reflective about the origins of belief systems (Brookfield's 1997 text can be read in this way). But it is difficult to imagine how a critical thinker who has become a critical theorist can be welcomed in many of our modern-day global corporations with their focused global objectives and narrow practices that demand loyalty and punish criticism (Klein, 2000). If the notion of critical thinking at work, given the limited management prescribed conception of workplace learning (Spencer, 2002), cannot be used to justify extensive credit transference to higher education can we argue the case based on the importance of experiential knowledge?

Adult Educators have always acknowledged the importance of adult experience in the classroom (Knowles is just one example) but knowledge gained through experience is not unproblematic. For example, Freire's work has been used to justify the idea that peoples' knowledge is unrecognized and unacknowledged in the academy and it is about time the knowledge gained through work was formally recognized by the granting of university credits (repeatedly claimed by presenters at Canadian PLAR Conferences, 1998; 1999). But this reading of Freire ignores his understanding that experience was a starting place, and could be very limiting leading to a "culture of silence." His argument is for a dialogical and collective education that results in workers "renaming" the world they occupy and eventually organizing to change it (Freire, 1970). His concern with self-awareness, action and reflection is similar to Feminist scholars' approaches to learning that can also be labeled experientially based but not experientially limited (Blenkey et al., 1986; Lather, 1991).

This rejection of the simple transference of workplace learning to the academy should not be read as a rejection of the idea that some work-based learning is not useful, or indeed credit worthy. Nor should it be taken as an argument that working people are not capable of breaking through the workplace ideology designed to co-opt their compliance. (For an interesting illumination and discussion of both these points and a detailed examination of the complexities of learning practices see Sawchuk's *Adult Learning and Technology in Working-class Life*, 2003.) What the above discussion is arguing is that any claim for extensive transference of workplace learning into higher education credits needs to be critically examined; the silences and absences—what has not been learned—may be as important as the knowledge claimed.

Nor is this an argument suggesting the academy has a stranglehold on what counts as knowledge—for example, women's studies, labour studies, indigenous knowledge, cultural studies (Steele, 1997) and the study of adult education all began life outside of the main halls and cloisters of the established universities. And mainstream education today still downplays or ignores the experience of minority groups in society such that their own learning about whom they are and what place they occupy within the dominant culture is undertaken outside the official curriculum (Kelly, 1998; 2004). This illustrates that knowledge originating and gained outside of universities is important and critical experiential learning or non-formal education is relevant to some programs. (A further question that cannot be

explored here but should be acknowledged is, “How do we change those conservative university programs that don’t pose critical questions?”)

Credentialism, Educational Purpose and PLAR Processes

From a traditional adult education perspective some of the issues involved in considering the importance of workplace prior learning are very familiar. If we take a broad sweep of adult education we find that credentialism has overtaken many formerly non-credential adult courses and programs. Traditionally liberal adult education (the “Great Tradition”) could be defined as outside of the “post-secondary system,” courses were offered to achieve a number of purposes including social and community building, for example Canadian adult education can historically be defined as “education for citizenship” (Selman, 1998). The outcome of the courses was not to be measured by a “grade” but by the reflections and social actions of its participants. The learning could be individual and social but it was not assessed for the purposes of credit. As adult educators adjusted non-credit courses to allow for awards of credit they had to face up to many of the same issues that are associated with PLAR. A major challenge was to retain the social purposes and collective learning of traditional adult education practice while ensuring that the course would pass any external examination of its credit-worthiness. In some cases courses were abandoned or changed significantly in order to adapt to this new learning environment. It cannot be argued that in *all* cases the outcome of this process was negative but it can be argued that, generally speaking, the learning objectives were changed to reflect what could be tested and credentialised. This same shift in emphasis—from learning to credential—can be observed in PLAR processes (Spencer, et al., 1999).

