A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY CONDUCTED TO FURTHER DEVELOP THE BASE OF KNOWLEDGE RELATED TO POST-SECONDARY STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY CONDUCTED TO FURTHER DEVELOP THE BASE OF KNOWLEDGE RELATED TO POST-SECONDARY STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)

by

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ABSTRACT

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a strategy that was developed to improve access and increase participation rates of adult learners, and to empower these individuals by recognizing the legitimate value of past learning experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to ascertain and construct through the description and perceptions of adult learners, an interpretive account of the meaning and significance of utilizing the PLAR process for the awarding of academic credit. Findings from this study should provide a description of the nature of the lived experience of post-secondary students and insight into the essence of the phenomenon.

A phenomenological method was used to conduct this study. The participants included eleven post-secondary students who had utilized PLAR. Four of the participants had experiences with PLAR at both the college and university levels, six had utilized PLAR at the college level only, and one participant had utilized PLAR at two universities. The data were collected through unstructured interviews.

The selective, or highlighting approach, as described by van Manen (1997), was used for data analysis. Five broad themes were identified and two themes were further subdivided as indicated:

1. Validating the Learning
2. Valuing the Past
    a. Providing Personal Affirmation
    b. Demonstrating Self-Recognition
    c. Experiencing Inequity
3. Encountering Support
4. Facilitating Personal Growth
5. Confronting and Embracing Time
    a. Adhering to Personal Schedules
    b. Facilitating Adjustment
    c. Balancing Roles
    d. Coping with Portfolio Development
    e. Organizing Time

The essence of the participants' experiences with PLAR was described as "opening doors to the future". They acknowledged how PLAR had provided educational opportunities that had opened doors for them, in very individualized and meaningful ways, into the world of lifelong learning.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my loving husband, Brad, who endeavored to provide me with countless hours to write and my three dear children, Andrea, Bradley, and Rebecca, who never complained as I wrote "my book".

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, the late Dr. Clarence H. Pottle, and to my mother, Marjorie Pottle (Ketch).

I dedicate this thesis to my father, who was a school principal and teacher for several years in Freshwater, Conception Bay, prior to entering Dalhousie Medical School. My father remained dedicated to the education of others throughout his professional life, as a psychiatrist. He devoted countless hours, and his expertise and knowledge in the field of Mental Health, as a lecturer to various groups and organizations and as a member and chair of numerous committees. I will always remember my father's words, "As educators we don't actually teach students: we motivate them to learn." Throughout his career, he truly embraced this philosophy.

To my mother, as was the case with many women in the early 1940's, her family became her career. She devoted her life to ensuring that her family was provided with all the caring and comfort that was possible. She frequently "came to the rescue" while I was completing my Masters degree, and she continues to provide endless love and support.

I will never be able to thank my parents enough for everything that they have contributed to making my life what it is today.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase in the enrolment of adult learners in post-secondary programs during the last two decades. Demographers have identified that the largest increase has been in the 25 to 44 year old age group (Thomas, 1998). Indeed, such projections were made by Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, and Tabor (1993) for the year 2000. As baby boomers enter the stage of middle adulthood, post-secondary institutions have responded by offering a greater diversity of programs designed for adult learners.

Adult learners enter the educational setting with significant learning that has been achieved through life experiences. Adult educators must reflect and respond to the forces that are influencing the face of the educational community (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Tice (1997) suggested that there is a need to balance the education of adult learners to include traditional approaches, such as classroom learning, with non-traditional approaches, such as the awarding of credit for prior experience. This provides recognition of, and builds upon, prior learning of adults while attempting to meet their learning needs.

The practice of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been established to improve the accessibility and efficiency of post-secondary education (Dennison, 1995). The utilization of innovative strategies, such as PLAR, will, as an element in change, generate new concerns to which educators

will need to seek answers. However, it may also be prudent to periodically reflect on the process of PLAR and how it relates to the overall aims of the institution. As well, how the attitudes of faculty and staff, and past practice influence the implementation of PLAR programs and how the effects of PLAR impact upon the progress and future success of the adult learner are questions that arise. These questions could also generate valuable insights into issues surrounding the implementation of PLAR and serve as the basis for future research in this area.

The focus of this study is to provide an understanding of adult learners' experiences with PLAR in the post-secondary setting. The participants' experiences were explored through the use of unstructured interviews conducted by the researcher. The participants shared their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs regarding their experiences with PLAR. The majority of participants concurred that PLAR had "opened doors" to the future by minimizing some of the barriers that have been identified by adult learners.

Background

Education providers have been challenged to respond to the changing realities of the global economy and to rapidly restructuring workplaces (Shaughnessy, 1995). They have explored their role in the development of a lifelong learning community and a seamless educational system, which removes

barriers by providing recognition of all learning (Thomas, 1995). The challenge has been to influence the changes that support the direction and character of lifelong learning.

There is a need to develop strategies that will foster a system for education and training that is effective, efficient and equitable (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1996; Newfoundland and Labrador Council of Higher Education, 1994). Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition has been an example of such a strategy. A priority of the Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education (NLCHE), since its inception in 1992, PLAR has been viewed as a process that has been used successfully by many post-secondary institutions to award credit and formally recognize past learning (West & Fraser, 1992). It has provided a means to evaluate learning that has occurred outside recognized educational settings (Thomas, 1995; Zakos, 1991). Further, it has been recognized as a process that will enhance the mobility of learners within the educational system (CLFDB, 1996; NLCHE, 1995).

PLAR is "learner-centred". It features a goal of validating learning regardless of where or how it occurred (Bélanger & Mount, 1998). Proponents of PLAR believe that it can open doors within the post-secondary setting for adults who potentially might be disinclined to pursue educational opportunities (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Purpose of the Study

There are growing numbers of adult learners receiving academic credit for past learning, yet there has been a scarcity of published data that would indicate what their experiences have been with PLAR. The existing literature that addresses the impact of PLAR on the learner has been primarily anecdotal (Thomas, 1995). The purpose of this study was to provide a clearer perspective of the experience that adult learners have had when they proceeded through and succeeded with the PLAR process. A phenomenological method was used to unveil the meaning and essence of the experience and personal significance of the process for the learner.

It is believed that this is the first study in Newfoundland and Labrador to describe the experience that adult learners have had with PLAR. Throughout Canada, public post-secondary institutions have been attempting to meet the mandate of provincial governments for the establishment of PLAR programs. The results of this study provide justification to re-examine the practice of PLAR.

Through exploration of the learners' experiences, valuable insight will be acquired as to the perceived effect of PLAR on the learner and on learning. Information generated from the participants of this study provides data to be utilized by administrators and faculty when planning, implementing, and evaluating student services such as PLAR. The availability of student input plays a strategic role as part of the evaluative methodologies for quality assurance

programs and serves as the basis for future recommendations for change. This study also provides useful data regarding students' views on the utilization of PLAR to gain credit for prior learning.

Rationale

The impetus for conducting this study stems from increasing awareness and concern regarding the barriers encountered by adult learners, changes in the workplace and post-secondary settings that necessitated the implementation of PLAR programs, and the lack of direct evidence indicating what adult learners find meaningful from their experience with PLAR.

There are three reasons that underpin the researcher's decision to conduct this study. Firstly, the facilitation of adult learning will be enhanced if educators are informed of the challenges that they may confront, the practices that minimize the burden of the learner, and those practices that maximize the resources of the learner.

The mean age of students enrolled in the public college system in Newfoundland and Labrador increased from 22.75 years in 1986-1987 to 25.4 years in 1995-1996 (Department of Education and Training, 1998). It is evident that students over the age of 25 represent a growing proportion of full-time enrolments. One of the complex challenges that educators confront is the diversity of this group, both in preparation and practice. Moreover, there has

been a general sensitivity to provide an education system that is flexible and responsive to student needs, allows for more convenient access, formally recognizes previous learning, and prepares students for future technological change (Dennison, 1995). PLAR has been conceived as one such strategy designed to facilitate and support entry of the learner into the post-secondary setting (Dennison, 1995).

Secondly, "long-term on-the-job security has become a thing of the past..." (Cawsey, Deszca, & Mazerolle, 1995, p. 41). The notion of progressing up the career ladder within an organization no longer exists. The downsizing that has occurred within most corporations as a result of the recession with global economic markets has created such insecurities for employees. Increasingly employees have recognized the necessity for continuing education both within formal and non-formal settings. Employers and educational organizations are demonstrating a greater commitment to value this form of learning through prior learning assessment mechanisms.

Thirdly, there has been a paucity of research into the use of PLAR in higher education, albeit the literature that has been available abounds with general description of its benefits to the student, the faculty, the institution, and society (West & Fraser, 1992). How individuals perceive PLAR is viewed as an important factor in the outcome of the learner's educational experience, yet such perceptions have not been available to the adult educator. Considering the lack

of research-based evidence, the use of qualitative research would be an appropriate method for such a preliminary, exploratory, and descriptive study.

Limitations

The following limitations have been identified within this study. The very nature of phenomenology as a research method creates a number of limitations. The purpose of phenomenology is to provide descriptive data of a phenomenon, creating a basis for future studies (Jasper, 1994). In keeping with the acceptable practices utilized in phenomenological research, participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling strategy. The results of this study may therefore not be generalized, as the participants may not be representative of the larger population of learners who have utilized the process of PLAR. The utilization of a small non-representative sample limited the generalizability of these findings. Rather, the findings were meaningful only within the context of the setting.

The process of networking sampling was employed in order to select several participants. This entailed a sampling technique in which the researcher asked participants to identify other individuals who had utilized PLAR. This process may have created biases within the study, as the participants were not independent of each other.

The number of programs within post-secondary settings that were actively using PLAR at the time further limited the diversity of the population from which the sample could be selected for this study.

There was a wide variation in the degree of experience with PLAR among participants. Several participants had received two credits through PLAR; others had received between ten to twenty-one credits. This may account for a discrepancy in the richness of the data that participants were able to contribute. Also, participants had accessed PLAR services in four different post-secondary settings and several participants experienced PLAR in more than one setting. The policies governing the practice of PLAR within the post-secondary sector were not standardized and the evaluative methods employed by assessors varied accordingly. These factors created a diversity of experiences with PLAR that were reflected in the participants' descriptions.

The settings in which the interviews were conducted may have influenced the level of comfort and privacy perceived by the participants. Also, several interviews were conducted by telephone when participants resided in other areas of the province. The lack of direct contact with the interviewer could have inhibited willingness to share information.

Delimitations

The selection process specified that participants must have received credit for past learning and be able to articulate their experience. This excluded learners from the study who were not successful with PLAR. This would have limited the opportunity for participants with negative views to provide description. The selection criteria further limited the participants to learners who had utilized the PLAR process during the past 18 months.

The nature of this study was descriptive and exploratory; therefore, the results of the study were beneficial to provide an understanding of the experiences of these learners.

The use of unstructured interviews provided participants with the opportunity to openly discuss their experiences with PLAR. The use of a guiding questionnaire may have influenced participants' responses. However, several participants required prompting and encouragement to fully explore the meaning of this experience for them.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms and accompanying definitions will apply:

Adult learner: a learner who has reached the stage of growth and development associated with adulthood, has been given the legal rights

associated with adult status, has accepted responsibility for one's life and is self-directed.

Advisor, counselor, co-ordinator of PLAR: an individual who may assist the candidate to analyze past experience, guide the applicant through the process, advocate for the candidate by providing necessary information, and provide guidance with portfolio development (Butler, 1993).

APEL: a term used in the United Kingdom to denote the assessment of prior experiential learning for the purpose of receiving credit. This implies learning that is not acquired through formal education.

APL: a term used in the United Kingdom to denote the assessment of all prior learning for the purpose of receiving credit. It includes formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Assessor: an individual who reviews and assesses the evidence of prior learning to ensure its validity and completeness and determines the appropriate method of assessment to be employed. This individual is the subject or content expert and is "the gate-keeper to the awarding of credit" (Butler, 1993, p. 162).

Challenge examination: a commonly used method of assessment that is administered in the form of a written exam, test, essay, or project.

Formal education: the structured education system from primary school through university that includes a variety of specialized programs and

institutions. This form of education is offered primarily through educational institutions.

Informal education: the education that occurs in everyday life through activities at home, work, travel, hobbies, interactions with others, written sources, and the mass media. It is not planned or organized, but is a major source of adult learning.

Interview or oral examination: a method of evaluation that utilizes oral presentation to assess the level of learning specific to the course.

Learning: the process of intentionally or unintentionally building upon previous knowledge, skills, beliefs, attitudes, and values. It is a continual and lifelong process.

Lifelong learning: the continuum of learning that occurs through formal, non-formal, and informal education throughout the lifespan.

Non-formal education: the education that occurs outside of the established education system and has organized learning objectives. The learning is purposeful, but is less structured, more flexible, and responsive to the learners' needs.

