

DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION
– PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES
GUIDELINES FOR THE CANADIAN PLAR PRACTITIONER

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Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition – Practitioner
Perspectives
Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner

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The steering committee represented a variety of stakeholder groups having an interest in PLAR. Members include:

- Deb Blower, Red River College, Manitoba
- Monica Collins, University of Windsor, Ontario
- Terry Durkin, Adult Learner Representative, HRDC, Ontario
- Sandra Evans, Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland & Labrador
- Louise Gordon, Provincial Government, Manitoba
- Bonnie Kennedy, Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB), Ontario
- Dr. Douglas Myers, Halifax PLA Centre, Nova Scotia
- Sharon Rose, Nortel Networks, Ontario
- Penny Scott, Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism, British Columbia
- Paul Zakos, President CAPLA/First Nations Technical Institute, Ontario

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines have emerged from the PLAR Benchmarking study conducted by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) and funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). An outline of the study is presented in Appendix Two.

The development of PLAR across Canada has been slowly gathering momentum. Initially formal implementation was confined to the post-secondary (mainly colleges) sector. However, a variety of other agencies and organizations have recently begun to develop PLAR policies and practices to help meet the learning needs of their constituents. This somewhat uneven, fragmented growth of PLAR for increasingly diverse groups and purposes presents major challenges in a country as geographically large as Canada with a decentralized education system.

The effectiveness of PLAR as a tool for education and training reform and labour force development is weakened considerably unless all of the key stakeholders can agree on a common language, principles and standards for PLAR regardless of the sector in which the assessment has taken place. Adults will invariably need to move from sector to sector and place to place as their life and learning needs change. In this regard the importance of nationally and internationally accepted benchmarks for the assessment of prior learning cannot be overstated.

This Practitioner's Guide is intended to make a positive contribution to the development of transferable, widely accepted benchmarks for assessment in the context of both Canadian and international adult education movements.

FEEDBACK FROM PLAR PRACTITIONERS

Feedback from survey and focus group participants during the PLAR Benchmarking study has confirmed the validity of newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR practice in Canada - these are presented in Appendix Two. Participants have also confirmed the newly-emerging roles of the PLAR Practitioner in Canada and offered suggestions on how this guide should be developed to support these roles.

A clear recommendation from Practitioners during the consultation process was the importance of developing a self-assessment process for PLAR Practitioners. It was felt that such a process would encourage reflective practice and an holistic approach toward PLAR. This in turn will help to ensure that the diversity of PLAR practice currently underway in Canada is captured in this guide.

A self-assessment process will also assist PLAR Practitioners to understand the benchmarks which support their practice, thereby helping them to be clearer about the demands and requirements that will be made on them as part of the PLAR process.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



What follows is a description of how to use this guide to determine your own level of competence in relation to the Benchmarks. Readers can engage in a series of **Key Learning Activities** that will enable them to reflect upon and continuously improve their own practice while engaging in key aspects of the PLAR process.



Readers are also encouraged to complete the **Discuss And Record** exercises while they develop their portfolios against the newly-emerging benchmarks (Appendix Two). A **Self-Assessment Scale** has also been developed for this purpose (Appendix Three).

THE PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment may be defined as

“...whenever one person in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding or abilities and attitudes of this other person.”

Rowntree, (1987)

Brown et. al. (1996:16) indicate that the purpose of assessment is to

- classify or grade students;
- enable student progression;
- guide and improve student performance;
- facilitate students' choice of options;
- enable students to rectify mistakes;
- give teachers feedback on their teaching;
- motivate students;
- provide statistics for the course or for the institution; and
- add variety to students' learning experiences and add direction to teaching and instruction.

Some of these activities are developmental or **formative** e.g. providing ongoing feedback enabling learners to rectify mistakes and/or make improvements. Others may be terminal or **summative** e.g. the assignment of final grades. Some of these assessment activities may be **organizationally/institutionally-focused** e.g. providing statistics for a course. Other activities may be **client-focused** and centre upon the needs of the individual e.g. facilitating adult learner career options.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is defined as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values).

This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences.

Recognition of prior learning can be applied to the requirements of education and training programs; occupational and/or professional certification; labor market entry; and/or organizational and human resource capacity building.

The goals of prior learning assessment and recognition include

- “identification of learning, wherever it has taken place;
- selection of specific learning that is relevant to a desired outcome, career or occupational plan;
- demonstration of the validity and appropriateness of the learning;
- matching learning outcomes to those stated within a chosen accreditation or career/occupation framework;
- assessment of evidence against pre-determined criteria to ensure the validity of the claimed learning; and
- accreditation within an appropriate and recognized accreditation framework.”

Challis, 1993

THE PROCESS OF PLAR

PLAR focuses on the individual. The adult learner and the PLAR Adviser or PLAR Assessor negotiate an appropriate plan of action in order to generate the evidence required to demonstrate that the necessary outcomes or competencies have already been achieved. **Figure One** describes a variety of activities and tasks which can be used to assist adult learners in making important personal, career and employment choices.

Evidence of prior learning can be generated in the workplace and in the community e.g. during voluntary community activities or in the classroom.

Evidence generated as part of the assessment process can be confirmed by others (e.g. colleagues, peers and supervisors) by making a direct comparison of an adult learner’s performance against the required outcomes or competencies and their associated criteria.



Figure One: PLAR is a continuous process which is individually-focused (Jessup, 1991)

When performance evidence is not immediately obvious (or in the case of assessing underpinning knowledge and understanding) the PLAR Adviser or Assessor can question the individual about his or her performance and make a judgement against the set criteria. When observation of performance by others is impossible (for ethical or safety reasons) simulations, projects, assignments or skills tests can be utilized in conjunction with oral questioning.

The various methods of assessing learning are summarized in **Figure Two**. They will be discussed in more detail throughout this guide.

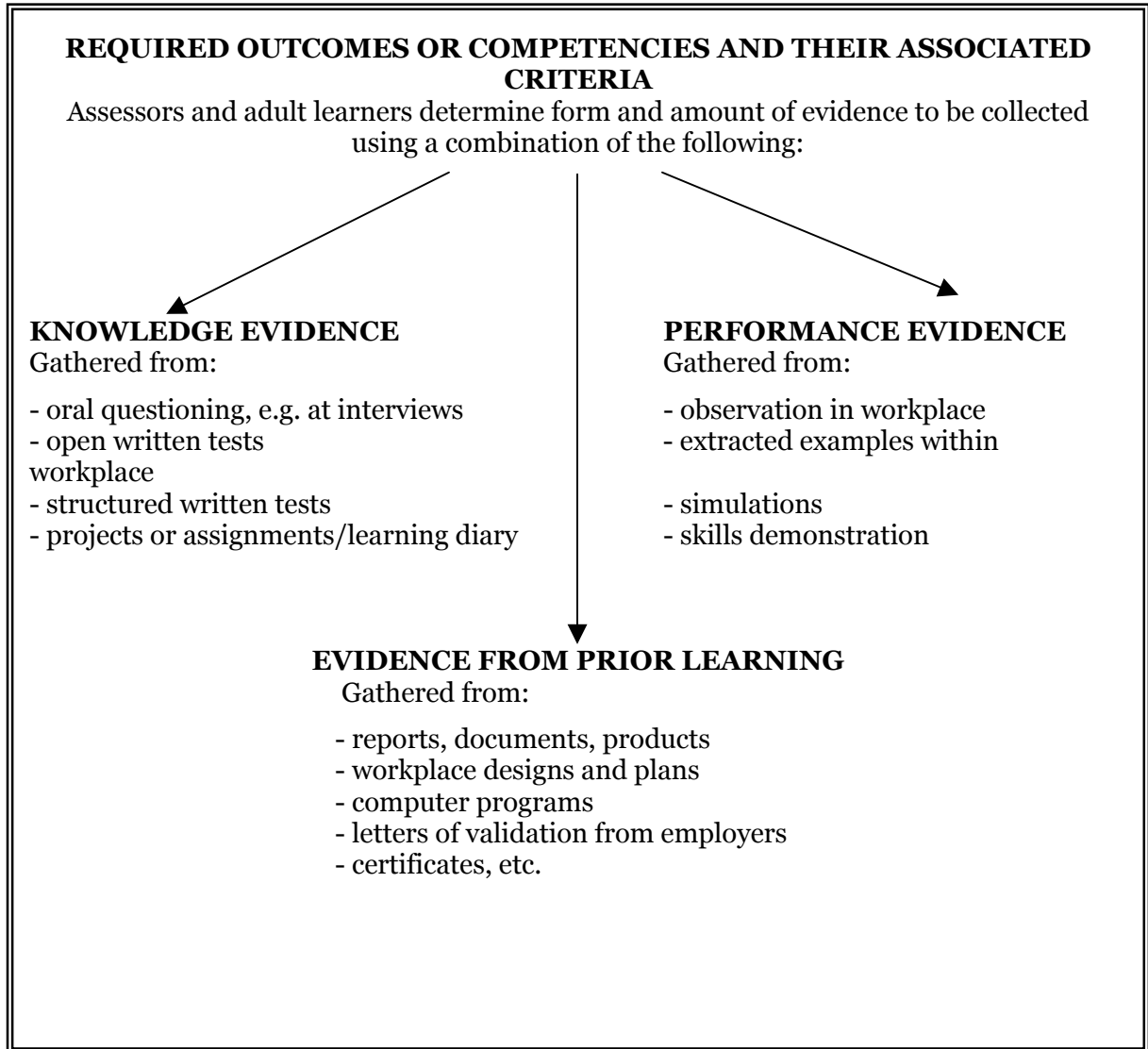


Figure Two: Possible Methods of Assessment



KEY LEARNING ACTIVITY NUMBER ONE

- Q1. Consider how you are involved in the PLAR process. For example do you mainly undertake **formative** or **summative** assessment?
- Q2. What aspects of your practice are **individually** or **institutionally/organizationally**-focused? What leads you to this conclusion?
- Q3. Can you identify any potential conflicts or biases inherent in your role?