Although some academic critics of PLAR can be accused of defending their turf or dismissed as elitists because they argue that only *course-based* learning is real learning it is interesting to reflect on the PLAR process itself as one that only recognizes *course-similar* learning. When challenging for credit a PLAR applicant will be counseled to emphasize the skills and knowledge areas that are similar to those that might be expected from a graduate of a particular program. If the applicant argues that she or he “has all this other experience, knowledge and skills and shouldn’t that count for something?” they will be politely told that learning does not count; only the learning that can be credentialised counts. Similarly, if the academic assessor suggests that there should be recognition for this other knowledge they too will be told that can only happen if they can fit it into the agreed criteria.

Typically the PLAR applicant's portfolio is individually assessed by an academic via an agreed schema of learning "outcomes" (say, 15-20 items) scored on a sliding scale (from little knowledge/skill demonstrated to full competency). The scoring is then totaled and equated to a credit equivalency with specific course credit included in the total (some processes will only assess course-by-course credit, others will assess course credit and generic program credits). This may involve three different academic assessments (scored in isolation) with a mean score being used for the final calculation. The idea is that such a scheme can be paraded as just as reliable and valid as any traditional course assessment or examination—if not more so. To suggest for example, that the schema be relegated to the status of a "guide" and a more holistic approach be adopted to the assessment process, with a meeting of the three academics called to determine the final credit award, would be to question the very "scientific" validity of PLAR. But this quasi-scientific approach to PLAR is rooted in an instrumental view of learning that is not applicable to most university education, particularly in the liberal arts, humanities and social sciences and it does need to be rethought.

It may be the case that this technocratic approach to PLAR is all that can be achieved given the limited purposes of PLAR and the restrictive nature of some programs of study, but it should make PLAR advocates reflect a little more on the processes they are advocating. The measure of the relevance of an individual's learning is a measure against whatever it is the institution is teaching. The learning that is being valued is that which most closely matches course content. From this perspective PLAR evangelists should not be characterized as radicals about to rock the foundations of education (Thomas, 1998)³ but rather as conservatives entrenching individualized learning goals, expressed in terms of specific skills and compartmentalized knowledge that is unrelated to broader experience and understandings of society and ideas. Having already lost adult education to credentialism, progressive educators are about to lose adult informal learning to the same scourge! The problem for learners and educators is how to keep knowledge exploration and creation at the heart of what we do while at the same time exploring how the prior knowledge of adults can be recognized in the formal education system. There are a number of ways of doing this including

³ Thomas (1998) refers to PLAR as the "most radical innovation in education" (pp. 330 & 341) but considers that it can also be "an instrument of seduction" (p. 342) into the existing education system.

creating more flexible programs of study and making more use of student experience in assignments; PLAR may only be a small piece of this puzzle.

Workplace Learning

As illustrated in the introduction to this article much of the energy behind the recognition for prior learning is coming from the workplace. The argument for PLAR of vocational skills comes in many forms and from many different directions. In some cases unions are arguing that their members are undervalued, that their skills and knowledge are not being recognized or rewarded; in other circumstances, employers are pushing PLAR, arguing that with PLAR in place training and credentialising can be speeded up and unnecessary duplication avoided; from another perspective, individual employees may want PLAR to enhance their promotion possibilities. PLAR of vocational skills may seem obvious and relatively straightforward but there are still issues that need to be addressed. These include some of the "tolerable contradictions" referred to by Alan Thomas (1998) -- who will decide what counts and what does not, and will college enrolments fall or will PLAR boost student numbers? Some of the issues become many-sided; for example, what level of competence equals what skill, what is the relationship between apprenticeship and PLAR? (Individual workers, different unions and different employers may line up differently on such questions.) Will PLAR processes be used to restrict worker access to broader educational and training opportunities and confine workers to employer-specific knowledge? Is PLAR a vehicle for employers (and governments) to claim they have a highly skilled workforce without having to provide training courses to actually achieve that objective? Are some of the more broadly based college training programs threatened by a narrow focus on specific skills? If so, is there a clash between the interests of some faculty unions (opposing PLAR) and private sector unions (wanting PLAR for their members)?