Performance evaluation or simulation: a method of assessment that enables the evaluation of skill level or problem-solving ability through the performance of a specific task or competency within a real or simulated situation.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA): a term utilized within Canada, prior to 1997, and has since been replaced by the term PLAR within many Canadian organizations. It is a systematic process that assists individuals to identify and document the skills and knowledge that may be acquired through experiences both within and outside of formal education programs and institutions. Past learning is assessed or measured against the requirements of formal courses, modules or programs for the purpose of awarding credit.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): a term adopted in 1997 by many organizations within Canada to place emphasis on the recognition that occurs through prior learning assessment. The recommendation for change originated with the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB).

Portfolio: a file or folder of information prepared by the learner that supports and provides evidence of past experiences and accomplishments. It includes documentation, such as a biographical narrative, description of learning, learning statements, challenge essays, and evidence that verifies prior learning.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature that pertains to adult learning, experiential learning, and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

The Nature of Adult Learning

Various definitions have been proposed within the field of adult education in attempts to capture the meaning of the term "adult". The challenge in formulating a valid definition has been the influence of cultural and historical factors. Knowles (1980) proposed two criteria for adulthood: an individual is perceived to be adult upon accepting societal roles and responsibilities designated as adult and upon accepting responsibility for one's own life.

Those involved in the field of adult education have generated frequent discourse regarding the nature of adult learning. In 1926, Lindeman laid the theoretical foundation that explained how adults learn. Lindeman was an advocate of the value of experience for adult learning, "the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner's experience. If education is life, then life is also education.... Experience is the adult learners' living textbook" (as cited in Knowles, 1984, p. 29). The significance of experience to the learning process has been addressed within all models that attempt to conceptualise adult learning.

By the 1940's, the main assumptions that were incorporated into a theory of adult learning had been proposed. Important contributions to learning theory were added to this body of knowledge from various disciplines. Developmental psychology has contributed to the current view of adult education by emphasizing the individual nature of learning; personal learning styles; the influence of internal motivations and drives; and the complex interplay of emotional, perceptual, and cognitive responses to learning (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1990). Maslow's hierarchy of needs has implications for learning. This theory contends that individuals are unable to focus on higher level needs, such as achievement and recognition, until the lower level needs of safety and belonging have been satisfied (Maslow, 1970).

The field of andragogy has made steady progress during the past thirty years and provides a focus on the adult learner as central to the learning process in the formulation of informed decisions. The conceptual model outlined by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) included principles of adult learning, which acknowledged the learner's need to know, the self-concept of the learner, and the prior experience of the learner. These concepts are relevant to the premise underlying the practice of PLAR.

One assumption of adult learning is that the adult learner's self-concept incorporates a sense of being responsible for independent decision-making (Knowles, 1984). Inherent in this principle is the need that others perceive and

acknowledge the individual's ability to be self-directive. Efforts to remove this sense of independence may create resistance to the learning milieu. Attitudes can have a dramatic effect on behaviour and learning.

Knowles outlined a second assumption that adults enter the educational setting with an accumulation of rich experience that has become entrenched in their personal identity. "To children, experience is something that happens to them, to adults, their experience is who they are" (Knowles, 1984, p. 58). Adults define themselves in terms of past experience and any situation that devalues or does not acknowledge these experiences may be perceived as a rejection of their experience and also a denial of their individuality and identity (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; MacKeracher, 1996).

MacKeracher (1996) concurred that adults develop a personal model of reality through past experience. The model of reality is closely aligned with the self. Current learning models of humanism and constructivism have emphasized the relevance of meaning formation, therefore, the inclusion of past learning experiences to enhance present and future learning.

Thirdly, Knowles (1984) identified that the main motivating factors for adults tend to be internal forces. The motivation to learn may be impeded by barriers, such as poor self-concept, lack of opportunity or resources, time limitations, and policies that contradict models of andragogy (Knowles, 1984).

Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) further proposed that an adult's orientation to learning tends to be life centred and motivated by situations that are perceived to be of practical benefit, and provide the necessary knowledge and skills to confront current or future problems. The educational system must enlist strategies to involve the learner and avoid boredom with repetition of meaningless, learning activities that are not perceived as challenging, interesting, and novel (Wlodkowski, 1999).

In order to illuminate the issues that facilitate participation of the adult learner, it would be relevant to consider the barriers that affect the participation of adults in learning activities. Based upon the results of participation studies, the deterrents to participation have been organized into three categories: situational, institutional, and dispositional (Cross, 1988). Situational barriers refer to those personal circumstances including work and home responsibilities, lack of time, financial concerns, childcare, and transportation. Institutional barriers are those created by the system including the policies and regulations that govern entrance requirements, tuition cost, availability of courses, lack of information, and program requirements. Dispositional or attitudinal barriers refer to the attitudes and perceptions of the learner, such as lack of confidence, lack of motivation, negative self-perception, inability to see the relevance of learning, misconceptions of the learning process, and negative past experience (Cross, 1988; Rogers, 1992).

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), the two most frequently cited reasons for non-participation have been lack of time and lack of money. In a study conducted by Valentine in 1997, 45% of respondents quoted lack of time and 33.4% reported cost as a barrier for job related education, 60% stated lack of time and 25.4% stated cost as a barrier for non-job related education (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The next most prevalent barrier reported by respondents was family responsibilities. In other studies, lack of confidence, lack of course relevance, and personal problems were listed as further deterrents to participation. Tight (1993) reported that the major barrier for adult learners was attitude.

A study by Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, and Tabor (1993) examined the differences between the adult student (ages 25 years and over) and the young adult student (ages 24 years and younger), and revealed that the adult students encountered a constant challenge of balancing priorities. Using a forced choice and open-ended questionnaire 403 undergraduates, graduates, and professional students were surveyed. A notable finding from this study was that time to balance home, work, and family posed a greater concern for adults than young adults.

Merriam and Brockett noted the relevance of the psychological environment to learning and of creating a climate that fosters communication and provides support (1997). This milieu recognizes the individuality and richness of

learning that each learner brings with them and that they can contribute as a resource for others. On the contrary, it must be acknowledged that learners as individuals have personal issues, which can detract from learning. Several researchers have proposed that it is the dispositional barriers that account for the lack of participation of adults in learning activities (Harrison, 1993). Non-participation is the result of a multiplicity of factors.

The characteristics of adults as individual learners serve as the basis for the implementation of change aimed at increasing participation. Edwards (1997) proposed that on a personal level some adults lack self-confidence and have had negative experiences with the education system. To facilitate participation there is a need for the appropriate supports that will provide motivation, nurture self-confidence, and support learners in other areas of life circumstance (Edwards, 1997).

Harrison (1993) recommended several strategies for creating a more informed "sense of self" as learner and for empowering the learner to participate (p. 16). An informal approach that is learner focused, the inclusion of relevant and practical course content, and acknowledgement of the learner's knowledge and skill can be invaluable assets to the future of the learner's education. Recognition afforded to the validity and relevancy of past learning is a key step in eradicating the phenomenon of disaffection within this group.

Consistent with the findings of past studies, Calder (1993) reiterated some of the criteria utilized by adult learners in determining the worth of a learning experience. The inherent costs are determined by the financial impact, actual time commitment, and affect on personal relationships. The actual achievement of success is weighed against the personal costs incurred. An important consideration for adults is the perceived usefulness of the course and whether they experienced disaffection with the learning process (Calder, 1993).

May (1998) surveyed 227 graduates of the Master of Adult Education program at one Canadian University. This qualitative study had a 66% return rate and examined the issues confronting educators in the field of adult education. Twenty-five respondents suggested that accessibility and learner diversity were important issues, and twenty-five advocated for educational policies that would address social concerns. It was common for respondents to suggest the need for change in teaching and learning approaches and methodologies, and to advocate for prior learning assessment. Lifelong learning approaches were suggested to provide increased access and to assist learners to cope with continual life changes. Many acknowledged that recent attempts to address these issues had not yet accomplished a "seamless" education system. The recommendations were for education initiatives that were flexible, creative, and individualized.

It is crucial to examine the factors that affect adult learners in the pursuit of educational goals in order to comprehend the implications of PLAR. The more knowledge that is gleaned of adult learners, the changes they experience, and the influence of change on their motivation to learn; the more responsive educators will be to initiate supportive strategies (Edwards, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991).

Learning Through Experience

Numerous educators and psychologists have attempted to explain the relationship between life experience and learning. The notion of experience as central to adult learning has been represented in Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning. Kolb (1984) presented a model that depicted learning as a problem solving process. Kolb's cycle illustrated the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation and translation of experience (Kolb, Rubin, & McIntyre, 1974). This four-stage cycle portrayed the act of learning with the learner engaged in an experience that lead to observations and reflections from which conceptualizations or generalizations were derived. The application of these principles or generalizations is used to guide future action. The last stage of the cycle involved the testing of these concepts in novel situations and the resultant engagement in new learning experiences. The cyclical nature of this model emphasized that all learning is relearning. Kolb's work was a major

stimulus in the evolution of experiential learning as a concept and method, thus broadening the scope and breadth of the term learning.

Kolb believed that an experience that is not reflected upon is unrealised learning. Kolb's (1984) definition of experiential learning has been a frame of reference for researchers in this area. He defined experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 38). Jarvis (1987) expanded the knowledge component of the definition to include knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Experiential learning is distinguished from other forms of learning by the learner's direct contact with the event. "Experiential learning is the creation of meaning from direct experience" (Peruniak, 1993, p. 17).

Dewey (1938) advocated that not all experience results in education (as cited in Merriam & Clark, 1993). Experiences that educate give rise to additional and richer experiences that must be connected to past experiences and must build on previous meaning structures. Jarvis (1987) presented a similar model to Dewey's, while extending the relationship between reflection and active experimentation. He contended that learning occurs, if there is adequate learning from past experience to create meaning for the learner.

Reflection is a personal process that is affected by the sociocultural environment and past learning, thereby creating a unique learning experience for the individual. The personal growth that occurs depends upon the polarity of the

experience; some experiences are meaningful, some are meaningless (Jarvis, 1987). Jarvis (1987) concluded that all learning is grounded in experience and transformation of that experience is the process of learning. He acknowledged that experience presents the potential for learning, but learning may not necessarily occur.

The notion of experience as being a central element of adult learning is pervasive throughout both the theory and practice of adult education. Current discussions on the components of the learning cycle include reflexive observation as one of the main elements for active learning. Freire, Kolb, and others have proposed that most learning transpires through the critical analysis of experience.

Mezirow proposed that an individual is able to make meaning or sense of an experience by creating a new or revised interpretation through the use of critical reflection (1990). "Making sense of, interpreting, and making meaning of our experiences is what learning in adulthood is all about" (Merriam & Heuer, 1996, p. 247). This belief has been central to theories proposed by Mezirow, Dewey, Jarvis, and Daloz. All individuals have different learning styles and preferences for different modes of learning, as represented in Kolb's learning cycle. No individuals learn effectively, however, unless there is reflection (Evans, 1992).

Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993) have offered the following propositions on learning from experience. The positive or negative effects associated with past learning have the potential to stimulate or inhibit new learning. Two key factors that are influential in the learning process are past experience and the elements that contribute to a supportive environment. The learner associates with past experience the affective and social elements that have implications for future expectations for learning. The effects of negative learning experiences may be minimized through the conveyance of support, trust, and confidence in the learner.

Research conducted by Merriam and Clark (1993) examined the question of what makes learning significant. The study used an exploratory, qualitative design. Data were collected using an open-ended instrument that was distributed to 400 participants. Nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with adults selected from the initial group of respondents. Data were analysed using the constant comparative method of data analysis. The study indicated that a learning experience is considered to be significant if it affects the learner on a personal level by expanding their skills, abilities, self-perception or life perspective, or it leads to a transformation of the individual. All life experiences serve as the foundation and have the potential to produce significant learning. These findings assist in explaining why learning occurs during some life

experiences and not others, and why some individuals learn more from the same life experience.

It has been recognized that although the majority of an individual's time involves learning from experience, this form of learning has not traditionally been recognized and valued as the learning that occurs within the formal educational setting. The learning that occurs from experience has an irrefutable role in shaping the uniqueness of each individual, their goals, and aspirations. This would suggest that experience is an event with meaning; it does not connote a passive relationship with some event, but an active encounter of the learner with the environment (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993).

Analysis of the findings by Merriam and Clark (1993) further revealed that the vast majority of experiences listed by the respondents were not experiences of formal education, but learning that would be described as informal or the product of life experience. This finding was unexpected given that most respondents were participants in continuing education programs. This reinforces the belief that life experience appears to be the primary and most valued mode of learning for adults.

The percentage of adults participating in formal learning has increased over the past thirty years, with a recent study concluding that approximately 40% of adult Americans participate (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As indicated in studies of self-directed learning, the percentage of the population participating in

non-formal learning has been estimated to be higher. The notion of lifelong learning and the popularity of the term "lifelong" is an indication of the growing awareness that education is not confined to educational institutions (Collins, 1998).

Peruniak (1993) outlined several assumptions about experiential learning. He proposed that a comparison of experiential learning to other modes of learning revealed that learners are often experiencing in one domain, such as the cognitive domain; these are incomplete learning experiences. Experiential learning focuses on "multidimensional ways of knowing" (Peruniak, 1993, p. 15). Learning is experienced through the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, which contribute in varying degrees to the holism of the experience (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). It facilitates holistic development of the learner in all settings, on a lifelong continuum.