You may choose to record your answers here or complete the Learning Diary on page 23.

MAINTAINING RIGOUR

Every effort should be made to ensure that assessment decisions are **valid, reliable** and **sufficient**.

1. **Validity:** assessment should be based upon the required outcomes or competencies and their associated criteria. Assessment is said to be valid if the Assessor refers only to the stated criteria.
2. **Reliability:** is concerned with the consistency of assessment. The degree to which an Assessor's opinion may match that of another Assessor in the same situation, with a similar adult learner using the same criteria.
3. **Sufficiency:** in order that an assessment may be deemed to be sufficient adult learners must be able to demonstrate that all the criteria within each of the specified outcomes or competencies have been met, including any necessary underpinning knowledge and understanding, where appropriate.

Evidence must also be:

4. **Current:** up-to-date.
5. **Authentic:** the individual's own work.

THE ROLES OF THE CANADIAN PLAR PRACTITIONER

A PLAR Practitioner is an individual who utilizes **learner-focused** activities to **formatively** or **summatively** assess an individual's prior learning either for academic credit or recognition of occupational and/or professional competence. The key purpose of a PLAR Practitioner is to:

“review progress and/or assess achievements, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their personal development and/or education and training objectives.”

CAPLA Benchmarking Study

This description of the key purpose of the PLAR Practitioner appears to be consistent with PLAR practice at the international level based on the findings of the Benchmarking Study.

In Canada this definition includes the work of the PLAR Adviser who guides, assists and formatively assesses the learner – sometimes one-on-one, sometimes in small groups - in order to identify learning strengths and learning needs. It also includes the work of the PLA Assessor who summatively assesses individuals in order to award a final grade or to make a final decision about their competence.

Within Canadian post-secondary education institutions the PLAR Assessor is usually a subject-matter expert from faculty. In workplace education and training programs the Assessor is usually an experienced member of staff who is occupationally or professionally competent and is trained in assessment skills.

Within Canada, the PLA Co-ordinator may also be involved in the guidance and/or assessment of individuals, but will also be involved in

- maintaining, submitting and revising the use of assessment documents and records e.g. registration, orientation plans, assessment plans, assessment and certification procedures, appeals procedures;
- providing advice and support to Advisers and Assessors e.g. initial training, trouble shooting, methods and resource development, continuing professional development and updating of assessors; and
- monitoring assessments and ensuring consistency in the assessment process e.g. establishment of sampling frameworks for the purpose of statistical analysis and report writing, conducting regular Assessors meetings for the purpose of

developing consistency in assessment processes, individual needs and equal opportunities monitoring.

PLAR Assessors who summatively assess individuals should be competent and knowledgeable in the outcomes or competencies they are assessing. All PLAR Practitioners should be aware of the guidelines and newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR (Appendix Two).

When establishing their role, PLAR Practitioners should expect to encounter some initial tensions within their organizations. Such tensions may arise in the following situations

- questioning the rationale for the selection of one person as a PLAR Adviser or PLAR Assessor, rather than another;
- between Assessor and manager, when the Assessor negotiates time and space out of normal work activities in order to undertake assessments;
- within individual Assessors when they realize that they will be held accountable for their assessment decisions; and
- when individuals realize the need to reconcile the demands of being an Assessor with the demands of being a PLA Adviser so that objectivity can be maintained and any potential conflict of interest between the two roles can be avoided or minimized.

The PLAR Practitioner's role demands a range of interactions with individuals from within and outside the organization. Interactions with adult learners include

- pre-assessment guidance and action planning;
- observation and ongoing collaboration; and
- providing feedback on performance/competence.

In addition, PLAR Practitioners may be required to

- meet with their peers for the purpose of developing consistency in the application of assessment methods;
- meet with others in order to justify their assessment decisions e.g. PLAR Advisers, PLAR Co-ordinators, heads of faculty, heads of human resource development, external advisers etc.; and
- liaise with adult learners, managers, administrators and faculty to report on individual progress and to comment on resources for PLAR.

There are many factors which influence the performance of PLAR Practitioners (Day, 1996). It is essential that regular contact is maintained with faculty, other PLAR

Advisers and Assessors, as well as the PLAR Co-ordinator so that competence in assessment practice and the integrity of the PLA process is maintained.



KEY LEARNING ACTIVITY NUMBER TWO

- Q1. Review your response to Key Learning Activity Number One. Did you identify any potential conflicts or biases? If so, how might they be resolved?
- Q2. Draw up a plan of action to assist you in developing your PLAR Practitioner role. Indicate the factors which might be critical to your success and discuss them with the PLAR Co-ordinator or a respected colleague.

You may wish to record your answers using the Learning Diary provided on page 23.

In order to competently carry out their duties, PLAR Practitioners need to have a clear understanding of the PLAR process and how it relates to their role. They also need to have an appreciation of the competencies required of the PLAR Adviser and the PLAR Assessor (Appendix Two).

At some point in their development, PLAR Practitioners may also need to demonstrate that they are competent in the relevant activities and functions outlined in Appendix Two. For example, what are the specific competencies which support the work of the PLAR Adviser? These competencies are slightly different than those required of the Assessor.

The difference depends upon whether one is involved in formative or summative PLAR assessment. For example, the PLAR Assessor will often make a final appraisal of an individual's work in order that academic credit can be awarded or competence confirmed. Whereas the Adviser is more often involved in informal or ongoing developmental work.



KEY LEARNING ACTIVITY NUMBER THREE

- Q1. Review your responses to Key Learning Activity Number One and compare them to the competencies outlined in Appendix Two. Would you say you are a PLAR Adviser, a PLAR Assessor or both?
- Q2. What activities differentiate the roles of Adviser and Assessor in your workplace?
- Q3. At your workplace, what activities do the PLAR Adviser and PLAR Assessor have in common?

You may choose to record your answers here or complete the Learning Diary on page 23.

The Assessor carries out the following activities

- agreeing to and reviewing an assessment plan;
- judging evidence and providing feedback; and
- making an assessment decision and giving feedback.

Whereas the PLAR Adviser mainly carries out the following activities

- helping the individual to identify relevant learning;
- agreeing to and reviewing an action plan for demonstration of prior learning; and
- helping the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment.

WHAT ACTIVITIES DO THE ADVISER AND ASSESSOR HAVE IN COMMON?

Some activities are performed by both the Adviser and the Assessor. For example, both of them are involved in action planning, making an appropriate judgement about evidence and providing feedback to adult learners. The benchmarking study has shown that many Practitioners in Canada now undertake both roles as part of a team-based approach to assessment. Many assessment skills are common to both the Adviser and the Assessor roles.

Each of the activities relating to the roles of the Assessor and Adviser are now outlined.

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ASSESSOR

Agreeing to and Reviewing an Assessment Plan

Assessors may be involved in planning the most appropriate time, place and method for an individual's assessment. There is no prescribed format for this but they will need to take into account and discuss

- the outcome or competence to be assessed;
- an appropriate time and place for the assessment;
- the type of evidence that needs to be gathered e.g. how will competence be assessed as well as supporting knowledge and understanding?;
- any aspects of confidentiality that may apply;
- any ethical implications for assessment e.g. how will the safety of a third party be maintained?;
- any special assessment requirements – the individual may be a shift worker, nervous or use English or French as a second language; and
- the assessor and the adult learner need to make sure that they agree with the plan and that this agreement is appropriately recorded.



Discuss and Record - An example of an assessment plan is provided on the next page. You might like to discuss this with a respected colleague and consider how it may need to be modified in light of your own practice.

EXAMPLE ASSESSMENT PLAN

Learner: Fred Smith **Adult Learner Identification No.** 00001
Organization: Peabody International **PLA Adviser/Assessor:** Malcolm Day
Outcomes/Competencies: **Criteria:**

Peabody 's Workplace Development Program

Health and Safety at Work, Unit One

Unit One H&S 1a, 1b, 1c.

1. Assessment Opportunities:

Fred is the workplace health and safety officer with responsibility for attending workplace accidents and administering first aid. He is also responsible for training other workers in first aid procedure. Evidence of Fred's competence can be provided by letters of validation from those whom he has assisted, plus records of incidents he has maintained (with client's permission). Fred always evaluates his training sessions; these evaluations are available in written form.

2. Assessment methods:

- **Letter of validation:** 3 validation letters from clients Fred has assisted.
- **Workplace Product:** copies of Fred's incident reports relating to the above.
- **Workplace product:** copy of evaluation forms from at least 3 training sessions Fred has conducted.
- **Interview/oral questioning:** discuss the contents of Fred's portfolio and how these relate to criteria Unit One.