Workers have always learned at work. Whether or not some of this workplace learning should be recognized for credit would depend on its nature, much of it may relate to workplace skills and know-how that could translate into training-course credits rather than university education credits. But there is an argument that, given the changes in the nature of work from Taylorist and Fordist workplaces to flexible workplaces, information communication technology plays such a major role that workers now need to know more about work process throughout the organization (Boreham et al., 2002). The old style worker is often characterized as ignorant of these work processes and while it may be true that employers did not encourage such

learning it does not necessarily follow that workers did not gain this knowledge. Another exaggeration may be the extent of this change—many workplaces have not changed that much—and other new workplaces, such as fast food outlets, do not make extensive use of new technology (a careful study by Statistics Canada concluded that only 20% of Canadian workers could be described as knowledge workers, Beckstead and Gellatly, 2003). Employers may be encouraging “teams” and “problem solving” at lower levels of their organizations but few are encouraging employees to be involved in key investment, location and product-mix decisions—empowerment is in most cases circumscribed.

Nonetheless it has been argued that there are significant changes and this new “work process knowledge” includes a “dimension of theoretical understanding. Inert theoretical knowledge is integrated with experiential know-how in the course of solving problems at work, and this generates what we call work process knowledge” (Boreham et al., 2002, p. 8). Does this new perspective on “work process knowledge” warrant consideration for transference of workplace learning to university credits? One problem is the “theoretical dimension” claimed is unclear and still seems to be prescribed by employer goals and purposes; of course some of the knowledge gained at work will be similar to some of the kinds of knowledge examined on some—the more instrumental—university courses and some credit can be awarded. But as argued above, it is unlikely that employers will encourage employees to think critically about what it is the employer is doing – they may want critical thinkers in the sense of problem solvers but there is no evidence to suggest they want them as critical theorists. The case for “work process knowledge” as a new phenomenon imbued with theoretical insights is under-whelming; it would seem therefore that extensive credit transference from workplace learning to university should be ruled out. (Many workers will tell you that after a few weeks at work they knew the job and that new “learning” opportunities were limited—for many ten years work experience can be described as one year’s experience repeated ten times.)

A case can be made for some knowledge gained via community and voluntary activity and even personal journeys as well as from different kinds of work experience to be granted credit within particular academic programs such as business, nursing or social work (European Commission, 2002). One example of an area where work-related learning could be considered for university credit was investigated in the Athabasca University research *Learning Labour: A PLAR Project*. The purpose of the project was to consider what credit could be granted for students who had undertaken

labour education/union training. As Bob White, former President of the Canadian Labour Congress (1997), observes, “labour education starts with the premise that all is not right with the world. It contradicts the ‘going story,’ the official version.” It was noted from the beginning that the aim of the project was not to change the social purposes of labour education (education and training for union representatives, activists and members aimed at enhancing union effectiveness and social actions) or to emphasize participation in labour education and activity for individual gain. These issues are just some of the misgivings that PLAR projects arouse in most labour educators (Gereluk, 2001). Many unionists, however, resent the fact that other forms of workplace learning, such as how to do your job more efficiently, or how to work in a team are transferable into college/university credits. This suggests that a PLAR model is needed that fairly assesses union provision without imposing the structures of formal education on union programming. Such a model would have to be related to critically focused as opposed to the more instrumental forms of formal education. The most obvious choice would be labour studies and labour relations courses at colleges and universities, or other critical social science and applied social science areas of knowledge. Labour studies and labour relations are rooted in practice and framed theoretically. The knowledge bases of these subjects are to be found in labour’s experience at work and in society; therefore they are obvious candidates for accepting PLAR credits based on union learning.