Women, as individuals, additionally, educators, trainers in the workplace, and employers may not have realized that their experiences outside the formal setting provide opportunities for learning (Butler, 1993). This is a significant barrier, specifically for females, in a society that has traditionally devalued unpaid work, especially in the home. The lack of awareness among women, of the learning that occurs from unpaid work, is illustrated by the frequently reported comment, "just a housewife" (Butler, 1993, p. 165).

Burke (1995) summarized the elements that distinguish classroom learning and experiential learning. Classroom learning is often teacher-directed learning, learning is in progress and based on the common experience of learners in that setting. It is rich in theory, and the evaluative methodologies are both formative and content-based assessments. Experiential learning, however, is learner controlled, learning has already occurred and it is based on individualized experiences. It is rich in practical knowledge and the evaluation methods are summative and outcome-based.

The basis of experiential learning has the potential to challenge the notion that knowledge may only be achieved through formal education, with the selection of that knowledge controlled by those within the walls of academia (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997). Some have viewed this change as a means to increase access and have input into the curriculum. Within the post-secondary setting this has influenced the valuing and relevance attributed to experience. Experience for individuals has become a valuable commodity.

According to the work of Allen Tough and his associates, approximately 80% of adult learning activities occurred outside of the formal educational setting (Thomas, 1993). As a result, adult learners have entered post-secondary settings with varying levels of knowledge and skill acquired through work and life experiences. This was believed to have important implications for educators concerned with the questions of where and how learning occurs and the policies

and practices that facilitate the educational process. The flexibility of institutions to acknowledge experience and past learning has been viewed as a means to better alleviate cost constraints imposed on adult learners. In times of limited resources, it is vital to examine alternatives that will ensure education and training resources are used advantageously and to the benefit of the learner (CLFDB, 1996). PLAR as a means of creating a system that is effective, efficient, and equitable has received considerable attention in recent years (CLFDB, 1996).

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

Societal and Historical Influences

Societal and historical influences including gender differences in the workforce; unstable political climate; population shifts; freedom of travel, communications, and transfer of goods and services; career changes; family discord; global economic influences; and evolving social roles have created a demand for educational institutions to prepare individuals who have the attitudes, competencies, and adaptability to adjust to the present market place (Rogers, 1992; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997; Wlodkowski, 1999).

Globalization itself has impacted on the learning needs of society by creating the necessity for lifelong learning. Inman and Vernon (1997) have examined the factors that have attributed to this development. During the past

decade this has been manifested by interest in learning in the workplace. To maintain a competitive edge in the world market, countries have recognized that emphasis on the importance of continuous learning for workers has been paramount. Indeed, increased technological innovation has created a greater need for accessibility to information for those in the workplace. Moreover, corporations have recognized the necessity for preparing a workforce that is equipped to deal with continuous change. These trends compel educators to examine the learning that occurs in all settings, including the workplace.

Economic shifts have occurred as society has changed its focus to providing services rather than producing goods, and as the economy has become information based rather than industrial based (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These rapidly changing work practices have led to the need for continuous upgrading and training. The result has been a shift in the delivery of education to the business community.

All these above changes emphasize the changing nature of adult learning and emphasize the vast implications for the educational practices that support adult learning. Clearly, adults are entering the educational setting with vast amounts of learning experience, and as a result adult educators have found it prudent to examine social and cultural forces that are influencing adult learning.

In the present socioeconomic climate, many organizations acknowledge the importance of having a competent work force that is adaptable and highly

skilled (Layer, 1993). In an effort to compete within the workplace, individuals have recognized the necessity of becoming lifelong learners (Coberly, 1996). Learning across the lifespan has become firmly entrenched in the lives of the employed and has become an inevitable reality in an effort to maintain current knowledge and skills. Edwards (1997) has recommended that lifelong learning would be best facilitated in a variety of settings through assessment and accreditation. Barriers are most strategically bridged by the implementation of credit frameworks that provide a systemic response to the learner's past achievements. The socioeconomic changes of the 80's and the 90's have created the conditions that necessitate a major paradigm shift in education (Morin, 1998).

Studies that have examined trends in the participation rates of adults enrolled in organized instruction on a part-time basis have noted an increase from 10% in a 1969 survey to 40% in 1995 (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The students aged twenty and older have been the most rapidly growing group of learners at all educational levels (Thomas, 1998).

The great influx of adult learners has created the need for post-secondary settings to re-evaluate their aims, policies, and practices. The entry of these adults, who bring with them a diversity of experiential learning, has implications for the teaching and evaluative methodologies designed for traditional learners. As a result, many adult learners may be enrolled in courses for which they could

be eligible for exemption in view of prior learning experiences (Sansregret, 1995). "PLAR. . .is potentially the most radical innovation in education since the development of mass formal education during the last century" (Thomas, 1998, p. 25).

PLAR has been viewed as a means to facilitate the placement of individuals striving to upgrade their educational qualifications (Keeton, 1995). The strategies that have propelled the promotion of PLAR have varied internationally. In countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and Australia, it has been a key element in the development of the workforce (Isabelle, 1994). An increasingly diverse North American population created by declining birthrates and revised immigration policies and practices have been significant factors in the rapidly expanding interest in assessing prior learning (Zakos, 1991).

Higher education had developed many strategies intended to significantly alter the participation rates of adults (Layer, 1993). Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) offered a means to improve access, increase participation rates, and demonstrate that individuals can be encouraged and motivated to learn if they are enabled to recognize the value of their past and are empowered to do so (Evans, 1992). The idea of credit for prior learning experiences is synonymous with the philosophy of adult education; there is legitimate value in the life experiences of individuals (Herbeson, 1996). APEL

was based on the belief that individuals learn without the opportunity for receiving formal teaching (Evans, 1988).

The practice of PLAR has assured a revolutionary way for formal, informal, and nonformal adult education to link in a system that promoted lifelong learning. Educators have reported that PLAR has uncovered aspects of teaching, evaluation, and learning that require attention when considering the changing nature of society and the educational population. PLAR has challenged the current practice of evaluation that demonstrates limitations in relation to current economic, social, political, and geographic influences (Thomas, 1998). According to Mandell and Michelson, "The introduction of PLA has been one of the most significant breakthroughs in higher education" (1990, p. viii). They concluded that the acknowledgment of prior learning has both righted the traditional injustice against individuals whose education has occurred outside the institution and enriched the institution itself.

Thomas (1998) suggested that educators of adults must be alert to changes within the system that could affect the balance between support for education and support for learning. He described the period of the 1950's to mid 1970's as one in which government was instrumental in the development of an "educative" society in Canada. The belief at the time was, "If it isn't taught somewhere, it isn't worth learning" (Thomas, 1998, p. 362). By the 1970's the cost of maintaining such an education system was realized and gradually cost

and responsibilities were transferred back to the private sector. The decline of public resources for education has created a dependence on the learning domain in order to maintain the knowledge and skills demanded in the workplace. As a mechanism to facilitate movement between the learning and educational settings one recommendation was the support and development of PLAR (Edwards, 1997; Thomas, 1998). The belief was that this would promote a more efficient means of bridging learning between the workplace and formal settings.

Prior learning assessment and recognition was viewed as a process that assisted individuals to identify, recognize, and validate learning that had been acquired through formal and informal education and to have it assessed for the purpose of awarding credit. This description acknowledged that valued learning was an integral part of informal, as well as formal learning experiences. PLAR was based on the premise that significant learning occurs in a wide variety of contexts throughout life and that the recognition should be awarded irrespective of where and how the learning occurred (Edwards, 1997; Lewis & Williams, 1994; Van Kleef, 1998). This process provided formal recognition to the individual through academic credit, occupational certification, access to higher education, and advanced training and employment opportunities (Van Kleef, 1998; Weil & McGill, 1989).

The concept of PLAR acknowledged that individuals learn in many different ways and in many different situations and circumstances. The evaluation of prior learning focused on the outcome of that learning, not on the process of learning. The emphasis was not how the knowledge was acquired, but rather that the learner could provide evidence that learning had occurred. "The only sound basis for giving recognition for learning is the assessment of the actual learning and the competence achieved" (Whitaker, 1989).

Origins of PLAR

The notion of PLAR is not new within the post-secondary setting. The origins of PLAR differed from country to country; the philosophy was identical: individuals learn without formal teaching (Evans, 1988). The first formal system of PLAR was the General Educational Development (GED) examinations. These were initially implemented in the 1940's for the American military in order to facilitate educational mobility, and later extended to the civilian population (Keeton, 1985). As a result, new routes to higher education were developed through the Advanced Placement Program and the College Level Examination Program (Peruniak, 1993). By the 1950's, several universities in the United States awarded credits based on an assessment of informal learning.

In 1974, the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) Project investigated various methods for the valid and reliable assessment of

learning from non-traditional settings. CAEL evolved into an organization, broadened its focus, and by 1985 became known as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Peruniak, 1993). CAEL had become the major resource base for developments in PLAR worldwide by providing written resources, workshops, and consultative directives; developing and publishing standards, theories, and practices; and facilitating research (Shaughnessy, 1995).

Other countries have established experience with PLAR, although all have adopted different terms for this practice. In the United Kingdom it was referred to as Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) or Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL); in Australia, New Zealand, and Africa it was known as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). There was collaboration worldwide through on-line discussion groups, national organizations, and international conferences, which provided the essential forum for the sharing of research, information, and advice on PLAR (Shaughnessy, 1995). By 1990, with the United States and the United Kingdom acting as leaders in the promotion of PLAR over 1,000 colleges within the United States allowed adults to earn credit for prior experiential learning (Saltiel, 1995).

The formal implementation of PLAR in Canada initially occurred in Ontario and Quebec at the post-secondary college level in 1980, with the aim of granting academic credit (PLA Task Group, 1996). The impetus for a more integrated approach began in Quebec in 1984 in the Colleges of General and Professional

Education (CGPEs). The Ontario government approved the establishment of a provincial PLAR system in 1993 within community colleges. The goals advocated by this program included the facilitation of lifelong learning, increased access, and increased efficiency by the elimination of the repetition of learning (Shaughnessy, 1995). In an attempt to create a national systems approach to PLAR, the Canadian Association on Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) was formed to promote a collaborative effort with information and resources (Burke & Van Kleef, 1997).

At present, a number of post-secondary institutions and provincial governments have developed PLAR policies and procedures. They include the provinces of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia (Van Kleef, 1998). Formal PLAR policies have been least developed at the university level across Canada.

In 1994, the Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education established a provincial PLA task group to develop a PLA policy and a strategic plan for the province (NLCHE, 1995). The following year the Council began a two-year initiative to foster the implementation of PLA within public post-secondary institutions in Newfoundland and Labrador. The latest milestone was the publication of Provincial guidelines for the development and implementation of a policy for PLAR by the Department of Education in 1998.

During the early 1990's, a number of national organizations became involved in the promotion of PLAR. The Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) has undertaken a number of initiatives that support the implementation of PLAR as a mechanism that will increase access to training and development (CLFDB, 1996). It was through the recommendation of CLFDB that the term "PLAR" was adopted to replace the previous term "PLA"; the intent was to emphasize the recognition that was awarded through assessment (Van Kleef, 1998). Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) supported a number of conferences, initiatives, and sponsored pilot projects in several regions (Van Kleef, 1998). At the writing of this thesis HRDC has continued to be involved in facilitating the resolution of issues that have been identified at the provincial and national levels.

According to Van Kleef (1998), there have been a number of issues that cloud the ability to evaluate the process of PLAR in Canada. There had been inconsistent attempts to collect data and monitor activities at the institution and government levels. Government responsibilities have been limited to policy development and financial support for the initial development and implementation within institutions. However, there has been no consistent funding provided to support the ongoing development or delivery of PLAR. Provincially efforts to facilitate mobility across the post-secondary sector have also been minimal.

The implementation of initiatives to ensure quality in the PLAR process has not alleviated concerns within the workplace, and within education and training institutions. These reservations have been intensified by a general lack of directive information on PLAR and of research on its effects at all levels.

Assessment Methodologies

PLAR has utilized a variety of tools to assist the learner to reflect upon, identify, articulate, and demonstrate past learning. There has been no specific PLAR method that is universally suited for a given situation. The method should be selected based upon the uniqueness of each situation, and a combination of methods may be required (Koenig & Wolfson, 1994). The methods should not be more rigorous than traditional methods of assessment, neither should they be overwhelming for the candidate (McGrother, 1993).

Within Canada and the United States, the philosophical foundation that educational institutions have used in the development of PLAR programs has been based upon the widely accepted standards developed by Urban Whittaker (1989) and adopted by CAEL. These Ten Standards for Quality Assurance have been used as the framework to ensure valid and reliable PLAR policies and practice (Koenig & Wolfson, 1994; NLCHE 1995). Evans (1992) summarized these guiding principles that serve as a frame of reference and are integral to a credible PLAR program:

1. The responsibility of making and supporting the claim lies with the learner.
2. The learning from experience will be assessed and not the learning itself.
3. The learning must be clearly identified before the assessment proceeds.
4. The assessment is the responsibility of the academic staff (content expert).
5. The assessment method is dependent on the nature of the course to be assessed and the evidence submitted.
6. The process of providing support to the learner in preparation for the assessment and the assessment of the learning should be distinct roles performed by separate faculty. The tasks of advocate and judge should be differentiated.