3. Resources required:

- Blank letter of validation x 3
- Copy portfolio development guidelines

4. Action to be taken by Assessor/Adviser:

- Malcolm to provide Fred with blank copies of letter of validation, plus portfolio guidelines.
- Malcolm to arrange interview to discuss Fred's portfolio and how it relates to criteria 1a, 1b, 1c.

5. Action to be taken by the Learner:

- Fred to compile a portfolio to include letters of validation, copy of incident records and copies of evaluation forms from training sessions.
- Fred to get written permission from clients/administrators to use incident records.
- Fred to let Malcolm have diary dates for meeting re: discussion of portfolio.

Signature of Learner: _____

Date: _____

Signature of PLA Adviser/Assessor _____ Date: _____

Judging Evidence and Providing Feedback

PLAR Practitioners may be involved in formatively or summatively reviewing the performance/competence of individuals and evaluating them against the criteria for the competencies or outcomes being assessed. These outcomes or competencies should be made available to both the Practitioner and the adult learner before an assessment is made of the learner's competence.

Practitioners are often required to review tasks and activities associated with the adult learner's field of study, place of work or chosen profession. This may be difficult to substantiate without the use of checklists or assessment records, which should be signed by the Practitioner and the adult learner. To help validate an assessment decision it is often useful to refer to examples of products that have arisen from the learner's work/studies. These products should be relevant to the criteria being assessed.

Practitioners will often need to ask questions in order to explore the supporting knowledge and understanding relating to the criteria which is being assessed. It is important not to lead the individual. i.e. that the question does not suggest the answer. Questions could also be

- *spontaneous*: verbal questions arising naturally from the evidence being reviewed. It is advisable to jot them down, along with the adult learner's response - as far as is reasonably possible i.e. do not let this distract from the work at hand;
- *pre-planned*: a series of written questions necessary to ask of the individual, which are prepared in advance. Practitioners and their PLAR colleagues could develop a question bank. This has the advantage that other Assessors have checked the questions to ensure they directly relate to the criteria being assessed. These questions are confidential and should not be disclosed to individuals prior to the assessment;
- *or both*: as one becomes more familiar with the required criteria and more experienced in the art of interviewing, it may be possible to combine both strategies in order to get a greater appreciation of the individual's performance/competence and underpinning knowledge and understanding. Questions should cover **processes**, as well as **outcomes**. It is important to pay particular attention to situations which have not been verified by others.

Individuals can become extremely nervous when subjected to questioning. Questions are best kept simple and should be directly related to the criteria being assessed. A quiet room is needed, free from interruptions and distractions.

Also, it is helpful to have a list of relevant questions on a separate sheet of paper to which to refer. The sheet of paper should also have a blank column in which to record the individual's answers. It is important to sign and date it and to get the adult learner's signature as well!



KEY LEARNING ACTIVITY NUMBER FOUR

Examine the guidelines for asking questions (next page). Think back to an assessment you recently undertook with an adult learner. Using the guidelines provided, make a comparison of these with your own practice.

- Q1. How might you have improved your questioning technique?

- Q2. Take one specific question that you have used and indicate how you might improve it.

- Q3. Discuss the proposed improvement with a respected colleague. What does he or she think?

You may choose to record your answers here or use the Learning Diary on page 23.

Making an Assessment Decision and Giving Feedback

Once the evidence has been collected, the PLAR Practitioner has to decide whether the individual has met the required criteria and inform him/her of the decision. Similarly if competencies or outcomes have not been met, the individual needs to be informed in a positive and constructive way, how this gap can be filled. It is important to be clear and concise about this - in fact it is helpful to record this information for the person.

When giving personal feedback to the adult learner it is important to be as sensitive as possible. Any negative comments may be harmful. It is also important to give the individual one's undivided attention and to respond appropriately to how he/she may be feeling after the assessment. The discussion can be initiated by asking how the individual thought the assessment went - this will help open up the feedback process and encourage him/her to share any concerns without fear of criticism. Individuals often identify gaps that have become obvious during the assessment process enabling the Practitioner to build upon their strengths and work toward the development of a realistic plan to help overcome any shortfalls.

It will take time to carry this out effectively. A quiet room, free from interruptions should help. However, it is one's personal approach, the way in which interest and concern are expressed, that will help to ensure a successful outcome to this process.

GUIDELINES ON HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS (ADAPTED FROM DAY, 1996)

When asking questions it is important to remember that learners have to first hear what is being said, then understand the question, think about it, search their memory, formulate an answer, then give the answer – this takes time.

Remember to

- ask questions in an interested manner and with a natural tone of voice;
- word questions in simple and straightforward language – avoid textbook jargon;
- pace the conversation and allow some time before going to the next question;
- ask questions which require more than a yes/no response;
- ask questions which only directly relate to the criteria being assessed;
- pose questions which do not suggest the answer; and
- encourage the learner to give a full and complete answer.

Try to avoid

- ambiguous questions;
- trick questions;
- repeating the learner's answer;
- sarcasm at the wrong answers;
- asking mainly factual questions;
- repeating the question, it's probably better to rephrase it;
- asking questions just to prolong the assessment;

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- asking questions that the learner will not be able to answer; and
- putting unnecessary pressure on the learner.



Discuss and Record - The sample assessment record on page 17 is an example of how such a form may be used to provide a detailed account of the types of evidence provided and the strengths and gaps identified as a result of the assessment. You might like to discuss this with a respected colleague and consider how it may be modified in light of your own practice.

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT RECORD

Adult Learner: Fred Smith
00001

Adult Learner Identification No.

Organization: Peabody International **PLA Adviser/Assessor:** Malcolm Day

Outcomes/Competencies:

Criteria:

Peabody 's Workplace Development Program

Health and Safety at Work, Unit One

Unit One H&S 1a, 1b, 1c.

Evidence methods used:

1. Discussion regarding Fred's role as a certified workplace health and safety officer, against criteria for H&S 1a, 1b and 1c (see portfolio) including administrative tasks and training role. A copy of the questions I asked are attached.
2. Three different letters of validation from those whom Fred has assisted (see portfolio) e.g. a client who fainted, a client who cut her hand and a client who suffered a heart attack.
3. Copies of evaluation sheets from 3 different training sessions Fred has conducted e.g. Principles of First Aid, CPR and fractures and sprains.

Areas where competence/outcomes have been achieved:

Fred has demonstrated that he is competent in all of the activities outlined in H&S Unit 1a, 1b, 1c.

Areas where competence/outcomes have not yet been achieved:

Fred is now collecting evidence relating to the Advanced First Aid at Work Module.

Assessor's comments (continue on back of sheet if you wish).

Responses to my questions (attached) and comprehensive workplace documentation placed in Fred's portfolio indicates that he is more than competent in the criteria required. Well done Fred!

Adult Learner's comments (continue on back of sheet if you wish).

I was given very clear guidelines on to how to collect evidence against the criteria required. This made the compilation of the portfolio much easier.

Signature of PLAR Adviser/Assessor: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Learner: _____ Date: _____



KEY LEARNING ACTIVITY NUMBER FIVE

Examine the guidelines for giving personal feedback. Think back to an assessment you recently undertook with an adult learner. Using the guidelines provided compare them to your own practice.

- Q1. How might you have improved your technique in giving feedback? Take one specific aspect and indicate how you might improve it.
- Q2. Discuss this proposed improvement with a respected colleague. What does he or she think?

GUIDELINES FOR GIVING PERSONAL FEEDBACK (adapted from Day, 1996)

The Interview

Interviews are an essential ingredient in the PLAR process. They provide both the adult learner and the Assessor with an excellent opportunity to seek additional information, ask for clarification and engage in dialogue aimed at building on learner strengths and exploring realistic alternatives if additional learning/evidence is needed. Skilled interviewers pay close attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues during the interview and respond appropriately to them.

During the interview it is important to pay particular attention to the following factors which can have a significant impact on the outcomes of the interview.

posture - relaxed, upright, facing person at a reasonable distance.

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<i>gestures -</i>	balanced, open, relaxed and non-threatening.
<i>facial expression -</i>	firm and pleasant.
<i>eye contact -</i>	gentle, direct, relaxed gaze, same eye level.
<i>voice, tone and volume -</i>	low-pitched, medium volume, gentle.
<i>language -</i>	honest, open and to the point, giving praise and honest feedback. sharing and taking responsibility for your own feelings.
<i>timing -</i>	putting your own point of view across and encouraging the learner to do the same.

Remember to clearly and accurately record the agreed-upon outcomes of the interview, identifying how any shortfalls can be overcome, the support the learner will need to overcome them and any agreed upon timelines.

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PLAR ADVISER

As previously noted the PLAR Adviser tends to work with individuals and groups to help them identify learning that is relevant to their individual goals and objectives. In a group setting, one widely used approach is called portfolio development. This process draws upon the strengths of peer learning as well as individual analysis. It often involves a series of activities and exercises designed to help learners identify, describe and provide evidence of what they know and can do.

Some of these exercises focus upon enabling the learner to become more conscious and specific about the breadth, depth and nature of their own learning. Others prompt the learner to think critically and creatively about their goals and objectives. Still others emphasize the process of gathering and presenting credible and sufficient evidence to substantiate the learning claims the individual is presenting.