Even in these circumstances however, it may be that credit is used to give advanced standing rather than specific course exemptions—knowledge-type credit, for example generic social science or labour studies credits rather than specific course-by-course credits. It is perfectly possible that an active union member and union course attendee may not have considered some of the major issues addressed in a *particular* university or college course. Although not specific enough for particular course-credit, such prior learning is of academic value and could be awarded some form of credit (in terms of elective exemptions or unassigned credit perhaps) that will facilitate the learner’s advancement in college and university courses. This would allow critically-based but non-formally structured forms of programming to be assessed and granted credit without having to get into the theoretically questionable business of comparing “learning outcomes” between union and university courses. If the purpose of PLAR initiatives is to encourage working people to use the educational system their taxes support, we need to acknowledge that workers may have gained valuable knowledge and be willing to grant them some degree of formal advanced standing. The merits of a PLAR initiative that affords workers the opportunity to transfer their

socially- and critically-based forms of knowledge gained in union courses (non-formally), or informally via union activity, into formal educational settings and, thus, to develop skills that will allow them to better contribute to their union and community should be obvious. This, moreover, is a justification for crediting adult learning that is not based in dubious learning theory or in a zealot's advocacy.

In relation to the argument for PLAR as a mechanism for increasing access it should be noted that the evidence to date does not support a view that PLAR generally has increased access for educationally marginal and disadvantaged groups. A comparative study of European provision found that PLAR did not particularly advantage the disadvantaged but like many other educational schemes was utilized more by those who already enjoyed some privilege (European Commission, 2002). Perhaps this is an argument for targeted PLAR schemes aimed at particular social categories such as the *Learning Labour: A PLAR Project* discussed above. PLAR has been advocated in South Africa as a counter-balance to educational disadvantage resulting from years of Apartheid and is claimed to be increasing access there (Peters, 2001).

PLAR's Impact on Universities

Many of the challenges raised by PLAR for universities go beyond the scope of this paper with its focus on the applicability of workplace PLAR to educational programs with a more academic content—but there are some that cannot go unrecorded. One question for the academy is how can traditional academic institutions recognize work-based learning in a way that does not compartmentalize knowledge (recognizing of course that the move to modularization has already done some damage here)? Another is how can the academy make the best use of mature students' experience? Traditional post-secondary institutions focused on recruiting 18-year-olds may choose to ignore PLAR. But as institutions open the door wider to include older students and as they begin to accept that part-time study is legitimate, it makes sense to review what they are doing and how they are doing it. Why, for example, even have admissions criteria? Why not have an open door policy for mature students; recognize that adult students' experience to date qualifies them to enter courses or programs? When designing course work, why not do it in a way that allows students to skim or skip those sections where they have prior knowledge? When designing assignments, why not allow students to blend their studies with their prior and current experience? Why not make the timelines flexible so students can move as quickly or slowly through a course or program—as their prior knowledge (and time available) demands? All of

these kinds of mechanisms recognize prior learning and avoid the problems of assessment.⁴

Beyond the above policies, it may be possible to institute forms of PLAR that do grant advanced standing/course credits to students through the recognition that their prior learning is extensive and deserving. The rationale for doing this is simple enough—most certificate and degree courses are designed to ground students in an area of knowledge and assumes *no* prior knowledge beyond what could be expected from a high school student. Even when targeted at more mature students, they are mimicked on programs of study designed for graduating high school students. Adult students may not need to undergo the exact same journey to arrive at the overall understanding of a particular subject area. For example, a student who has held a number of positions in her or his union over a number of years is likely to have insights and understandings that go beyond those that can be expected from the average 18-year-old. Or, indeed, those from another adult student with no such experience. If she or he is enrolled in a labour studies program, it is likely that the student with a rich life experience can, as outlined above, demonstrate credit-worthy knowledge relevant to the program. A similar argument can be made for students engaged in other areas of study with prior program related areas of knowledge (social work, nursing, business etc). In the case of the labour studies student, it may also be possible to grant some credit for non-credit union education courses undertaken as well as for the experiential knowledge gained through union activity. This may result in a student doing fewer university courses, but they will still have to take some - - it does not exclude the student from undertaking the hard grind of course work; from the tasks of critical reading and writing that is associated with academic work. What it does do is accept that learning outside of the academy is valuable and relevant; it may be different learning from course-based learning but it can, nonetheless, result in valuable knowledge, some of which will be “credit-worthy.”