There have been a number of assessment methods used to assess prior learning. The method chosen by the assessor depends primarily on the learning outcomes to be measured (Advanced Studies Branch, 1998). The more common methods of assessment have been the written exam, the portfolio, the performance evaluation, and the oral examination.

The written examination was one of the most familiar assessment methods. It was often designed to be similar to final course examinations and to

address all of the learning outcomes of the course (PLA Task Group, 1996). The challenge exam required minimal preparation, had frequently been previously developed, and may have been concurrently administered to multiple learners (Advanced Studies Branch, 1998; Koenig & Wolfson, 1994). The disadvantages of this evaluation method have been identified that it may be intimidating for some learners, text or institution specific, and a weak indicator of the learner's actual knowledge of the subject area.

The portfolio rapidly gained attention across Canada as a method that provided the best means to identify a variety of learning that was to be assessed for credit (Sansregret, 1993). A well-developed portfolio provided a biographical narrative, a description of the learning, and verification (evidence) of learning that documented the knowledge, skill, and attitude acquired through experience (Koenig & Wolfson, 1994). Portfolio assessment was most suited to courses that had a base in practice, rather than those that were highly theoretical (Koenig & Wolfson, 1994). It was a time-consuming and challenging assessment method, and was considered a learning experience in itself. The learner benefited from the product, as well as from the process (Burke, 1995).

The performance evaluation was seen as appropriate, when the learning to be assessed involved the learner's ability to demonstrate competency with various tasks or skills (NLCHE, 1995). However, this learning may not be possible to assess in a real situation, but may be replicated in simulated settings

(Koenig & Wolfson, 1994). Simulations have been viewed as an effective assessment method for demonstrating critical thinking and problem solving, but were also viewed as time-consuming and costly where learners were evaluated individually (Advanced Studies Branch, 1998).

"An oral examination is an interview, usually highly structured, in which questions are planned in advance and relate directly to the competence being assessed" (Simosko, 1988, p. 42). It was employed for those who had difficulty with written evaluations. Structured interviews have been used to determine the extent of the learner's knowledge and abilities (Wong, 1996), however, this method was intimidating for some learners (Advanced Studies Branch, 1998). The interview enabled a more personalized assessment, was beneficial to individuals who displayed difficulty with writing, and was also learner focussed. Although this methodology was viewed as time-consuming, stressful, and required a skilful assessor, its advantages were more central to those who were articulate (Advanced Studies Branch, 1998; Koenig & Wolfson, 1998).

Benefits of PLAR

PLAR initially functioned as a means to provide credit for previously acquired knowledge and skills, appropriate placement of individuals in an educational program thus eliminating duplication of learning, and shortening the time for program completion (Evans, 1988; Keeton, 1985; NLCHE, 1995; Van

Kleef, 1998; Wong, 1996). The formal acknowledgement of prior experiential learning by educators has alleviated educational barriers for adults moving into and out of the educational organization and has created a more accessible system (Butler, 1993; Evans, 1988; Harrison, 1993). According to Davidson (1992), in some situations it has allowed learners to participate on a part-time basis at an individualized pace and it has provided mobility for learners transferring between educational settings (as cited in Edwards, 1997).

PLAR has provided an innovative means to individualize the relevancy of the learning, motivate larger number of learners, and lower educational costs (Butler, 1993; Wong, 1996). The focus on the learning aspect of experience has been encouraging for the learner as it attributed value to the knowledge, skills, and attitude that have been traditionally undervalued, and it provided the motivation to build upon the past (Evans, 1988; Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997). It has enhanced the motivation of learners and encouraged lifelong learning in a diversity of settings (Edwards, 1997; Evans, 1988).

According to Keeton (1995), the valuing provided through PLAR has created a number of opportunities for the learner. These included a greater personal understanding of the significance of past learning, an enhanced self-awareness and self-esteem, the basis for future career planning, the acquisition of additional skills and a higher level of competency, and the motivation to return to the post-secondary setting. He concluded that PLAR has evolved into a

service that has fostered all aspects of adult development. Keeton supported the belief that increased self-understanding and self-appreciation were the most vital outcomes of PLAR.

Other benefits have been identified for learners who have completed a portfolio as the chosen method of assessment. One advantage of the portfolio as an assessment tool is that it provides the occasion to present learning that occurs across time (MacIsaac & Jackson, 1994). The learner was afforded the vehicle for self-assessment and the opportunity to reflect on past accomplishments, the relevancy of these accomplishments, the meaning of these accomplishments for personal growth, and their contribution to the learning process (MacIsaac & Jackson, 1994). Portfolios were a valuable tool for realizing the potential of self-directed learning.

There have been intense feelings associated with the recall of some life experiences during the completion of a portfolio. This process may have re-created emotional pain: but assisted the learner to make sense of the past, resulting in personal growth and psychotherapeutic value (McCormick, 1990). One of the prime benefits of this form of self-reflection was that individuals gained a better understanding of their abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and future goals (Evans, 1992). The positive effect on self-confidence and self-esteem has been attributed to the focus on the strengths of the learner, rather than on their weaknesses (Weil & McGill, 1989). This was especially true with

older students who were apprehensive that they may not have been effective learners and they were provided the opportunity to recognize their strengths and abilities (Evans, 1988).

A qualitative study by Houston, Hoover, and Beer (1997) was conducted to examine students' experiences with the portfolio process and their perceptions of how it facilitated personal development. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to sixteen nursing students and fourteen were returned, an 87% response rate. Nine participants responded that reflecting on previous learning and practice were the most difficult aspects, three commented that reflecting on previous learning and practice and acquiring the appropriate writing skills were the least difficult undertakings, and five responded that managing time was the most difficult. Eleven participants reported that they would recommend the portfolio process to others. Participants commented that self-esteem, the ability to work independently, and reflective thinking skills were areas of personal development that were enhanced.

It has been purported that the benefits gained by PLAR were exclusive not only to the learner, but there were additional benefits for others involved: faculty, institutions, the workplace, and other PLAR providers. The educational institution gained by improving retention in courses through increased learner satisfaction, increasing enrolments of older learners and socio-economic groups that were often under represented, and maintaining staffing levels and resource

allocations (Evans, 1992). The institution was viewed as being more flexible and responsive to the needs within the educational community (Koenig & Wolfson, 1994; Wong 1996). PLAR has facilitated cooperation within and among educational institutions in Canada (Thomas, 1995). Faculty were afforded opportunity for professional development, increased interactions with non-traditional learners, ongoing discussion on course content, assessment of student credentials, evaluation of the reliability of assessment methods, and liaison with industry and other educational providers (Van Kleef, 1998; Wong, 1996).

Increasingly PLAR was viewed as a means of gaining access not only to higher education, but also to employment, progression within the job sector, opportunities for training and upgrading in the workplace, and professional membership (Weil & McGill, 1989). PLAR allowed the employer to recognize the capabilities of the employees, thereby increasing confidence in the employee (Evans, 1992). Evans claimed that it reduced the cost of educating employees and reduced lost work time (1992). The main benefit was the promotion of a competent and stable workforce. Collaboration with educational institutions and access to faculty with expertise in assessment was also a valuable asset (Wong, 1996). Some advocated that the gap between work, learning, and economic progress may be integrated more closely through practices such as PLAR.

The implementation of such practices as accreditation of prior learning have arisen from the need to provide supportive practice, to provide access and opportunity, and to facilitate lifelong learning (Edwards, 1997). Access was viewed as a positive initiative to provide equal opportunity, reduce the shortage of skilled workers in the labor force, and counter the effects of a decline in the number of entrants in the sixteen to nineteen year old range entering post-secondary education (Harrison, 1993).

Some critics of PLAR have argued that providing credit for experiential learning could diminish the value of a college education; while supporters believed that it could open the doors of post-secondary education to adults who would not otherwise have pursued the option of furthering their education (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Some educators were concerned that the accreditation for learning acquired in unpaid work would lower standards. They feared that incompetent practitioners would gain qualifications or that degrees would be bought in higher education (Butler, 1993).

Critics have articulated problems related to the implementation of PLAR. It has involved considerable training for faculty; additional time to review, record and evaluate learning, and provide counselling to applicants; the challenge of diverse faculty attitudes; and additional expense for the organization (Dennison, 1995). Practising institutions have reported that quality assurance has been a serious issue and there have been no clear interventions from government to

provide essential legislation and financial assistance to ensure consistent standards and methods of assessment (Bélanger & Mount, 1998).

Thomas (1998) focused on the longstanding policy of residency requirements in post-secondary settings. At this time there were no agencies that would allow the accreditation of an entire program through PLAR. The percentage of credit permitted by mechanisms such as credit transfer or PLAR varied from one agency to another. The common belief was that some formal teaching was a requirement.

An unpublished study conducted by Evans (1995) examined the knowledge, potential benefits, and perceptions of PLAR as perceived by faculty and administration of Cabot College (presently College of the North Atlantic). A questionnaire with a Likert-type scale was distributed to 16 administrative staff (81% response rate) and 221 faculty (52% response rate). Analysis of variance and Chi-Square were used to analyze the data. The findings indicated that respondents acknowledged that learning is acquired through life experiences and that the knowledge and skills gained may be equivalent to college courses. Work experience was chosen by most as the activity more likely to lead to college-equivalent learning. The majority of respondents also acknowledged that PLAR was beneficial to the student: the most commonly cited advantage was that it had the potential to save the student time. PLAR was also identified as

being beneficial for the college, with many respondents identifying more efficient use of material and staffing resources as the primary benefit.

A study by Bélanger and Mount conducted in 1997 examined the profile of PLAR in university settings, the appropriateness of PLAR at the university level, and the vision for PLAR in the future. This Canadian survey utilized a twenty-five item questionnaire, based on a Likert scale, that was distributed to all institutions offering university level programs. A total of seventy-four (73.3%) usable responses were returned and the data were tabulated using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The findings of this study indicated that PLAR was not a priority, was perceived as a community college issue, and was likely to have an institutional policy in half of the universities. Approximately 50% of respondents agreed that PLAR was appropriate at the university level, and 38% strongly agreed that PLAR accreditation should be used to meet all degree requirements. This study demonstrated an openness towards the concept of PLAR, yet a reluctance to implement the practice. It appeared that universities would prefer not to include PLAR services as part of the institution's mandate.

Although there has been progress in the areas of increasing awareness, policy development, and formalizing the practice of PLAR, in actuality the progress has been marginal within many educational settings. The practice of PLAR has been less readily accepted in the university setting than in polytechnical colleges where the practice was also limited, with some

departments or faculties not offering the service (Butler, 1993). PLAR has been viewed with caution by institutes of higher education and the demand by learners has been lower than anticipated.

There has been minimal research conducted in Canada on the impact of PLAR on learners and institutions. The evidence of PLAR's efficiency has been gathered from anecdotal accounts of individuals' experiences and specific projects. A Cross-Canada Study of PLAR was conducted in 1999 to investigate PLAR activities at seven colleges across Canada from 1993/94 to 1997/98 (Aarts et al., 1999). The study examined the characteristics of PLAR learners, PLAR activities, the effects of PLAR on the learners and institutions, and the costs of PLAR. Data collection methods included statistical data compiled from records of 3,500 PLAR learners and 12,000 traditional students, focus group sessions with assessors and PLAR learners, and financial analysis of PLAR activities.

In comparing PLAR learners to traditional students, the findings of this study indicated that the PLAR learners achieved comparable or higher course grades, pass rates and graduation rates were higher, and more courses were completed. PLAR enhanced self-confidence with learning, motivated adults to pursue higher education, shortened programs, reduced workloads, and minimized costs. The findings further indicated that PLAR was an effective marketing tool to increase enrolments of those requiring additional training or certification for employment and those over the age of thirty.

The results of this cross-Canada study further suggested that the provision of PLAR had not been financially advantageous for all institutions and had impacted on the number of assessments conducted. Following the initial implementation of PLAR there was a reduction in resources and, subsequently less focus on policy development. There has been inconsistent practice with remuneration of faculty for assessments and this has impacted negatively on learners and on faculty support. PLAR learners would benefit from more diversified assessment methods to demonstrate the full extent of knowledge and skills. There was an identified need to renew emphasis on PLAR training for assessors and increase public awareness of the availability of PLAR. The benefits of PLAR for the learner were frequently impaired by specific policies that required full-time attendance and affected eligibility for financial assistance. The results of this study have far-reaching implications for future research and examination of policies and procedures at the institution and government levels.

Summary

There has been a paucity of research in the area of PLAR, as indicated within the review of the literature. It has been further acknowledged that there is little known about the students who have utilized PLAR within the post-secondary setting. This provided the impetus for the researcher to conduct this

study and to explore the experiences of adult learners with PLAR in the post-secondary setting.