Whether working with an individual or group the tasks of an Adviser are basically threefold -to enable individuals to

- identify and describe relevant learning;
- develop and present examples of prior learning achievements; and
- document, organize and present a comprehensive, coherent and credible account of their prior learning.

Some of the exercises and activities used by the Adviser may include the systematic development of a life chronology. This helps trigger memories of the many events and settings an individual has experienced and often leads to an in-depth analysis and identification of the learning that took place in those settings. A summary life history paper helps individuals capture those aspects of their life and learning that are most

significant to them.

A learning narrative may also be used. This is a detailed examination of a particular event or experience in which the crucial distinction between the **experience** and the **learning** that occurred is emphasized. Initially many people find this a difficult distinction to make: learning always takes place in a experiential setting but the learning is not the same as the experience.

Each of the tasks carried out by the Adviser and how they relate to the functions and activities of the newly-emerging benchmarks (Appendix Two) are now discussed in detail.

Helping The Individual To Identify Relevant Learning

It is possible to collect many forms of evidence to demonstrate that one is competent (Figure Two). This section will concentrate on what is meant by **sufficient** evidence in relation to the use of a learning diary, letter of validation and simulation.

The Learning Diary

A learning diary can provide evidence that learners have the necessary supporting knowledge and understanding relating to an outcome or competence. When completed, the learning diary can be submitted to the PLAR Assessor, who will then ask questions about it. For example, whether it is the learner's own work, how it relates to the criteria being assessed, as well as questions about the content of the material. In keeping a learning diary, learners will need to

- identify a strategy that will demonstrate they have the appropriate knowledge relating to the criteria being assessed. For example, learners may need to search out new and relevant information, read it, appraise it and record it in a meaningful way. Or they want to have a discussion with a more experienced colleague or mentor. They may also wish to attend a professional development activity;
- identify what they have learned, taking into account any reading, professional development activities and/or any discussions with others;
- apply what they have learned to their practice e.g. by indicating how any new knowledge can be used in the workplace to solve a problem or deal with a contingency; and
- identify the evidence they can use to demonstrate appropriate knowledge. They will need to discuss this with the Assessor and it may include a bibliography, any notes taken, copies of any diagrams produced, any certificates received, etc.

An example of a learning diary and how it might be completed is provided on page 22. A blank sample is provided on page 23.

Validation Letters

Validation letters can provide an indirect and authenticated account of the adult learner's performance/competence. They may be collected from colleagues, supervisors, managers, customers, suppliers, etc.

Letters of validation should

- be specific to an activity or product;
- give a brief description of the circumstances and context of the observation;
- give a brief description of the background and qualifications of the signatory;
- give a brief background to the observed activity; and
- identify aspects of the outcome or competence demonstrated and how it relates to the set criteria.

It is helpful to provide a checklist to the individual writing the validation letter, the signatory, to link the learner's performance/competence directly to the appropriate outcome or competency.

The signatory may simply authenticate a piece of work as having been produced by the learner. In other cases, the signatory may provide an account of the learner's performance and comment on it in relation to the appropriate outcome or competency. It is important that signatories are familiar with the set criteria and are able to comment authoritatively on the learner's performance/competence.

Before accepting evidence from a letter of validation, the Adviser will need to

- judge the authenticity and validity of the evidence;
- check that the evidence is clear about the standards being covered; and
- check that the signatory can be contacted for authentication of the validation letter, if necessary.



Discuss and Record – A sample validation letter is provided on page 26. You might like to discuss this with a respected colleague and consider how it may be modified in light of your own practice.

SAMPLE LEARNING DIARY

Your Name: _____ Your Identification No.: _____

Organization: _____ Your PLAR Adviser is: _____

1. What is my strategy for learning?

After examining the criteria to be achieved, you could seek relevant information at the library or have a discussion with a colleague at work or with a mentor. Keep a record of what you do as this could count as part of the evidence you present in your portfolio.

2. What have I learned?

Based on the information you gained from the above activities, you will need to identify the knowledge you have gained, and indicate how it relates to the criteria to be assessed.

3. How will I apply this knowledge?

State how the knowledge gained will be applied to your field of study or occupation. For example, you may use it to solve an existing problem or you could describe how it might be used to solve a potential problem.

4. What evidence can I demonstrate?

List the possible sources of evidence which demonstrate you have the appropriate knowledge for each of the criteria against which you are being assessed on. For example; a record of the reading you have undertaken, a copy of any notes you have made, any certificates of attendance you have obtained at training sessions. Don't forget to place a copy of any learning diaries you have completed in your portfolio!

5. PLAR Adviser Comments

The PLAR Adviser will need to record whether he/she agrees that you have the necessary supporting knowledge, and understanding and confirm the outcomes or competencies to which this relates. The PLAR Adviser will do this by countersigning this form and making any appropriate comments. These records should be placed in your portfolio.

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of PLAR Adviser: _____ Date: _____

SAMPLE LEARNING DIARY

Your Name: _____ Identification No.: _____

Organization: _____ Your PLAR Adviser is: _____

1. What is my strategy for learning?

2. What have I learned?

3. How will I apply this knowledge?

4. What evidence can I demonstrate?

5. PLAR Adviser Comments (continue on back of the sheet, if you wish).

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of PLAR Adviser: _____ Date: _____

Use of Simulations

Any source of performance evidence other than the learner's normal, naturally-occurring work activity can be thought of as a simulation. However, before the learner decides to use simulation, all other sources of evidence should be examined to ensure that simulation is the most cost-effective and appropriate method.

Care must be taken to ensure that any simulated assessment meets the full requirements of the outcomes or competencies being assessed. The Adviser must be confident that any competence demonstrated during the simulation can be transferred to the work environment and is therefore a realistic representation of the knowledge and performance/competence required.

Simulation could be used when there are issues relating to confidentiality and safety or to increase access to assessment. Some examples are given below

- future requirements such as new technologies and work practices at the individual's workplace that do not offer opportunities to provide appropriate evidence;
- infrequent events such as an annual inventory or the outcome of a five-year business plan if waiting for the event to occur could delay assessment;
- avoiding risks to the individual or others in the work environment, e.g. cleaning procedures in cases of chemical contamination;
- procedures which may have complicated or dangerous consequences, e.g. testing for and repairing a gas leak;
- life-threatening conditions, such as resuscitation of a person who has stopped breathing; and
- situations in which collecting evidence would intrude on personal privacy or confidentiality.

Simulations allow the learner to develop and practice skills in a safe environment and can provide useful opportunities for developmental assessment and feedback. However, when simulations are used for assessing competence against a standard they must be set up to reflect real activities and conditions.

When planning to use simulation, the Adviser and the learner should consider the following questions

- what arrangements have been made for identifying sources of evidence? e.g. workplace, work placement simulation at the evidence planning stage;
- when workplace evidence is not available, have opportunities to use work placements and job rotation been fully explored?;

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- do other faculty/staff or Assessors share a common understanding of simulation?;
- what systems, processes and design criteria are in place to support the development and design of simulations?;
- are the simulations cost-effective when compared to other methods of generating and gathering evidence?; and
- what arrangements have been made for briefing those who are to be assessed through simulation?

All simulations must provide for valid and reliable assessment of the required outcomes and criteria.

Agreeing to and Reviewing an Action Plan for Demonstration of Prior Learning

Learners might think that they already have the necessary knowledge and experience required to demonstrate that they can meet some of the outcomes or competencies outlined in Appendix Two. Much of the evidence that can be used for this has already been discussed and includes certificates and transcripts, from previous courses; work records and products; and letters of validation.

SAMPLE VALIDATION LETTER

Learner's Name: Fred Smith Learner's Identification Number: 00001

1. Declaration:

I have read and understood the outcomes/competencies required and I am able to state that the above individual can meet the following requirements:

Competence/Outcomes: Health and Safety Unit One

Competencies/Criteria: 1a, 1b and 1c

2. Evidence to support the above statement i.e. *I am able to state this because...*

Fred looked after me when I cut my hand at work. He laid me flat, raised my hand in the air and applied a firm bandage to control the bleeding. He covered me with a blanket and told me not to eat or drink anything and then arranged an ambulance to get me to hospital. When I returned to work the next day, Fred helped me fill out the accident report book. Fred was calm throughout the incident and I really felt safe and reassured by him.

3. Details of person signing the Letter of Validation.

Name: Joan Smith **Designation:** Shop floor worker

Qualifications: Body Shop Operative **Telephone:** Extension 242

Relationship of Witness to Learner: Client **E-mail:**

Address: The Body Shop, Peabody International **Telephone Number:** Ext. 242

Signature of Verifier: _____ Date: _____

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

NB: You may be contacted by a PLAR Adviser or PLAR Assessor to confirm your observations/comments.

Some organizations keep a comprehensive account of staff training activities and they regularly carry out staff performance reviews. Other organizations issue workers with a personal handbook which records comments from supervisors on their performance at work. The outcomes of these staff development activities may be used as evidence, provided they relate to the criteria being assessed and they can be substantiated.

Learners may find that they can organize evidence to demonstrate several outcomes or competencies at the same time. If the assessment process is to be meaningful, it is important to consider the possibility of using this whole or "*holistic*" approach to PLAR - rather than reducing the process to a series of unconnected observations and tasks. In doing this Advisers will find that

- the PLAR process will become more interesting;
- evidence will become more meaningful and efficient;
- it will avoid unnecessary repetition;
- use of learners' achievements will be maximized; and
- it will save valuable time and energy which can be applied elsewhere.