As noted above many PLAR advocates are keen to reduce all courses to a list of “outcomes” or “competencies” because they share a limited

⁴ All of above are also characteristics of Athabasca University. Athabasca is an open university using distance education techniques, essentially catering for part-time adult students. It offers both 3 and 4-year equivalent degrees—90 and 120 credits. Most of the undergraduate courses are offered as individualized study so that all of the above are more easily accommodated.

behaviourally influenced view of education and learning. Within the competency approach content takes second place to skills. The argument that a particular course has been put together in order to challenge a student's understanding of a particular area; or to develop critical awareness around certain issues; or to deepen insights; leaves them cold. And for some courses it's the journey that is important not a specific outcome. For example, a particular history or literature course may consist of reading a set of texts, carefully chosen for differing interpretations and designed to bring out contrasting opinions. Such a journey is unlikely to be traveled outside of the course. PLAR advocates should just accept that such a course is usually outside their remit. This kind of caveat is not to suggest that PLAR does not pose fundamental questions for the formal education system. For example, what exactly are the "core" areas of knowledge that constitute a particular degree; what is the relevance of "residency"; and why is a first degree usually a four-year (120 credit) program in North America? Many degree programs simply accept existing conventions while others have not undergone significant rethinking for years. Although institutions allow small variations they essentially favour conformity, a suggestion that one "four-year" degree program should be 120 credits and another 111 and yet another 93 would create organizational apoplexy! Comparisons with other programs would become difficult to systemize. Apart from the general challenge posed by PLAR, what it also allows for is the individual candidate to challenge the course program and maybe make it fit better with the areas of skills and knowledge she or he needs, and maybe, after having earned PLAR credits, undertake a 93 credit, "four-year" degree!

In summary it can be argued that credit can be granted on a modular or course-by-course basis or as program credits. Building PLAR into programs can have a significant impact resulting in a program tailored to meet mature student needs (Peters, 2001). However, any claim for extensive transference of experiential learning into higher education credits needs to be critically examined if it is to gain support of academics, as Hanson has commented "rigorous though the technical requirements of PLA may be they are of little help without a clear understanding of what they are measuring against and why" (Hanson, 1997, p. 11). Accelerating an adult student to achieve degree completion may result in them missing out on crucial areas of knowledge and critical insights and understandings—in the end the DaimlerChrysler employees referred to at the start of this paper may have got their degree but were they denied an education? On the other hand adult students do not have to travel the same road to a degree as a high school leaver; for example adult

life experiences may legitimately replace elective courses designed to give “breadth” for younger students, even if it cannot substitute for core courses.

Conclusions

One of the challenges for PLAR advocates and reluctant academics alike is to overcome the “with us or against us” attitude that pervades debate about PLAR and engage in critical evaluation of the value and applicability of PLAR in particular programs. While PLAR may emphasize access (dramatically illustrated in post-apartheid South Africa but little evidenced in Europe) and has the potential to shake up traditional teaching, the mainstream promotion of PLAR does little to resuscitate the democratic social purposes of adult education: it has the opposite tendency; it emphasizes the argument that learning is essentially about skills and competencies useful for employment. The challenge for progressive educators is to marry the critical experiential learning that working people do engage in to critical theoretical knowledge within the academy: to recognize experiential knowledge when it is appropriate and build on it when needed. Under the right circumstances workplace learning, along with other experiential and non-credit learning, can contribute to higher education and can do so by enhancing rather than diminishing the case for a radical higher education: that is for an academy that becomes a “critical agency, facilitating the symbiosis between academic, theoretical knowledge and practical, lived experience in the ‘real world’” (Taylor et al, 2002, p.135).