The research study by Aarts et al. (1999) has provided some of the most comprehensive data on PLAR students and the PLAR activities within Canadian colleges. The qualitative data gleaned from this study have illuminated the vital role of PLAR in facilitating the transition of adult learners into the post-secondary setting. The results of this research study have indicated that participants have the perception that PLAR has assisted them to achieve their educational goals, and to recognize the value of past learning experiences. Participants attributed their academic success to the PLAR process.

CHAPTER III

Methodological Approach and Methods

Qualitative research methods have been recommended as a method of collecting data on individuals' subjective experiences, their views, and perceptions (Munhall & Oiler, 1986). A phenomenological method was chosen as the design of this study. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research method. It has traditionally focused on the complexity of human experience with emphasis on the study of the experience as it is actually lived (Polit & Hungler, 1995).

This chapter is subdivided into two sections: methodological approach and methods. The first section presents phenomenology as a research method and an approach to human science research, as described by van Manen (1997). The second section describes the method of phenomenology utilized by the researcher to explore the experiences of adult learners who were awarded academic credit through PLAR.

Methodological Approach

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology has its roots in both philosophy and psychology: its purpose is to capture the lived experience of participants (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001). The philosophical position of phenomenology, as developed by Husserl,

and Heidegger, "is an approach to thinking about what the life experiences of people are like" (Polit & Hungler, 1995). The researcher is interested in the question: What is the essence of this phenomenon as experienced by these individuals? The phenomenological method, "is a process of learning and constructing the meaning of human experience through intensive dialogue with persons who are living the experience" (LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 1994, p. 262). It is a systematic and rigorous approach to gain essential insight into the phenomenon and articulate a clear and penetrating overview of the phenomenon to others (Becker, 1992). According to Becker (1992), the phenomenological viewpoint has been based upon two premises: experience is a valid and worthwhile source of knowledge and the everyday worlds are valuable sources of knowledge.

Habermann-Little (1991) described the purpose of the phenomenological approach as "to uncover the meaning of the human experience through analysis of participant descriptions" (p. 188). It attempts to understand and explain human phenomena. Phenomenology typically seeks to uncover the meaning of experienced phenomena through the analysis of participants' descriptions (Parse, Coyne, & Smith, 1985). This research method has been viewed as unique in its aim to explicate meanings as lived by individuals in everyday life (van Manen, 1997). It is an especially useful approach when the identified

phenomenon has been poorly defined or conceptualised, and about which little is known (Jasper, 1994; Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001).

The basis of phenomenology does not seek solution to a problem, but aims to provide insight and understanding through discovery of the common meanings underlying empirical variations of a phenomenon (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992). The use of a phenomenological approach for this study assumed that there was a commonality with the adult learners' experiences with PLAR and an essence to this shared experience. These essences are the core meanings, mutually understood through experience with the phenomenon of PLAR. The search for these commonalities in the experience involves rigorous methods of analysis and bracketing of preconceptions (Patton, 1990).

Phenomenologists study phenomena from the perspective of the experiencing person. This assists in the understanding of individuals and life events, enabling individuals to live more effectively through the attainment of a more in-depth understanding (Becker, 1992). This method explicates participants' experiences with life events and the meaning of these events for them. Phenomenology seeks to understand the ways in which participants make meaning of and arrive at an understanding of their experiences. According to Patton (1990), part of the process of achieving an understanding of the phenomenon was discovering the insider's perspective of reality: an emic perspective.

The belief of phenomenologists has been that human existence is meaningful and intriguing because of an individual's consciousness of that existence (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001). Consciousness has been viewed as the means of relating to the world through thought, sight, hearing, and touch. To be conscious is to be aware of some aspect of the lifeworld. An individual cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. Thus phenomenological reflection is retrospective (van Manen, 1997).

The aim of phenomenological research has been to explicate the structure of the lifeworld, the everyday world as experienced in daily events and relations. The lifeworld of each individual is unique and each individual inhabits numerous lifeworlds at different times of day and throughout different stages of life. Van Manen (1997) has identified four fundamental existential themes, which permeate the lifeworlds of all individuals and assist the researcher in the process of phenomenological inquiry. These four existentials of spaciality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality form the basis of the fundamental questions that interest the phenomenologist. Lived space, or spaciality, refers to the individual's perception of a specific lived space and its effect on the nature and quality of an experience. Lived body, or corporeality, has been viewed as the individual's physical presence in the world and through this presence one can both reveal and conceal things of a personal nature that are beyond one's level of consciousness or control. Lived time, or temporality, refers to the subjective

sense of time, the dimensions of past, present, and future and the interrelatedness of these dimensions in shaping one's perspective of reflected experience. Lived other, or relationality, is the relationships that are maintained with others in the lifeworld that is shared with them. These four existentials comprise the fundamental nature of the individual's lifeworld and are intricately interwoven in the richness of meaning of all life's experiences. The concepts of temporality and relationality were particularly relevant to the essence of the experience of participants in this study.

There are a number of methodological interpretations of phenomenology. Polit, Beck, and Hungler (2001) proposed that a descriptive phenomenological study involves the phases of bracketing, intuiting, analysing, and describing. Bracketing is the process of identifying and suspending any preconceived beliefs and opinions of the phenomena to be explored (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001). Often the researcher's role has been complicated by prior knowledge, assumptions, and ideas regarding the nature of the phenomenon. Van Manen referred to the necessity of the researcher utilizing reduction or bracketing: "To overcome one's subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomena or experience as it is lived through" (1997, p. 185). It was only through reduction that the researcher has been able to put aside personal biases and pursue the issues that are important to the participant.

Intuiting occurs when the researcher maintains an objective stance and remains open to the meanings associated with the phenomenon by those who describe the lived experience (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001). The analysis phase involves the process of "making sense of the essential meaning of the phenomenon". The descriptive phase occurs when the researcher arrives at an understanding of the phenomenon.

The researcher of this study chose phenomenology as the research strategy based on its usefulness in captivating a more in-depth understanding of the adult learner's experience. The research process was guided by the steps outlined by van Manen (1997). During each step of the process the researcher was faithful to the phenomenon by setting aside any, and all preconceptions, and being open to the experience as recounted by the participant.

Van Manen (1997) suggested that the method of phenomenology is not associated with a prescribed set of investigative procedures. Despite the lack of rigid methodology, it is a principled form of inquiry that adheres to appropriate methodical procedures in the quest to pursue human science research. Van Manen identified the active interplay of six research steps that embody the phenomenological research method.

The initial step of phenomenology involves the goal of the researcher to understand a complex social situation within the context of the setting. The researcher should be familiar with the phenomena that are being studied and

have a keen interest and commitment to the study. Phenomenology has been most aptly characterized by the word "thoughtfulness" (van Manen, 1997). Heidegger described it as a method of research that represents an interest in an element of the lifeworld: a mindful wondering of an aspect of life, of living, of the meaning inherent in that life for the participant (as cited in van Manen, 1997).

Secondly, the researcher should investigate the experience as it is lived, not as it has been preconceived. The researcher of this study approached this step by exploring the experiences of the participants through unstructured interviews. The intent was to preserve the natural spontaneity of the lived experience and to avoid influencing the participants' responses (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992; Munhall & Oiler, 1986). General guiding questions were utilized to facilitate an in-depth description of the learners' perceptions of their experience. The use of broad open-ended questions were reserved for participants who appeared hesitant or uncertain as to what aspects of their lived experience to explore, and to ensure that relevant aspects of the lived experience were recounted. The fundamental principle of qualitative interviews is to provide a structure that will allow participants to present their understandings in their own terms (Patton, 1990).

The relaxed setting that was maintained during the interviews and the unstructured nature of the interview process occasionally allowed the participant to diverge from the issue. The researcher attempted to refocus the participant by

posing the central question, "What is it like to have lived with PLAR, to experience this process of assessment and receive credit for past learning?" The researcher also facilitated the interview and enriched data collection by the use of reflection; and requesting examples, further description, and clarification.

The third step necessitated reflecting on the themes that embody and identify the phenomenon. The process of listening and re-listening to the audiotapes and repeatedly reading the transcribed copies of the interviews, while maintaining a sensitive presence to the entire description, enabled the researcher to identify essential meanings. As the researcher became immersed in the data, thematic statements were extracted from the interviews using the selective or highlighting approach as identified by van Manen. A theme is an aspect of the lived experience that recurs within the descriptive text provided by the participants, and captures the experiential structures of that experience (van Manen, 1997).

The researcher highlighted the statements or phrases that appeared to be essential or revealing about the phenomenon or lived-experience description. This process of thematic analysis allowed the researcher to recover the essential elements of the participants' lived experience with PLAR. During a second interview, the researcher verified the themes with the participants to confirm that they reflected the nature of their lifeworld.

The fourth step involved providing written description of what was learned about the phenomenon. In this study, the data were presented in the form of narrative text, supported by excerpts from the description of the participant's experience. The researcher provided a path of information arising from the research question, samples of the participants' significant phrases, the researcher's interpretation, and concluded with the final essence of the lived experience.

The fifth research step necessitated a dedication to the research question. The text of this study presents a rich description that explores the meaning structures of the participants' experiences as they related to the research question.

The final step demanded that the researcher "balance the research context by considering parts and whole" (van Manen, 1997, p. 31). Patton (1990) advocated that the researcher utilize a holistic perspective to view the phenomenon as part of an entire and intricate system. The researcher's final task was to discover how all the parts of the phenomenon interrelated and were essential to understanding the meaning of the lived experience. "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (van Manen, 1997, p. 36).

Methods Used in This Study

The term method refers to "the mode of inquiry" (van Manen, 1997, p. 28) or the way the research was conducted. This section describes the methods of participant selection, data collection, data analysis techniques, and theoretical considerations.

Participants

Participants in this study were adult learners who had utilized the process of PLAR in the post-secondary setting for the award of academic credit for prior learning. The selection criteria included (1) individuals who had successfully used PLAR for the awarding of academic credit; (2) individuals who had utilized PLAR in the past twelve months; (3) those who were able to read, speak, and understand the English language; (4) individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the study and were willing to share their experiences; and (5) individuals who were able to articulate these experiences.

The rationale for these criteria included (1) the human science research approach demanded that participants had experience with and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied; (2) individuals who had utilized PLAR within the recent past could recollect and readily share their lived experience; (3) participants and researcher must comprehend a common language to ensure effective communication; (4) individuals who have a sense of commitment and

are motivated to participate will provide a richer experiential description; and (5) individuals who are able to express their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes relating to the phenomenon will clarify and enhance the researcher's understanding of the concept.

Selection Process

Purposive sampling was utilized in this study to assure quality of information: qualitative researchers value the deep understanding provided by information-rich cases (Sandelowski, 1995). In following Sandelowski's guidelines, the researcher decided to select participants who were particularly knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied. This was also justified in a review of the literature by Polit, Beck, and Hungler (2001).

Participants were chosen because they had lived the experience being investigated. Purposive sampling is congruent with the aim of phenomenology, "illuminating the richness of the individual experience" (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992).

Qualitative studies use small, non-random samples; the aim was to discover meaning and uncover multiple realities; therefore, generalizability was not a guiding criterion (Polit, Beck & Hungler, 2001). The decision to stop seeking new participants is determined when the researcher ceases to acquire new information and there is repetition in the description of the phenomenon, or

informational redundancy (Habermann-Little, 1991; Morse, 1989), or when theoretical ideas seem complete, or theoretical saturation has occurred (Sandelowski, 1995).

The researcher of this study decided that no further interviews were required when there was little or no further valuable information revealed with respect to the students' experiences. If the data had not provided a clear understanding of the phenomenon, this would have indicated that further interviews were required.

The sample size included twelve adult learners who were selected to share their experiences with PLAR. One interview was not utilized in the data analysis as the participant was unable to offer sufficient descriptive detail, despite repeated attempts to promote a relaxed environment and the use of open-ended questions to facilitate the interview.

In phenomenology the sample size is maintained deliberately small in order to facilitate the exploration of individual experience in its entirety (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992). A sample size that is too large may create unmanageable volumes of data that impede a detailed analysis (Sandelowski, 1995).

Participants were selected from public post-secondary settings, where they were currently completing programs of study or had completed programs within the past twelve months. The settings included the College of the North

Atlantic, the Centre for Nursing Studies, Memorial University, and Athabasca University. Permission to conduct the study was sought and obtained in writing from administrators, if students were enrolled in programs of study (see Appendix A and B). This provided the researcher with permission to recruit prospective participants through the assistance of faculty. For those willing to participate, names and telephone numbers were released to the researcher and permission to contact them was obtained by faculty. All participants were contacted by telephone, a brief description of the nature of the study was provided, an initial interview was scheduled, and a consent form (see Appendix C) and a demographic data form (see Appendix D) were distributed.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct this phenomenological study was granted by the Human Ethics Education Committee of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador (see Appendix E).

Prior to signing the consent form, the participant was provided a complete explanation of the following information included on the form: purpose of the study, potential benefits, data collection procedure, permission to audiotape the interview, duration of participant involvement, measures to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, and notification of the ability to withdraw from the study at the participant's discretion.