Learners will need to take into account the way in which they organize their work and/or learning in order to make best use of the evidence they are generating. One way of doing this is to build up a portfolio of learning and experience.

This process can be initiated by undertaking a self-assessment of one's current skills, abilities and competencies. The results of this activity and any supporting evidence can be included in the portfolio.



Discuss and Record – i. An example of a completed self-assessment grid is provided on page 28. You might like to discuss this with a respected colleague and consider how it may be modified in light of your own practice.

ii. An example of an evidence grid is provided on page 29. You might like to discuss the amount and type of evidence that could be collected with a respected colleague and consider how it may be modified in light of your own practice.

EXAMPLE OF A SELF-ASSESSMENT GRID

Your Name: _____ **Your Identification No.** _____

Organization: _____ **Your PLAR Adviser:** _____

1. Please identify the outcome or competency you wish to achieve. Then rate your performance against this outcome or competency using the **Performance Grid** below.
2. Use the **Evidence Grid** (next page) to identify the evidence which supports your performance rating. This evidence needs to be included in your portfolio with the results of your self-assessment.

PERFORMANCE GRID

*My level of performance is
(Tick relevant right hand box)

Outcome or Competency Statement	1	2	3	4	5	
1a) Taking appropriate action in the event of an accident at work.				/		
1b) Making an appropriate referral and keeping appropriate records.				/		

*My level of performance is:

Performance Scale (adapted from Steinaker and Bell, 1979)		
Level	Adult Learner	Assessor
1.	I have observed or been orientated to this	The individual has observed or been orientated to this
2.	I can participate and assist in this	The individual is able to participate and assist in this
3.	I can do this with close supervision	The individual is able to do this with close supervision
4.	I can do this with minimal supervision in a safe and competent* manner	The individual can do this with minimal supervision in a safe and competent* manner
5.	I can demonstrate this to others	The individual can demonstrate this to others

* Competence is defined as 'the possession of sufficient knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding for successful performance in the workplace.'

List the evidence which supports your performance rating using the **Evidence Grid** below.

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EVIDENCE GRID*

*Evidence Available
(See Key Below)

Outcome or Competency Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1a) Taking appropriate action in the event of an accident at work.				/	
1b) Making an appropriate referral and keeping appropriate records.			/		

***Evidence Key**

- 1. Certificates and transcripts from courses**
- 2. Learning Diary**
- 3. Workplace products and records**
- 4. Validation Letters**
- 5. Evidence log**

Comments: (i.e. other forms of evidence not covered by the evidence key):

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of PLAR Adviser/Assessor: _____ Date: _____

Help the Individual to Prepare and Present Evidence for Assessment

Evidence of prior learning can be collected in a portfolio. A portfolio is a record kept in a binder, a file or a folder – of an individual's prior learning achievements – what she or he knows and can do. Some portfolios are extremely comprehensive and wide-ranging, some are more narrowly and specifically focused – depending on the purposes, objectives and goals of the learner. While portfolios often contain many of the elements and components outlined above, there is no single 'right' way to organize and present a portfolio. In fact, people exercise a great deal of creativity in this regard.

ORGANIZING A PORTFOLIO

Individuals may develop a portfolio for a variety of reasons. For example it may be for a specific purpose such as gaining admission or advanced standing to a program of further education and training or employment in a particular field or position. In these instances the portfolio will contain a record of the learner's personal development which has been built up over a period of time. This will often include

- any plans the learner has made for his or her ongoing learning;
- a review of the learner's actions since commencing PLAR activities;
- descriptions of any learning activities undertaken at work or place of study; and
- evidence from others about the learner's skills and abilities.

The way in which a learner presents his or her portfolio is crucial. It should be easy to follow. The Adviser should also be able to readily identify any learning that has taken place and any evidence of the learner's claim of competence. There should be a contents page which outlines each section of the portfolio. Each section of the portfolio should represent a competency or outcome and its associated criteria.

Within each section the learner should place the evidence he or she has collected - this should be complete, signed, dated and appropriately cross-referenced to the contents page (this could be done numerically or with colour codes). Each section should then be prefaced by a brief summary of its content. A portfolio submitted for academic credit may be rejected if it is poorly presented, so it is important to make sure that the learner's name is clearly written on it, that documents and records are legible and signed and the portfolio is neatly packaged and organized.

DEVELOPING A PORTFOLIO

Probably one of the most difficult tasks for the learner is deciding what to include in a portfolio. The possible sources of evidence that might be used have already been discussed. However, the art of building a portfolio is a learning process in itself, which develops self-reflection and critical thinking skills. Although highly individualized,

portfolio development is often successfully accomplished in small groups. Adult learners work closely with each other to identify and document significant learning events in their lives assisted by a facilitator skilled in interpersonal communication, group dynamics and adult learning principles. The development of a portfolio is a continuous and reflective process. It includes the following stages

- familiarization with the outcomes or competencies required;
- reviewing existing abilities and prior achievements;
- self-assessment and production of a personal profile;
- identification of any personal development needs e.g. any “top-up” learning that is needed;
- identification of other sources of help and guidance;
- identification of other appropriate sources of evidence;
- identification of opportunities to maximize evidence generation;
- planning and organizing assessments; and
- compiling the evidence.

APPRAISING THE PORTFOLIO

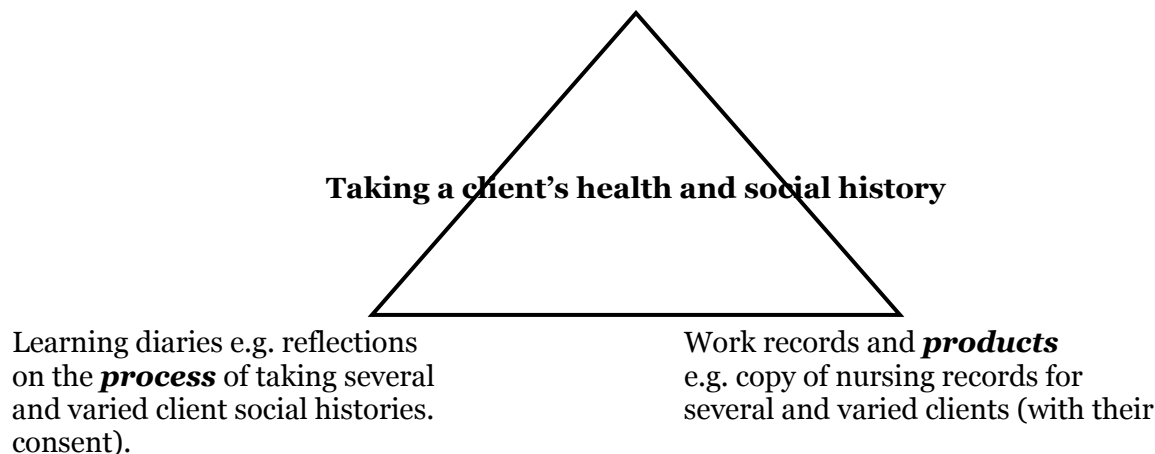
Evidence in the portfolio should be

- valid i.e. related to the outcomes or competencies for which the learner is seeking credit;
- sufficient i.e. meets all of the criteria required;
- authentic i.e. learner’s own work;
- current i.e. up-to-date; and
- able to demonstrate that the learner has developed appropriate knowledge and understanding.

Validity - It would be inaccurate to infer that the learner was competent on the basis of his or her knowledge alone. Any evidence must also demonstrate that the learner can actually use and apply his or her skills and knowledge to meet the required criteria. The amount of evidence required will depend on a number of factors, including the specific requirements of the outcome or competence being assessed, as well as the opportunities open to the learner to collect evidence. Collecting several diverse pieces of evidence relating to the knowledge and skills required of a competency or an outcome can strengthen the validity of the evidence the learner presents. Similarly, several letters of validation gathered from colleagues, clients and supervisors about the learner’s skills and abilities will provide evidence of different dimensions of the learner’s work. This is

called **Triangulation** - using a variety of diverse sources of evidence to demonstrate competence. In demonstrating the ability to take a client's health and social history a learner in the health care field might present the following evidence described in the example which follows, using the principle of triangulation.

Letters of validation e.g. several colleagues, nursing supervisors and various clients.



Sufficiency – Has been achieved if the learner

- meets all of the criteria within each outcome or competence that is required;
- can demonstrate that the evidence is current and up-to-date;
- is consistent with his or her performance and can be demonstrated over a period of time; and
- can demonstrate that he or she has relevant knowledge and understanding and can apply this.

An absolute minimum would be to have one item of evidence, provided it met each of the criteria outlined within the outcome or competency required. However in practice, a single item of evidence is unlikely to demonstrate the learner's ability to perform consistently. A number of items collected over a period of time would be needed to demonstrate this. An evidence log can be useful for this purpose.



Discuss and Record - An example of an evidence log is provided on the next page. You might like to discuss this with a respected colleague and consider how it may be modified in light of your own practice.