References

- Beckstead, D., & Gellatly, G. (2003). *The Canadian economy in transition: The growth and development of new economy industries*. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. 11-622-MIE no.002.
- Belenkey, M., Clinchey, B., Goldenberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Boreham, N., Samurcay, R., & Fisher, M. (Eds.) (2002). *Work process knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Briton, D. (1996). *The modern practice of adult education: A post-modern critique*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Briton, D., Gereluk, W., & Spencer, B. (1998). Prior learning assessment and recognition: Issues for adult educators. Published in the *Proceedings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference Proceedings*, University of Ottawa, pp. 24-28.
- Brookfield, S. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Burbules, N., & Berk, R. (1999) Critical thinking and critical pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. In T. Popkewitz & L. Fendler (Eds.) *Critical theories in*

50 *Spencer and Kelly, "Is Workplace Learning Higher Education?"*

- education: *Changing terrains of knowledge and politics* (pp. 45-65). New York: Routledge.
- European Commission. (2002). *Social Inclusion through APEL: A Learner's Perspective. Comparative Report*. Glasgow: Glasgow Caledonian University.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gereluk, W. (2001). *Labour education in Canada today*. Athabasca University. Available at www.athabascau.ca/html/depts/workcomm/PLAR_Report.pdf
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and human interests*. London: Heinemann. (Originally published 1968).
- Hanson, K. (1997). A university perspective on PLA. *Learning Quarterly*, 1(3), 10-13.
- Human Resource Development, Canada (HRDC). (1995, May). *Prior Learning Assessment Newsletter*, 1(2). Ottawa, ON: HRDC.
- Kelly, J. (1998). *Under the gaze: Learning to be black in white society*. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Kelly, J. (2004). *Borrowed identities*. New York: Peter Lange.
- Klein, N. (2000). *No logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies*. Toronto: Random House.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Meen, S. (1999). Putting PLAR at the heart: A case study of a university degree program designed for DaimlerChrysler employees. Paper given at the 1999 Prior Learning and Recognition (PLAR) Conference, Vancouver.
- Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education*, 32(1), 3-21.
- Peters, H., Pokorny, H., & Sheibani, A. (1999). Fitting in: What place is accorded to the experiential learning the mature students bring with them to higher education. Paper presented at the 1999 SCUTREA Conference, University of Warwick.
- Peters, H. (2001). The 'Trojan horse': Can recognition of prior learning be used as a means of bringing about change from within in traditional institutions of higher education? Paper presented at the 2001 SCUTREA Conference, University of East London.
- Sawchuk, P. (2003). *Adult learning and technology in working-class life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Selman, G. (1998). The imaginative training for citizenship. In S. Scott, B. Spencer & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for Life: Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 24-34). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The leader's new work: Building learning organizations*. MIT Sloan Management Review, 32 (1), 7-23.

- Spencer, B., Briton, D., & Gereluk, W., (1999). From learning to credential: PLAR. Published in the *Proceedings of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education Conference*, University of Montreal, pp. 190-195.
- Spencer, B. (2002). Research and the pedagogics of work and learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14(7), 298 – 305.
- Spencer, B. (2004). *The purposes of adult education: A guide for students* (2nd ed). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Steele, T. (1997). *The emergence of cultural studies: Adult education, cultural politics and the 'English' question*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Taylor, R., Barr, J., & Steele, T. (2002). *For a radical higher education: After postmodernism*. Buckingham, U.K.: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Thomas, A. (1998). The tolerable contradictions of prior learning assessment. In S. Scott, B. Spencer & A. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life: Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 354-364). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Waters, M. (1994). *Modern sociological theory*. London: Sage.
- White, B. (1997.) Education for action. *Our Times*, 16(5), 14-16.