The researcher described to participants measures that would be adopted to assure anonymity, such as the use of codes to identify audiotapes and transcripts; the securing of audiotapes, consent forms, and demographic data sheets in a locked cabinet; and the erasure of tapes following completion of the study. The participant was provided time to read the consent form and clarify any concerns prior to signing the form.

Participants were advised that their experiences would be described in the study in a manner that would make identification unlikely. The coded data would only be shared with other researchers for the purpose of guidance and verification.

Data Collection

A guiding questionnaire had been developed to ensure that each interview explored the wholeness of the participant's experience with PLAR (see Appendix F). An individual with expertise in the field (see Appendix G) reviewed the questionnaire and provided feedback to the researcher, which resulted in several minor additions and revisions. The use of broad questions encouraged the participants to describe the experience as completely as possible without suggesting to them what to say and influencing their response. Open-ended questions provide the participant the option to offer as much detail and depth as they are comfortable offering (Appleton, 1995).

This study used a two-phase unstructured interview approach as the data collection method. The researcher provided flexibility during the interview to allow the interview to be redirected, based upon participant responses; this facilitated the exploration of leads and cues provided by participants. Flexibility of research design allows for individuality in seeking divergent information and remaining open to many potential ways of knowing the phenomenon (Patton, 1990).

A pilot interview was conducted to gain confidence with the research process, test the usefulness of the guiding questionnaire, and test the recording device. A student who had received two credits through PLAR acted as the pilot participant. Following the pilot interview, the researcher utilized the process of reflection to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview. Analysis of the pilot interview reinforced to the researcher the necessity of using open-ended questions to encourage in-depth discussion.

Participants were contacted by telephone to arrange a date, time, and convenient location for the participant to meet with the researcher. Interviews were conducted in an environment chosen by the participant. Two interviews took place in participants' homes, four were conducted at the researcher's place of work, one occurred within a post-secondary setting, and five were conducted over the telephone. "The interview situation should be private, free from

interruptions, and one in which the interviewee feels comfortable. The format will maximize attention to the descriptive task" (Becker, 1992, p. 39).

All interviews were audio-taped, which ensured that the interview was captured in its entirety, and they were transcribed verbatim. The initial interviews ranged from forty-five to eighty minutes. The duration of each interview varied according to the degree of experience the participants had with the phenomenon, their degree of interest in sharing their experience, and their personal style of communication.

During the interviews, the researcher was cognizant of exploring the nature of the participant's experience through the use of broad open-ended questions and utilizing the guiding questionnaire only if necessary to focus or redirect the discussion. "The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The interview was an effective means to collect large amounts of data, and to obtain immediate clarification and follow-up. There was an advantage in being able to observe the participants during the face-to-face interview: this allowed the researcher to note non-verbal cues denoting the meaning of individual experiences with the phenomenon. The interviews were facilitated through the use of effective listening skills, personal interactions, techniques of questioning and probing; and empathy and motivation.

The use of reflection and seeking clarification or elaboration of events, feelings, memories, meanings, and thoughts associated with the PLAR experience allowed this researcher to probe the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon. The researcher utilized the skills of an attentive listener, while assessing the absence of any aspects of the phenomenon within the description.

The researcher suspended any preconceptions of the phenomenon during the research process to minimize the risk of a priori hypotheses influencing data collection or interpretation. The focus of phenomenology is primarily to understand empirical matters from the perspective of the participant (Munhall & Oiler, 1986).

Following each interview session, field notes summarized the participant's experience, recurrent themes within or between interviews, observations of the interview, and specific areas that required clarification or more detailed exploration. Interview summaries were useful in formulating further questions and clarifying ambiguous data. The documentation of participant affect and non-verbal communication provided additional insight into participants' statements.

A copy of the interview transcript was delivered to each participant. A second interview was conducted with each participant, which provided them with the opportunity to elaborate on any detail that may have been omitted from the first interview, to clarify descriptive information, and to verify the emergent

themes that had been identified by the researcher. The second interview allowed examination of the data in a collaborative manner with the participants.

Data Analysis

As data were collected, data analysis occurred simultaneously. Analysis of qualitative data was aimed at finding or arriving at an understanding inductively, from living with the data, rather than deductively from a priori hypotheses (Patton, 1990). Each phase of data analysis entailed the process of data reduction, which reduced the volumes of data by selecting the phrases or sentences that were meaningful to the phenomenon, and interpretation, which brought meaning and insight to the descriptive detail of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Following the completion of each interview raw data input were transcribed verbatim and numerically coded to provide the participant with anonymity. Each transcript was proofread as the researcher concurrently listened to the audiotape and checked for omissions, spelling errors, and inaccuracies. This proofing process was the first occasion the researcher was provided with a glimpse of the completeness of the interview in the context of the research. The act of repeatedly listening to the audiotapes and reading the text of the interview afforded the researcher with opportunity to attribute order, structure, and meaning to the volumes of data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

This constituted the preliminary phase of data analysis. The researcher focused on achieving a sense of each interview before attempting to make comparisons between interviews (Sandelowski, 1995).

Each participant was provided with a copy of the interview transcript and was requested to inform the researcher if the transcript did not accurately reflect the interview. Allowing the participant to review the transcript was a preparatory step for the second interview, if aspects of the interview required clarification, further exploration, or verification.

As the researcher became immersed in the data, continued review of the interview enabled the researcher to hear meaningful information in the text that had not been previously noted. Notes were recorded in the margins of the interview and key phrases were underlined.

Analysis of the data began as soon as the initial data collection process began. This directs the process of further data collection (Sandelowski, 1995). The second interview was conducted with each participant following preliminary data analysis of the initial interview. These were conducted by telephone and focused on verifying the accuracy of the transcript, clarifying and exploring elements of the initial interview, and verifying the themes that were becoming apparent to the researcher. Colaizzi recommended that the researcher return to the participants to validate that the findings reflected the perceptions of the experiences, which they shared with the researcher (as cited in Baker, Wuest, &

Noerager Stern, 1992). These interviews were also transcribed, proofread, and reviewed for new insights into the meaning of the phenomenon.

The researcher utilized the selective or highlighting approach as described by van Manen. This allowed the researcher to streamline the data and uncover the essential meaning of the lived experience.

A coding scheme was essential to analyze and to organize the data around common themes. This process involved hours of reading and re-reading each interview line-by-line and word- by- word to allow identification of themes. During analysis, participant interviews were identified that introduced a potential theme. Interviews were also identified in which a theme was not as evident. Analysis involved movement from detail to the entirety of the data and back to detail (Habermann-Little, 1991). "Themes are not objects or generalizations. . . .Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through" (van Manen, 1997, p. 90). Within the context of this study they allowed the researcher to proceed with phenomenological description.

Thus, five broad themes were identified. Next, the researcher shared a selection of the interviews and a description of the themes with two nurse educators who were experienced with the process of qualitative research. These individuals provided feedback regarding the validity of the identified themes and suggestions for the clarification of two of the themes. The themes were further explored with the researcher's thesis advisors and it was suggested that sub-

themes be developed within two of the themes. This assisted the researcher to clarify the descriptive detail of the findings of this study.

As the researcher proceeded with the task of further developing the thematic statements, descriptive data were summarized and linked with the lived experience that was provided by the participants. Quotes were viewed as illuminating the subtle aspects of an experience and creating a vicarious experience for others (Sandelowski, 1994). The words of the participants were used as the framework for writing and re-writing the themes. Through continual revisions the researcher was provided with a true understanding of the essence of the lived experience with PLAR.

Credibility

"Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the data" (Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2001, p. 312). It is the truth of the findings as confirmed by participants and others within the discipline (Lobiondo-Wood & Haber, 1994). The goal is to demonstrate that the study was conducted in a fashion that ensured accurate identification and description of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The researcher adhered to the following measures to ensure the credibility of this research study (1) the study was supervised by two faculty members, both of whom were knowledgeable in qualitative research and the subject of PLAR; (2) the guiding questions for the interview were evaluated by

three individuals: two thesis advisors and one who is an expert in the field of PLAR; (3) themes were discussed with thesis advisors and analysed according to van Manen's selective or highlighting approach; (4) participants were able to validate initial data that were collected, provide further experiential description during the second interview, and confirm that the researcher's interpretation of the data was correct; (5) all participants had utilized PLAR and had been awarded academic credit for prior learning, although there was a variance in the amount of credit acquired; (6) a selection of interviews and a preliminary draft of the identified themes were reviewed by two nurse educators, who had experience with qualitative research, to verify the validity of the themes.

Throughout the research study the researcher remained open to the perspective of the participants and aware of personal biases, adhered to the phenomenological method, used precise methods to collect and analyze the data, and developed the thematic statements from an "emic" perspective.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Chapter IV is divided into three sections. Section one provides a brief description of the participants' characteristics; section two presents the identified themes, supportive narratives chosen from the interviews, and interpretive data to convey the nature of receiving credit through the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process. Section three presents the thematic interrelationships and the essence of the lived experience.

Participants' Characteristics

Eleven post-secondary students were selected for this study based on meeting the pre-established criteria. The participants shared few similarities, the only common characteristics noted by the researcher were being native to the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, being enrolled in a post-secondary program or having completed a post-secondary program within the past year, and having received credit through PLAR. The diversity of participant characteristics included personal and situational elements, such as personality, age, marital status, socioeconomic status, family responsibilities, work experience, level of education, length of absence from the educational setting, number of credits received through PLAR, and methods of assessment utilized with the PLAR process.

Eleven participants ranging in ages from twenty-three to fifty-two years participated in the study. Just as there was a wide range in the ages of participants, there was a notable variance in the amount of credit obtained through PLAR. Two participants had received two credits for prior learning, while others had been awarded from five to twenty-one credits during the course of program completion. Four of the participants had experiences with PLAR at both the college and university levels, six had utilized PLAR at the college level only, and another participant had utilized PLAR at two universities.

Their experiences were further individualized by the varied methods of assessment used, based upon the nature of the course and the learner's formal and informal learning. Five participants had been required to complete multiple assessment methods as part of the PLAR process. Seven participants were required to complete a written examination, four participants a performance evaluation, three participants a written assignment, and one participant an oral examination. Five participants utilized the portfolio as the primary mode of assessment; occasionally this included a supplemental method of assessment if the learning was not evident within the provided documentation. Two participants were denied the opportunity to utilize PLAR for two or more courses.

Nine participants had attended a community college; five were completing the same program, but were at various levels of the program. The remaining four participants were enrolled or had been enrolled in another program of study,

again at various levels of completion; two of these participants had been enrolled in university programs. Another participant was enrolled in a diploma program offered at another post-secondary setting and the remaining participant had completed a degree program through a university setting.

Nine participants were female and two male. Six of the participants were married and lived with their spouses. Five of these participants had two or more children, all of whom were living in the family home. The ages of the children ranged from two years to nineteen years. One of the participants was divorced and had two adolescent children. Of the remaining single participants, two resided in the parental home and the others resided independently. Eight participants resided in an urban setting and three in rural areas of the province, while completing their post-secondary education.

The educational level varied, with six participants nearing completion of a community college diploma program, several had recently graduated from diploma programs, and four were nearing completion of degree programs; one of these had previously obtained a Masters degree. Two of the participants had completed courses at the university level, but had transferred to the college setting. All participants had been employed or were still employed in full-time or part-time positions. The occupations of the participants varied and included positions within health care, child-care, private business, secretarial, and computer technology.

Thematic Analysis

Van Manen (1997) compared the identification of themes to the presence of stars within the universe. The themes provide the guiding-light through which to explore the lived experience of participants. Phenomenological themes illuminate the life-world of the participant and allow the reader to become engaged in the phenomena.

The following thematic analysis provides a description of the participants' lived experience with the receipt of credit through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). The descriptions were based upon the experiential accounts of the participants as they recalled their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes regarding PLAR from the time of their initial introduction to this concept in the post-secondary setting and extending to the time of the final interview. The stories related by each participant served as the data source from which five themes were identified. Each theme serves to capture a particular aspect of the lived experience and collectively they describe the phenomenon that has been studied.

The five themes are distinct in nature, yet intertwined as they each contribute to the essential meaning of the participants' experiences with PLAR. These were:

1. The first theme, "validating the learning", provides insight into the assessment process, which participants were required to follow.

2. Theme two, "valuing the past", is divided into three sub-themes and illustrates the way in which participants valued their prior learning or were affected through the valuing of others.
3. The third theme, "encountering support", illustrates the participants' perception of the support they received with PLAR.
4. The fourth identified theme, "facilitating personal growth", provides an account of the impact that PLAR had on participants' personal growth, which includes self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-awareness.
5. "Confronting and embracing time" is the fifth theme and describes how the award of credit created personal time for participants, yet the PLAR process infringed upon personal time for some. The participants' experiences in relation to time have been organized under five sub-themes.

Validating the Learning

The term to validate is defined as, "to lend force or validity to; confirm, substantiate" (Barber, 1998, p. 1605). Participants were required to validate learning through assessment methods that were determined by the nature of the course for which they were seeking credit. The most frequently employed methods as reported by participants were written examinations, written projects, performance appraisals, and portfolios. The most information rich cases were

the participants who had completed written portfolios. This method of evaluation was reported to have provided the greatest challenge and was afforded the most description within the text of this theme.