EXAMPLE OF AN EVIDENCE LOG

Candidate: Fred Smith **Registration No.:** 00001
Organization: Peabody International **PLAR Adviser:** Malcolm Day
Outcome or Competence: Health and Safety **Criteria:** 1a, 1b

Outcomes or Competencies practiced over a period of time	Learner's comments regarding their own performance
1a) Taking appropriate action in the event of an accident at work.	Called to body shop at 10 a.m on 21 st October. Female with laceration to right hand. Arterial bleeding. Laid flat. Elevated arm and applied firm sterile bandage. Ambulance called. Nothing by mouth.
1b) Making an appropriate referral and keeping appropriate records.	Ambulance called and shift supervisor informed at 10:10 a.m. 21 st October. Incident recorded in accident book.

Evidence of Support Knowledge and Understanding e.g. a Learning Diary

Arterial bleeding is under pressure. It is bright red and frothy and spurts. Patients will be shocked due to pain and loss of blood i.e. pale, clammy and rapid pulse. Patient should be laid flat to increase oxygen to the brain and kept warm to prevent dilation of peripheral blood vessels and further systemic blood loss.

Your Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of PLA Adviser: _____ Date: _____

Authenticity – It is important to be certain that all of the evidence is the learner's own work. For example, when looking at a computer printout, it can be difficult to tell if an item of evidence is entirely the individual's own work or whether it was produced by the learner as a member of a work team. In these cases a letter of validation could confirm the authenticity of evidence which is being put forward by the learner.

Currency – The learner will include evidence from prior learning related to specific competences in his or her portfolio. This should be checked by the Adviser for validity and authenticity. It is important to recognize that even if the evidence meets the required criteria, it may not demonstrate that the learner is currently competent if it was produced some years ago. It is essential that the learner's evidence show current competence. If the Adviser is not one hundred percent sure of this, it may be necessary to seek further advice from faculty or for the learner to include a more recent piece of evidence in his or her portfolio.

Underpinning Knowledge and Understanding – Knowledge and understanding are critical to competent performance. The learner must be able to demonstrate that he or she has any appropriate supporting knowledge and understanding listed in each outcome or competence statement. The learner can do this through written and oral questioning or demonstrate this through his/her performance. However, it is unlikely that performance evidence alone will be sufficient. Therefore, a combination of evidence might be used e.g. written and oral questioning, plus direct observation of performance.

If the Adviser is unsure about the depth of knowledge required, he or she can check this with a respected PLAR colleague or with faculty. Standardization meetings are useful for this purpose. At these meetings, the assessment team can reach a common agreement and understanding about the nature of knowledge and performance evidence. In this way consistency can be achieved.

SUMMARY

The various methods which learners might use to generate evidence of their abilities have been discussed, with particular emphasis being placed upon the need to

- generate evidence that is relevant to the outcomes or competencies required;
- carefully plan work and/or learning in order to maximize the evidence produced;
- record evidence in a meaningful and constructive way, using a portfolio; and
- utilize evidence from diverse and various sources.

These issues are now summarized in the form of a checklist that the PLAR Practitioner can use to review the evidence that the learner is presenting in his or her portfolio. The questions which follow highlight key issues to consider.

1. Is the evidence relevant to the outcomes or competencies required?
2. Does the evidence cover all of the criteria?
3. Does the learner have the necessary supporting knowledge and understanding?
4. Is the evidence up-to-date?
5. Is the evidence real and not fabricated?
6. Is the evidence the product of the learner's own work?
7. Is the confidentiality of any sensitive information maintained?
8. Is the evidence laid out in a clear and consistent way?
9. Will the Assessor be able to easily follow the evidence presented in the portfolio?

A portfolio enables adult learners to give a detailed account of their skills and abilities in relation to the outcomes and criteria being assessed. In order to do this it should

- be structured in a clear and logical way;
- be supported by evidence from others e.g. colleagues, peers, supervisors, etc.;
- describe the learner's learning and/or work environment and the daily activities in which he or she participates;
- be easy to read and understand; and
- allow the learner some freedom of expression.

PLAR, as exemplified by the portfolio development process, enables adult learners to create valid, reliable and comprehensive documents based on their own unique strengths and life circumstances. For many adults the preparation of a portfolio affirms their self-worth, enhances their self-confidence and strengthens their capacity to proactively deal with the many transitions in their lives. A well-prepared portfolio also enables them to achieve formal credit and recognition for their skills and competencies.

CONCLUSION

This Practitioner's Guide is intended to encourage both PLAR Practitioners and adult learners to purposefully apply proven assessment theory to meet a variety of personal and professional goals and needs. The Guide has identified and discussed the basic principles and processes necessary for effective, systematic assessment of prior learning. It is solidly rooted not only in Canadian practice but in international practice as well.

It is hoped that the assumptions, values, beliefs and practices espoused in this Guide will be applied in flexible, innovative and thoughtful ways that are respectful of the diverse backgrounds, interests and needs of Canadian adults.

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APPENDIX ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CAPLA PLAR BENCHMARKING STUDY

The aim of the CAPLA/HRDC Benchmarking Study is to develop and promote national benchmarks for those engaged in PLAR assessments across Canada, in all sectors and communities. The objectives of the study are to:

1. Gain practitioner consensus on the development of benchmarks for PLAR assessment across Canada;
2. Produce a guide to support the implementation of national benchmarks for PLAR assessment;
3. Make recommendations for the promotion of the national benchmarks and distribution of the guide; and
4. Investigate the feasibility of developing a system to confirm the competence of PLAR practitioners, based on nationally agreed-upon benchmarks for practice.

In meeting these objectives the following outcomes have been achieved:

1. A review of the outcomes based approach to learning in Australia, United Kingdom and Canada, the context in which this approach is emerging, the tensions arising and how these are being resolved by post-secondary institutions.
2. An overview of the diversity of PLAR practice in Canada and the emerging issues. Case study presentations include
 - a Canada-wide PLAR initiative for the Technology Professions;
 - the development toward a national tourism learning system;
 - a focus on health and human service programs in two Canadian provinces;
 - a focus on the role of post-secondary institutions in two Canadian Provinces; and
 - a focus on community-based PLAR in two Canadian Provinces.

This is not meant to be a complete picture of what is occurring in Canada but rather a cross-section of case studies to show a variety of approaches.¹

¹ For a more complete picture of PLAR in Canada the reader may wish to contact the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Project, University of Toronto at: <http://nall.oise.utoronto.ca>. or www.plar.com

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3. A review of the benchmarking process and a report outlining the development of emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners;
4. An analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for using PLAR benchmarks in Canada;
5. The recognition of emerging benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners in Canada;
6. An example of a mechanism for validating the competence of PLAR practitioners. This is based on feedback received from focus group participants;
7. Discussion on the development of a comprehensive policy for the establishment of PLAR training organizations in Canada; and
8. Finally, recommendations for the development and dissemination of a printed text-based guide for Canadian PLAR Practitioners have been made.

A copy of the Benchmarking Study can be obtained from:

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
P.O. Box 20135
Belleville, ON
K8N 5V1

APPENDIX TWO

NEWLY-EMERGING BENCHMARKS FOR CANADIAN PLAR PRACTITIONERS

An Holistic Framework for Quality Practice

The Benchmarking Study is concerned with the development of benchmarks for four of the CLFDB standards (7, 8, 9, 10), and for the principles of the BC PLAR code which cover “*learner orientation*” and “*professional development*.” When implementing the benchmarks emerging from the study it is recommended that organizations consider both the CLFDB standards and areas E and F of the BC Code as an appropriate philosophy and context for PLAR practice. In this way the need to maintain a common widely accepted standard as well as an holistic approach towards PLAR practice can be fulfilled.

THE KEY PURPOSE OF THE PLAR PRACTITIONER

The Benchmarking Study has found that the key purpose of the PLAR Practitioner in Canada is to:

“Review progress and/or to assess achievements, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their personal development and/or education and training objectives”

The key purpose recognizes the range and diversity of PLAR in Canada. This includes

- assisting individuals with their personal growth and development;
- human resource development;
- the preparation of professionals; and
- assessment of individuals for academic credit.

EMERGING ROLES FOR PLAR PRACTITIONERS IN CANADA

This study found that the main functions and activities of the PLAR Practitioner’s role are to

(1) Prepare the Individual for Assessment. This may include the following activities:

- *help the individual to identify relevant learning;*
- *agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning; and*

- *help the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment.*

(2) Assess the Individual. This may include the following activities

- *agree to and review an assessment plan;*
- *judge evidence and provide feedback; and*
- *make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.*

PLAR Practitioners in Canada carry out both of these functions, more recently as part of a team approach towards PLAR assessment. Practitioners should be made aware of the potential conflicts and biases which exist when undertaking both roles, but they should also be encouraged to develop competence in both advisory and assessment functions, so that the **content validity** and **predictive validity** of PLAR evidence can be addressed.

INDICATORS FOR PRACTICE

The performance indicators relating to each of the functions and activities of the PLAR Practitioner are outlined on the next page. These have been developed from the UK TDLB standard (after an extensive consultation) to ensure that the culture, context and diversity of PLAR practice in Canada has been appropriately captured, for example, the term “*outcomes*” was inserted to replace the phrase “*Units, Elements and Performance Criteria*”- these are specific terms used in the UK which only relate to NVQs. They are inappropriate for Canadian Practitioners. The italics reflect the changes made to the TDLB benchmarks, based on feedback from community based PLAR centers in Manitoba and Halifax.

FUNCTION 1 - PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT

Activity (I) Help the Individual to Identify Relevant Learning

- a The **individual** is given clear and accurate information about the reasons for and methods of, collecting and presenting evidence of prior learning.
- b The **individual** is encouraged to review all relevant and appropriate experience.
- c **Outcomes or agreed-upon criteria** which the **individual** may currently be able to achieve are accurately identified from a review of their experience.
- d The way in which support is given encourages self-confidence and self-esteem in the **individual**.

- e If the ***individual*** expresses disagreement with the advice offered, possible alternatives are explained in a clear and constructive manner.

Activity (II) Agree to and Review an Action Plan for Demonstration of Prior Learning

- a The **individual** is given accurate advice and appropriate encouragement to enable him or her to form realistic expectations of the value of his or her prior learning.
- b **Any outcomes or agreed upon criteria** to be achieved are appropriate to the **individual's** prior learning and future aspirations.
- c Advice to the **individual** accurately identifies **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria** which might reasonably be claimed on the basis of prior learning.
- d Opportunities to use evidence from prior learning are accurately analyzed.
- e The **individual** plan agreed to identifies realistic targets to collect and present evidence of prior learning as efficiently as possible.
- f The **individual's** motivation and self-confidence is encouraged throughout.
- g If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the **individual** are explained clearly and constructively.
- h The plan is reviewed appropriately with the **individual**.

Activity (III) Help the Individual to Prepare and Present Evidence for Assessment

- a The **individual** is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio **or other appropriate forms of evidence**.
- b Guidance provided to the **individual** during evidence preparation encourages the efficient development of clear, structured evidence relevant to the **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria being claimed**.
- c Liaison with **potential** assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio of **evidence** and maintains the **individual's** confidence.
- d Opportunities are identified for the **individual** to demonstrate **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria** where evidence from prior learning is not available.
- e **Any** institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met.

- f If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the **individual** are explained clearly and constructively.

FUNCTION 2 - ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL

Activity (I) Agree to and Review an Assessment Plan

- a Any possible opportunities for collecting evidence are identified and evaluated for relevance against the **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria** to be assessed and their appropriateness to the **individual's** needs.
- b Evidence collection is planned to make effective use of time and resources.
- c The opportunities selected provide access to fair and reliable assessment.
- d The proposed assessment plan is discussed and agreed with the **individual** and others who may be affected.
- e If there is disagreement with the proposed assessment plan, options open to the **individual** are explained clearly and constructively.
- f The assessment plan specifies **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria** to be achieved, opportunities for efficient evidence collection, assessment methods and the timing of assessments.
- g Requirements to assure the authenticity, currency, reliability and sufficiency of evidence are identified.
- h Plans are reviewed and updated at agreed-upon times to reflect the **individual's** development.

Activity (II) Judge Evidence and Provide Feedback

- a Advice and encouragement to collect evidence efficiently is appropriate to the **individual's** needs.
- b Access to assessment is appropriate to the **individual's** needs.
- c The evidence is valid and can be attributed to the **individual**.
- d Only the **agreed upon criteria and/or outcomes** are used to judge the evidence.
- e Evidence is judged accurately against all the relevant **outcomes or agreed-upon criteria**.

- f When evidence of prior learning is used, checks are made that the **individual** can currently achieve the relevant **outcome or agreed-upon criteria**.
- g Evidence is judged fairly and reliably.
- h Difficulties in authenticating and judging evidence are referred promptly to the **appropriate person(s)**
- i When evidence is not to the agreed standard, the **individual** is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.
- j Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the **individual's** needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.

Activity (III) Make an Assessment Decision Using Differing Sources of Evidence and Provide Feedback

- a The decision is based on all of the relevant evidence available.
- b Any inconsistencies in the evidence are clarified and resolved.
- c When the combined evidence is sufficient to cover the **outcomes or the agreed-upon criteria**, the **individual** is informed of his/her achievement.
- d When evidence is insufficient, the **individual** is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.
- e Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the **individual's** needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.
- f The **individual** is encouraged to seek clarification and advice.
- g Evidence and assessment decisions are recorded to meet any **PLAR audit requirements**.
- h **Any** documentation is legible and accurate, stored securely and referred promptly to the next **appropriate** stage of the recording/certification process.

APPENDIX THREE

SELF-ASSESSMENT SCALE FOR CANADIAN PLAR PRACTITIONERS

SELF-ASSESSMENT SCALE

This Scale has been designed to help you determine your level of competence in relation to the Benchmarks for PLAR assessment around which this Guide has been designed.

The self-assessment process enables you to take an active role in assessing, documenting and monitoring your ongoing competency development in relation to the assessment of prior learning. There are several advantages to conducting a self-assessment. The self-assessment activity should

- encourage and support you in taking responsibility for assessing your own learning;
- assist you in assessing your level of competence in PLAR assessment and helping you to identify gaps in your skills and knowledge;
- assist you in focusing specifically on the PLAR assessment benchmarks and deciding which of them to pursue by providing evidence of your competence in those areas; and
- promote the design of an individualized learning plan based on your previous experiences and learning related to the Benchmarks enabling you to strengthen existing PLAR assessment skills and knowledge and to fill in any gaps.

The starting point in the PLAR process is a candid, thoughtful self-appraisal of your level of competence in relation to the Benchmarks for assessment. The checklist has been designed to help you compare your skills and knowledge to the Benchmarks. Please check the level of performance which best describes your competence in each of the areas on the chart.

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SCALE

1	2	3	4	5
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RATING

- 1 Have no experience with this
- 2 Have observed this or been oriented to this
- 3 Can participate in and assist with this
- 4 Can do this with minimum assistance
- 5 Can successfully do this without assistance

Carefully review each of the functions and activities and their performance indicators. Using the self-assessment scale, record what you think is your present level of competence. Make notes of possible sources of evidence in the right hand column of any particular tasks, projects, responsibilities, courses, training programs, self-directed study in which you have participated that may help you to demonstrate competence. You may find that one piece of evidence is strong enough to demonstrate competence in more than one competency area. However, you will probably need more than one piece of evidence to demonstrate competence in any one competency area. Providing diverse sources of evidence to demonstrate your competence is a critical element of the PLAR process. The Practitioner's Guide describes in detail important principles related to evidence collection.

After completing the self-assessment activity it may be a good idea to take some time to review the entire Practitioner Guide. Pay particular attention to those benchmarks for which you consistently rated yourself as being able to perform the competency with minimum assistance and/or without assistance. Such ratings indicate that these are the areas on which to focus in generating various forms of evidence to support your claim that you possess the required assessment skills and knowledge.

COLLECTING EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT COMPETENCE

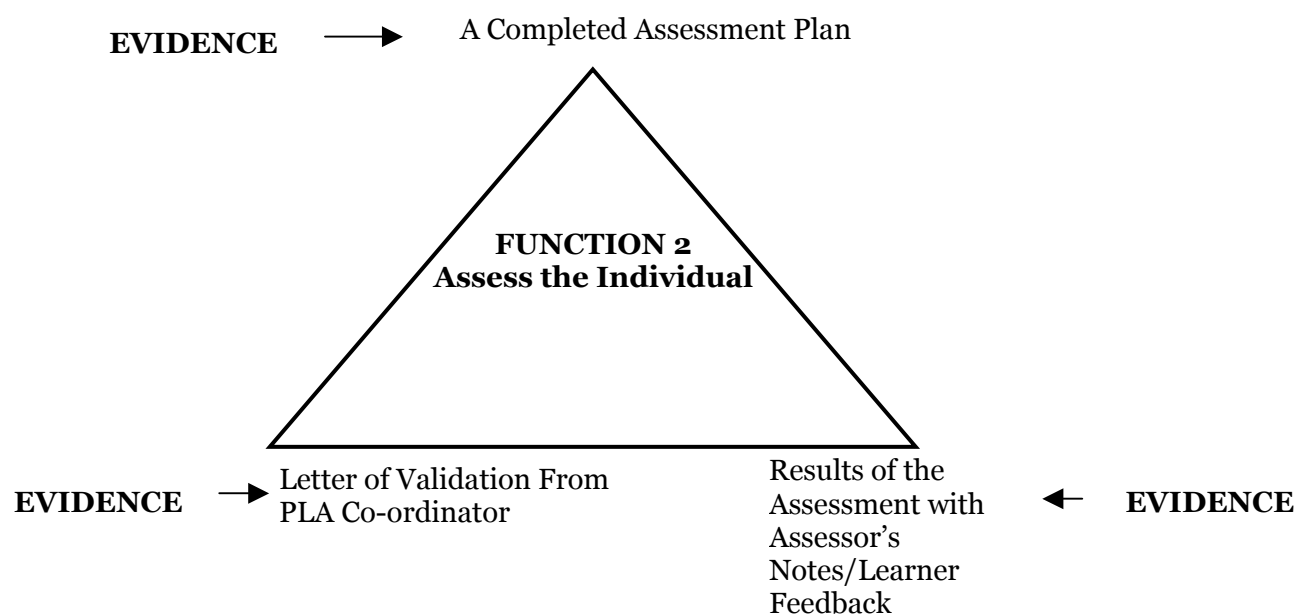
Providing appropriate sources and types of documentation (evidence) to support one's claim of competence is a key component of PLAR. Evidence generally falls into two categories; **direct** and **indirect**.