Participants reported minimal obstacles in the process of having prior learning assessed. The majority of participants reported that the methods of assessment employed within the educational settings were fair and valid, and they effectively confirmed the equivalency of their learning. Most participants concurred that the evaluation methodologies were challenging and as one participant commented:

> It's not easy to get challenges, you know, if you get your credits you have to work at getting your credits. They don't give it to you on a platter you've got to prove that you do really know this stuff. You've really had to dig deep within your soul and say, "Why do I think I know enough about this?"

There were several difficulties experienced by participants in the process of providing the substantive evidence that demonstrated the equivalency of past learning to terminal course objectives. Five participants who had completed individual written portfolios related the most descriptive stories. Portfolio development involved documenting the experiences, competencies, and achievements that have resulted in program or course relevant learning. The writing of a portfolio demanded that the writer reflect upon the value of past learning experiences. Self-reflection was beneficial to the learner as it provided an opportunity to analyze knowledge gained through past experiences.

This method of assessment was unfamiliar to most participants, it was a lengthy process, and it demanded an innovative approach to proving the extent of one's learning. Participants reported that they encountered several unanticipated events during the development of their portfolios that impeded their progress, however, all of these participants reported that it was fair process.

Firstly, one of the difficulties encountered with the portfolio method was the unfamiliarity and inexperience of participants with the educational system. In most cases, the main portfolio was completed before coursework began, although all of these participants had the advantage of participating in a pilot portfolio development course.

Secondly, another dilemma they confronted was a lack of familiarity with the expectations of the faculty assessors and a lack of knowledge regarding course content. Two participants recounted:

> You're writing this essay and you know you've got thirty years there. You try to stick with the key things that you think they [assessors] want to know. You don't know where they're coming from. . . .How far do you go? Is it like from all your experiences? How much do you tell them? You didn't want to write too much. . . .You can't write a book on each. You want to give them enough and this is where in some of them I had to go for the interview because I probably hadn't addressed one of the points that they wanted addressed. I hadn't seen that in the outline that I'd read.

Thirdly, it was a challenging process to prove the extent of one's learning. It was trial and error, and difficult to determine the depth and the breadth of detail that should be provided. Some participants had years of experience to document. This provided a challenge when attempting to prioritize the

descriptive information that would adequately illustrate their learning. In attempting to be succinct there was a risk of omitting relevant information. On the other hand, an attempt to create a comprehensive review of past learning in the portfolio would risk embedding critical information within extraneous detail. As recounted by two participants:

> If I had to take it and do it now, I think that it would be a whole lot different because I had been out of the field; I had been away from education for so long. I know more of what people want from me and that you need to expand on and go into, and let people know exactly what you know, instead of just braising the surface. I think I could have gone into it in more detail.

> You don't realize like how much work is involved. . . .When I read about it [portfolio method] I didn't realize that it was going to be this much work. . . the assignments and everything, like the essays that you have to write up and all the documentation. It's what you really want to put into it that's what you get out of it.

One of the required steps in the formal PLAR portfolio process was to ensure that any learning claimed was verified by a reliable source. Applicants could not just state that they had the specific knowledge, skill or ability. They had to verify, through the portfolio, that learning was indeed completed. Participants described this as an onerous process. They also acknowledged the necessity of validating the assessment, and were sensitive to the additional burden for time required to complete the process, "Everything had to be verified. It's a long process. I worked day in and day out sometimes until two and three o'clock in the morning." Despite this, the process was described as, "being fair". As two participants recalled:

> You needed documentation for all the places that you worked basically. I found that hard, having to write the letters to your past employers. Some of them didn't mind, but [pause] some of them shrug their shoulders a little and took their time in doing it [providing verification]. . . .You had to have a number of people back up your information.
>
> It's been a really good learning experience for me. It was a lengthy process and took a good part of a year to draw everything together. You either had to have some sort of certificate or diploma, or someone in a professional field to say that, yes you had done this. You wrote essays to prove that you were competent in this area. I got letters from everybody that I could think of. . .and anything that I thought could prove that I had gathered the experiences that would require the knowledge and competencies that were reflected in their course outlines.

Another difficulty participants encountered with the portfolio method was locating the sources and resources to verify learning. It was a challenge to prove one had the skills and knowledge, and to provide the evidence of when and where they had been acquired, especially if the people, records, and businesses were no longer able to provide the documentation. In some instances, individuals who could provide verification were no longer living or had relocated, and records were difficult to locate or were no longer in existence. This was the experience of two participants.

> So, I went for eight of these learning activities packages to get credit. I wrote my eight essays and I wrote my letters off to get verification. I wrote to the colleges that I'd been to in England and, of course, one had burned down and gone, and the other one doesn't keep records that long (Laughter). . . .I didn't get any direct credit; I had to do the prior learning for all of them.
>
> A lot of the documentation part of it was difficult because. . .a lot of the people are dead. . . .They no longer existed. Companies that I had worked for before I was married were no longer in existence. . .and the people who originally owned it are dead.

When there were difficulties encountered in providing verification of learning through the written portfolio, an additional method of evaluation was employed by the assessors. In the case of several participants, the substantive documentation was insufficient. They were assessed through an oral interview or a performance appraisal and were observed in a practice setting for their ability to apply past learning. This provided participants with further opportunity to demonstrate learning. As illustrated by the following comments from two participants, they viewed this as a fair practice.

> I wrote all my essays and got my verification papers and it seemed to be like an awful lot of work. . . .A couple of times I did an extra interview or something because it was difficult for me to get people to verify. . . .When I was in doing my summer program to do my practicum I would do an interview with the instructor to prove that I hadn't written it all from a book or something.

> I hadn't expanded on something enough and they [assessors] said the content was really good, but they wanted interviews. They covered everything from what you learned in the course, what your past learning was, and then they had the chance to observe you to see how you did hands on.

Through the experience of compiling a portfolio participants realized the importance of maintaining accurate records of the documents that provided verification of learning. These documents included the following types of evidence: outlines of workshops, conference programs, course certificates, transcripts of marks, letters of recognition, and performance appraisals. Participants recognized that retaining this information in an organized file would

facilitate access to the documentation required for job resumes; membership in organizations; applications for scholarships, grants, and awards; and PLAR.

> The portfolio is a lot of work, if you haven't been keeping your stuff as you go along. I think it's really important that they [students] are told, look one of these days you may want this. One of the big issues I had was I graduated in 1981, and like all good students I took every single course outline and every single thing when I got that diploma and I chucked it in the garbage. Of course, 1981 to now is a long time. . .[School] is no longer in existence

As participants gained more experience with compiling the database for their portfolios the process became less daunting. The process of proving past learning was not as challenging for participants once they became known within the educational setting. As faculty became familiar with individual participants and with their level of knowledge, skill, and abilities they were not required to submit as extensive a file in order to validate their learning.

> I think in doing your challenges you have to sit down, and analyze, and write your essays, and come up with your people who know you well enough to verify what you're saying in your essays. . . .In the first workshop we did, we had to go for this verifying a lot. . . .In the last ones where I'd been in the College system for a couple of years the tutors and everybody knew me well enough that they could verify for me. I didn't have to go looking for verification as much. There were areas they would say, "Well yes, we've seen that and we know that".

The quality of the portfolio was contingent upon a concerted effort by the PLAR applicant. This participant was determined to demonstrate within her portfolio how past learning experiences were equivalent to specific courses. She itemized the documentation corresponding to each course objective that would

clearly demonstrate to the reviewers the evidence of course equivalent learning. It was an arduous process.

> What I found best for me was to go through all of my own course outlines and show exactly where in the course outlines the information was that was corresponding to the objectives in their courses. . . .I didn't leave it up to them to go through all of my other courses and find out. . . .I did out a list . . .That was very time consuming. . .I don't know if I needed to go to that much detail with it, but I didn't want to risk it. . . .I really wanted the course.

There were only two participants who encountered challenges with validating their learning through other assessment methods. One participant felt that the extent of his past learning should have been evident to the PLAR assessors, but he was required to proceed with a formal assessment. He believed that the process should have assessed his learning in a more global sense rather than specific to each course. He believed that a more critical assessment of his learning should have exempted him from several courses and that the scope of his learning was beyond the basic concepts that were tested in the assessment.

> Another one that I had to challenge was Access and I'm Microsoft Certified with Access. I still had to go and write a PLA. . . .Some of the PLAs were fair, but they tested what you needed to know for the course. It didn't test your knowledge. . .not real world knowledge compared to academics. . . .The PLAs were just the finals of the courses. . . .How much of this course did you actually know? That's what they were asking, not assessing the knowledge you actually had in the. . .broad scope.

Valuing the Past

The term valuing is described in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary as "consider of worth or importance, have a high opinion of"(Barber, 1998, p.1605). For all participants PLAR was a validating experience; past learning acquired through formal courses, work and life experiences had been attributed value in their educational plan. The involved faculties, PLAR assessors, and the educational institution had recognized their previously acquired experiences as worthy of academic credit. This fostered a sense of self-satisfaction. They appreciated that past years, "had not been wasted". Success with PLAR was an experience that reportedly had resulted in significant personal growth.

Receiving credit for previous learning through a formal assessment confirmed that previous achievements were valued as replacement for current course requirements. Five participants applied to post-secondary programs with the belief that their learning would be valued in this manner and they would receive academic credit. Other participants were not as confident that they would receive acknowledgement that their previous learning was equivalent to the course learning outcomes of the program. They were uncertain of the educational value of their past, and were conservative with the amount of credit they had applied to challenge using PLAR. Three participants expressed some dissatisfaction with the process principally because the individual nature of their learning had not been valued. Two of these participants clearly felt that they

should have qualified for more credits than they had been awarded, and that their learning had been devalued.

It became evident to the researcher that a number of sub-themes could be abstracted from the comments of how the participants' prior learning had been valued by themselves and others. As well, there was a wide variation in their perceptions of the degree to which they experienced valuing. Several participants did not initially recognize the wealth of learning that they had acquired through past experience; it was the encouragement from others that helped them to attain a degree of confidence with PLAR. This provided them with the courage to proceed with PLAR; others had provided them with affirmation. Other participants demonstrated greater self-awareness, but the reassurance offered through others enhanced their beliefs that past learning had value in the educational setting. The receipt of course credits through PLAR provided them with formal acknowledgement and recognition. The experiences of these participants are described in the first sub-theme of "providing personal affirmation".

Several participants entered the post-secondary setting with confidence that they should be awarded course credits for past learning through PLAR. They demonstrated insight into the value of experiential learning and their experiences have been discussed within the second sub-theme of "demonstrating self-recognition".

Several participants encountered situations where they were refused the option of accessing PLAR and experienced a devaluing of their past. These participants believed that they "experienced inequities" with PLAR as the final sub-theme was entitled.

Providing personal affirmation.

Five participants had no prior knowledge of PLAR until their initial contact with the post-secondary setting. They were surprised that the potential existed to be exempted from particular courses. After receiving an introduction to the concept of PLAR, six participants were skeptical of the notion that past learning may have equivalency to courses in their program. Five of these participants had not previously been enrolled in any formal educational setting as adult learners. This group doubted the legitimacy of their learning and their eligibility for success with PLAR. As two participants described:

> We were kind of a bit wary of it all and whether we really thought we did know enough, and so I think most of us only went for the bare minimum credit because we were kind of not really sure about this.
>
> When they said, "Lord, you can get credit for this and credit for that", at the beginning I was there, "I wonder what they mean by that, I should get credit for that." I'm sitting there and then I ask, "What in the God are they talking about, mean to tell me I don't have to do this course here if they think I have enough skills?"

The PLAR process was viewed as potentially intimidating to those who had no recent post-secondary experience with which to compare past learning

experience. Although some participants had years of experiential learning, they lacked self-awareness and were hesitant to compare their learning to curricular objectives. In some instances, intervention of faculty who had become familiar with the experiential and educational backgrounds of students, provided the necessary encouragement to pursue a PLAR that might have been avoided. For some participants, faculty were instrumental in providing the necessary affirmation of past learning. This enabled them to proceed with PLAR. Two participants explained:

> They were saying, "Go for as many as you want,"[PLAR] and you're looking down this list, and saying, "Oh my lord, (laugh) what would I go for, what would I try to get my credit for?" So, I tried for eight of mine first and then you know I got them. From then I went on and did more, but at first it was a bit overpowering.

> Before you apply for credit, you really got to sit down and work out what you know. You only did the ones [PLAR] that you seriously thought that you should get credit for. The instructors do ask you questions related to the course. They'll say, "Well, you know a lot about that. Why don't you apply for that one?" Then you'd get to thinking and you'd say, "Geez, I know a lot about that" . . .There's a lot of discussion in the classroom during the portfolio. They really get to know a lot about you. Then they know what credits you can apply for.