Direct evidence refers to products, reports, plans, and performances that you have created and produced. In most cases direct evidence is the strongest evidence to support your claim that you really do have the skills and knowledge that you say you have in relation to the Benchmarks. It is important that you collect as much direct evidence related to the Benchmarks as possible in support of your claim of competence.

Indirect evidence generally refers to information about you and your achievements/competencies. Examples of indirect evidence include letters of validation written on your behalf by employers, supervisors, co-workers, members of professional associations, formal job evaluations, awards, commendations.

In many cases, direct evidence or observation of one's skills and knowledge may not be possible due to cost, confidentiality, lack of time, etc. When it is not possible or realistic to provide direct evidence to support one's claim of competence indirect sources of evidence may be used. A flexible combination of direct and indirect evidence is highly desirable and commonly used as an integral part of the PLAR process.

Remember that throughout the assessment process emphasis should be placed on ensuring that diverse sources of evidence are used i.e. **at least three sources per each of the major functions and activities and their accompanying performance indicators.** The example which follows demonstrates the principle of triangulation of evidence.



SELF-ASSESSMENT SCALE

PLAR PRACTITIONERS BENCHMARKS FOR ASSESSMENT

FUNCTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- 1. Prepare the Individual for Assessment**
 1. Help the Individual to identify relevant learning.
 2. Agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning.
 3. Help the Individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment.
- 2. Assess the Individual**
 4. Agree to and review an assessment plan.
 5. Judge evidence and provide feedback.
 6. Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.

	1	2	3	4	5
SCALE					
RATING					
1	Have no experience with this				
2	Have observed this or been oriented to this				
3	Can participate in and assist with this				
4	Can do this with minimum assistance				
5	Can successfully do this without assistance				

FUNCTION 1 – PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
I. Help the individual to identify relevant learning	a The individual is given clear and accurate information about the reasons for and methods of, collecting and presenting evidence of prior learning. b The individual is encouraged to review all relevant and appropriate experience. c Outcomes or agreed-upon criteria which the individual may currently be able to achieve are accurately identified from a review of their experience. d The way in which support is given encourages self- confidence and self-esteem in the individual. e If the individual expresses disagreement with the advice offered, possible alternatives are explained in a clear and constructive manner.						

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FUNCTION 1 – PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT *(continued)*

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
II. Agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning	a The individual is given accurate advice and appropriate encouragement to enable him or her to form realistic expectations of the value of his or her prior learning. b Any outcomes or agreed-upon criteria to be achieved are appropriate to the individual's prior learning and future aspirations. c Advice to the individual accurately identifies outcomes or agreed-upon criteria which might reasonably be claimed on the basis of prior learning. d Opportunities to use evidence from prior learning are accurately analyzed. e The individual plan agreed to identifies realistic targets to collect and present evidence of prior learning as efficiently as possible. f The individual's motivation and self-confidence is encouraged throughout. g If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the individual are explained clearly and constructively. h The plan is reviewed appropriately with the individual.						
III. Help the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment	a The individual is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio or other appropriate forms of evidence. b Guidance provided to the individual during evidence preparation encourages the efficient development of clear, structured evidence relevant to the outcomes or agreed-upon criteria being claimed. c Liaison with potential assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio of evidence, and maintains the individual's confidence.						

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FUNCTION 1 – PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT *(continued)*

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
	d Opportunities are identified for the individual to demonstrate outcomes or agreed-upon criteria where evidence from prior learning is not available. e Any institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met. f If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the individual are explained clearly and constructively.						

FUNCTION 2 – ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
I. Agree to and review an assessment plan	a Any possible opportunities for collecting evidence are identified and evaluated for relevance against the outcomes or agreed-upon criteria to be assessed and their appropriateness to the individual's needs. b Evidence collection is planned to make effective use of time and resources. c The opportunities selected provide access to fair and reliable assessment. d The proposed assessment plan is discussed and agreed with the individual and others who may be affected. e If there is disagreement with the proposed assessment plan, options open to the individual are explained clearly and constructively. f The assessment plan specifies outcomes or agreed-upon criteria to be achieved, opportunities for efficient evidence collection, assessment methods and the timing of assessments. g Requirements to assure the authenticity, currency, reliability and sufficiency of evidence are identified. h Plans are reviewed and updated at agreed-upon times to reflect the individual's development.						

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ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
II. Judge evidence and provide feedback	- a Advice and encouragement to collect evidence efficiently is appropriate to the individual's needs. - b Access to assessment is appropriate to the individual's needs. - c The evidence is valid and can be attributed to the individual. - d Only the agreed-upon criteria and/or outcomes are used to judge the evidence. - e Evidence is judged accurately against all the relevant outcomes or agreed-upon criteria. - f When evidence of prior learning is used, checks are made that the individual can currently achieve the relevant outcome or agreed-upon criteria. - g Evidence is judged fairly and reliably. - h Difficulties in authenticating and judging evidence are referred promptly to the appropriate person(s). - i When evidence is not to the agreed standard, the individual is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.						

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FUNCTION 2 – ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL *(continued)*

ACTIVITY	PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	1	2	3	4	5	POSSIBLE EVIDENCE
III. Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback	j Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the individual's needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.						
	a The decision is based on all of the relevant evidence available.						
	b Any inconsistencies in the evidence are clarified and resolved.						
	c When the combined evidence is sufficient to cover the outcomes or the agreed-upon criteria, the individual is informed of his/her achievement.						
	d When evidence is insufficient, the individual is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.						
	e Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the individual's needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.						
	f The individual is encouraged to seek clarification and advice.						
	g Evidence and assessment decisions are recorded to meet any PLAR audit requirements.						
	h Any documentation is legible and accurate, stored securely and referred promptly to the next appropriate stage of the recording/certification process.						

APPENDIX FOUR

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Assessment: Rowntree (1987) defines assessment as “....*whenever one person in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another is conscious of obtaining and interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding or abilities and attitudes of this other person.*” Assessment may be *formative* or *summative*. It may also be *client or learner-focused* or *institutionally/organizationally-focused*

Client or Learner-Focused Assessment: any assessment activity which primarily focuses on the individual needs of a learner e.g. his or her culture, personal learning style, language preference, work context, etc.

Formative Assessment: developmental and ongoing, i.e. its purpose is to identify for and with learner’s, areas in need of improvement.

Institutionally or Organizationally-Focused Assessment: any assessment activity which primarily focuses on the needs of an institution or organization e.g. the recording and processing of summative assessment data from learner cohorts for the purpose of statistical analysis, the development of articulation agreements between and across institutions and departments, block transfer of credits, etc.

Summative Assessment: undertaken to judge a learner’s knowledge, skills and values at a defined point in time for the purpose of awarding a final grade or granting some credit.

Authentic: evidence that can be directly attributed to a learner is said to be authentic.

Current: evidence which is up-to-date is said to be current.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR:) is a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences.

PLAR Practitioner: an individual who utilizes *learner or client-focused assessment activities* to *formatively* or *summatively* assess an individual’s prior learning, either for academic credit or recognition of competence. This includes the work of the PLAR Advisor. It also includes the work of the PLAR Assessor - who is often but not exclusively, a subject matter expert from faculty. It may also include the work of the PLAR Co-ordinator - if he or she is directly involved in the guidance and assessment of individuals.

Reliability: the degree to which an assessor's opinion may match that of another assessor in the same situation, with the same learner, using the same criteria. Reliability can be improved if PLAR advisors and assessors are able to meet on a regular basis to discuss and agree assessment requirements in order to achieve some standardization and consistency of approach. This is an activity which is often overseen by the PLAR Co-ordinator.

Simulation: an assessment method which is based on direct observation of any performance other than the learner's normal, naturally-occurring work activity. Simulation can be used as an assessment method if safety or confidentiality are an issue in the workplace e.g. use of resuscitation dummies or role play. They may also be used if work placements for students are limited e.g. use of demonstration workshops or clinical laboratories. When designing a simulation the assessor must be sure that any simulated assessment meets the full requirements of the outcomes or competencies being assessed. Also, the assessor must be confident that any competence demonstrated during the simulation can be transferred to the work environment and is therefore a realistic representation of the knowledge and performance required.

Sufficiency: if all of the criteria within each of the specified outcomes or competencies have been met then the evidence is said to be sufficient e.g. the need to demonstrate both range and diversity of practice, or to demonstrate contingencies. An evidence log kept by the learner, which records daily work activities over a period of time, will help to demonstrate sufficiency requirements.

Triangulation: the use of several (and different) assessment methods to cross validate (or confirm) the performance and underpinning knowledge of a learner against the required competency or outcome e.g. performance assessment by direct observation and use of validation letters plus use of learning diary and question and answer to elicit underpinning knowledge.

Validity: an assessment should only be based upon the required outcomes or competencies and their associated criteria. An assessment is said to be valid if the assessor refers only to these stated criteria. Validity can be improved if the assessment criteria are explicit and made clear to the PLAR Adviser, PLAR Assessor and the learner e.g. according to McCory (1992:25) assessment criteria should be written in the form of a performance standard i.e.

Do	Something	To an agreed standard
(verb)	(object)	(condition)