Seven participants shared the opinion that the PLAR process provided personal affirmation that they had acquired valuable knowledge through informal learning. Participants reported that the valuing of past learning served as a declaration from others that past learning was worthy of credit. One participant had over 15 years experience and had received a significant number of credits based upon that experiential learning, "The work that I've done before I came in

to retrain, it's nice to know that it's been appreciated somewhere else. So, I don't have to waste my time now doing it again." Similarly other participants commented:

> When you invest any amount of time into anything be it a career and you do end up not working at it, you wonder is that three years of my life gone, totally spent for no good reason? When I was given credit through PLA for my first year of study it was nice to see that even though it was ten years ago since I received my diploma, it was still good now. So, it was definitely a total plus for me to see that it hadn't been all just wasted time.

> It kind of encouraged you because all the years that you had put into this line of work, and all the workshops and conferences and research and everything else that you did on your own, you were given some credit. It gave you some encouragement that this was recognized as learning, the same as having done it through a formal education. . . .After you're in the workforce for so many years, it's nice to know that it can be validated.

The completion of a portfolio for some participants provided not only a means to articulate past experience, but also a means to acknowledge the extent of learning that had occurred. It was a validating experience to document past learning and consider its relevance and value to the present. Through the process of self-reflection in preparing the portfolio, the value of prior learning experiences became more personally meaningful. Two participants recalled:

> Being able to give credit to like your life experiences. . .I think that's great because you realize how much experience you have, how many skills you have, and you can't do anything without that piece of paper. . . .This gave you the opportunity to tell them how long you've worked in the system, all your life experiences that you had. . . .You don't really realize how much you do know until you do that. . .and then they were able to give you credit for it.

> The self-confidence from it, it's exhilarating, that's the only word I can use to describe it. You're home all day long; you've raised a family, you got

> out of the workforce to do that; you've nursed your grandmother; you've taken care of the neighbor who had cancer; you've done things in church groups; you've organized the boy scouts, the little league, the cubs, the hockey things; and I've been church treasurer. All this can pull together as experience that shows you can organize things, and it makes you feel that these are worthwhile things and they're marketable skills.

For some, the experience with assessments fostered a new perspective of the educational system, as part of the building process of lifelong learning. Even though past learning did not necessarily lead to formal course credits, this participant realized that it had provided the basis on which to build further learning.

> These things that you're going to learn from the book are only going to reinforce what you already know, and you're going to build on it, so that way it's a positive thing. You've already come in there knowing how to add, so the next step you're going to go on and you're learning how to multiply. I found that I knew a lot of the things. Some of it needed honing up or touching up.

Participants eventually realized that they were not very different from the traditional classroom learner and that they were able to make a valuable contribution to the classroom setting as a result of past experiences. Two participants realized that their past was also a benefit to younger, less experienced students who could learn through them. The PLAR credits seemed to provide the personal affirmation that their learning was course equivalent and was valued in the post-secondary setting. They had received formal approval, and subsequently felt that they were qualified to assist others with learning. One participant commented, "It made you aware that you actually have the

knowledge. . . .You must know it or they [faculty] think you know it. So, then you could go and help someone else who probably had difficulty." Another participant recounted:

> It propelled me on, and sitting in the classroom with children who are younger than my own children, you realize that even when you do things like literature, that you have all these experiences that you can add to this classroom. You're contributing all the time. . . .It's been a rewarding experience.

The valuing of previous learning through acknowledgement received from the post-secondary setting, faculty, and significant others was essential to these participants. It reportedly provided formal recognition for the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they had achieved and it served an important role in facilitating their adjustment to the educational setting. One participant commented, "For them to acknowledge what I had done was good. . .to give you exemption [awarding of credit]. . . .The instructors must have had confidence in me to be able to exempt me". Another participant reported:

> It made me feel good really because I could look back at my past work and past educational experience and really that proved to be beneficial to me. It meant I didn't have to go and do the course, that they could just look at that and say, "Well yes, you're qualified to do the PLA."

One participant was so elated about the amount of credit awarded for a program that had been completed 10 years previously, and recent work-related experience, that she could scarcely tell the researcher enough about her, "good fortune". The amount of credit that she was awarded far exceeded her

expectations. She had anticipated that it would take three years to upgrade her education; PLAR made it possible to complete the program in two years.

> My marks were good, I had an overall 75 average from my previous diploma. . . .The course, although it was kind of a different direction it was still computers. . .I had done well. I would be exempted from the first year of this. . .program. . .and to me that was excellent. Just the adjustment of going from work into full time study is big and then of course you can decrease your workload again.

One of the challenges of administering a PLAR program was to ensure that the process was an equitable one and that the guiding principles of PLAR were appropriately applied to the individual's situation. This participant witnessed the willingness of one educational setting to alter their policies based on the uniqueness of her case, "I had a Masters Degree first and now I'm trying for an undergraduate degree. Also, I've taught a lot of the material in the undergraduate degree that I'm seeking now, so it was kind of an odd situation". Their policies were open and transparent which allowed the participant to recognize that they were not entirely applicable in her situation. Upon review of her extensive educational qualifications and professional experience, the PLAR Department confirmed the need to critically re-examine past practice and established policies. This participant was impressed with the flexibility of the institution to acknowledge and value past learning.

> They initially said that I couldn't ask for credit for academic courses. I didn't agree with that and that really cut down on the number of courses that I would be able to get. But, I think that might have been one of the things that they were actually re- looking at because I did get credit for all of those academic courses as well, which was really great. I was totally

> pleased with the whole PLA assessment. Overall, I thought it worked really well for me.

The primary benefit for these participants was the formal recognition of their knowledge, skills, and competencies through those who administered the PLAR process. The acknowledgement was a personally elevating experience. According to two participants:

> It was the overall self-esteem booster that you know people recognize. The assessors' comments were all very positive and it was kind of nice to read. . . .Several of the faculty members would say, "Why are you doing this program, like this is ridiculous, you know?" Just hearing somebody else acknowledge that you're doing this for a piece of paper, was just kind of nice and saying okay, so it's not me.

> I guess, the validation came from I knew I had all those competencies even though I didn't have the degree. [Pause] So, when [name of the university] looked at my portfolio and came back and said, "Yes, we agree with you", it made me think, "Oh thank be to God, there's somebody else in the world who agrees that I am able to do this and I do have the competencies required for this, so we don't see any point to you taking this course." So, that's the way I found it validating, it was just that somebody else was agreeing that I knew the stuff.

Prior to the use of PLAR, participants frequently reported that they had not recognized their life experiences for its intrinsic value. It was only when one was required to complete an inventory of experiential learning that the significance could be appreciated. It was reported by nine participants that an important personal gain from PLAR was that the past was recognized for its relevance to the present. They felt it was important that they were not starting at the beginning. It was also noteworthy for participants that the assessment

acknowledged learning that had shaped their individual development and influenced their uniqueness.

> Even to go back and as a teenager you worked part time in a clothing store, so you got to know about the retail end of our society, I can type and do shorthand, I've done books and all these things were beneficial to me. I've had a first aid certificate perhaps every year since I've been 17 or 18 years old, just because I was a mother and I wanted it for my own children, so, it was all beneficial, you weren't suddenly starting from nowhere.

On the whole, participants who utilized the portfolio reported that self-reflection was initially a difficult task. They reported being challenged when asked to compile an inventory of life experiences, achievements, and accomplishments. Frequently it was the objective opinion of others that assisted participants to recognize the value of their past.

> I told my husband, "No, there's no way I'm going to be getting credit for this here and this here and this here," and he'd say, "Hon, you do this and you do this and you do this right." He was a great help too right. They'd [faculty] give you so many pointers of what you know and where you use it and things like that. . . .it really gets you thinking and I'd say, "Geez, I did that before."

Demonstrating self-recognition.

Six participants independently recognized the value of past learning and were confident that they should be awarded credit through PLAR. They demonstrated self-awareness in relation to their level of knowledge, and skills and the relevancy to their present program of study. They clearly did not perceive the repetition of past learning as an educational opportunity. When

informed that she would be exempt from two courses one participant commented, "At least I knew that I didn't actually have to go through it all again, which was like a relief". Another two participants expressed similar opinions:

> The basis of prior learning assessment is that they look at your previous experience, whether it's work experience or educational experience. It gives you the opportunity so that you don't have to sit in a course and be bored, that you can just prove yourself by writing a test or demonstrating your skills.

> I think I would have been wasting my time if I had stayed for a whole year to do the course. I don't feel like I've sort of cheated the system or anything. . .got it the easy way, because obviously I fulfilled the requirements for the course by being able to write the same test that everybody else wrote.

One participant believed that his experiential learning was course equivalent and it had provided him with invaluable skills that would be recognized within the employment setting. He was confident with the extent of his past learning, and he compared the knowledge and skills he had acquired through experience to the limited skills of a younger student who would graduate from the same program. He firmly believed that the learning he had gained outside of the formal setting was equivalent to courses offered in his educational program:

> They're only going to do 30 hours and then they're going to have on their application that they've done a customer service course. When you're out in the workforce for 15-20 years you've got to learn something. I'm going to take more into a business where I go than somebody who just did the course. The basic skills we're doing next semester and a course on interviews and job preparation, I've been through all that, I've had hundreds of interviews for jobs. . . .If you've already done something why

> do it again? The PLAR is good for someone who has been out in the workforce. I had my own business.

Similarly, other participants were confident that their learning would be assessed as course equivalent. They had reviewed their experiential learning, compared it with course objectives and then confronted the challenge of demonstrating this to faculty assessors. Throughout the process they expressed certainty that their learning should be valued, as illustrated by two participants:

> Knowing that deep in my heart that I did know enough to get through these [portfolio assessments], and if I just got down to it and wrote essays about it I'm sure I could prove to people that I did. . . .I might have challenged for more of my portfolio, if I had understood how in-depth the courses were.

> What I knew from my experience. . .you know it was really good. . . .I'm sure I learned equivalently good material. I had some good ideas in my head from what I'd learned because I'd worked in residential childcare, I'd been one of six children, I'd raised two children, I'd run a toddler group, and I'd worked with the Department of Social Services, Direct Home Services. So, I had a lot of experience. If you've got all that, you really should be able to get something for it. [credit through PLAR]

This participant described herself as highly motivated and self-directed. Her personal priority was to have past learning acknowledged through PLAR. She was not satisfied with the number of credit awards that she had received. When required to duplicate past learning she decided that she would exit the program and transfer into another post-secondary setting in order to complete a higher-level designation.

> When I was doing the course for the first year instructor lead, I had to sit through a lot of things that I didn't really need to learn over again. But, they were being presented so I had to sit through it. Whereas, with doing

> the assessments I studied what I needed to study, I didn't go ahead and re-study things that I already knew. Cause I was sort of a bit more in control of what I was paying attention to.

Experiencing inequity.

It was evident to several participants that educational institutions may claim to practice PLAR, but the assessment process may not embrace the philosophy and principles advocated by such organizations as the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB). There were three participants who reported some dissatisfaction with the PLAR process and believed that PLAR practitioners did not consistently consider the individuality of students and the uniqueness of their learning experiences. These participants demonstrated self-recognition, but they experienced inequities with the PLAR process.

Two participants believed that if their past learning had been closely examined by content experts they should have qualified for transfer credits, and they should not have been required to complete an assessment in these courses. They recounted:

> I'm fairly unique up at the class where I've got a big background in computer science. I've been in front of a keyboard for 15 years and I've done three and a half years at university doing computers. For someone to say that I can't pass a computer study course at a college because I don't know keyboarding, I thought that should have not been done. They won't let me write a PLA in Math. . . .I didn't understand that at all, that was $300 for basically something I could have written a PLA for. I didn't

> attend classes anyway. . .I got a 90 in it. So, I didn't really learn anything there. . . .It's almost like they're not familiar really with courses that you've dealt with at [name of university]. . . .They won't let me write my PLA for Data Base either. . .I've got two years experience using Visual Basics and Access. . . .If they're not 100% sure that you're going to pass it then there's no way that they're going to let you write the bloody thing.

> I really felt that I had a lot of experience in communications having done some courses and having been a secretary for ten years, but the instructor wanted me to write a report and do a couple of tests. I thought that was really a little bit much and as it turned out I just took two nights and wrote up a report and passed it in, and I ended up getting 80 on it.

One participant believed, in some instances, that learning outside of the formal setting was not valued or even seriously considered for PLAR. His experience was that a student's skill set, acquired through informal learning, would not be assessed against course learning outcomes. There seemed to be inconsistencies in the decision making process that did not take into consideration the holistic nature of each individual's learning; rather the focus of the assessment was on formal learning.

> Some of the PLAs, it's like you have to have academic work, instead of total real. . .world experience and some of mine has been, cause I'm interested in computers. Even though I might not use it I'll read about it in a magazine article. . .and there's different technologies that you can learn. But, if you don't have any formal course or anything, they may not even consider it. Like I didn't have any formal training in keyboarding, but they let me do the exam. It also seems the further you go up in years, the less chances you have to do PLAs.

Several participants experienced how the practice of PLAR differed among educational settings. When educational settings did not practice PLAR according to established practice and nationally recognized guidelines, it was a

source of frustration to them. In the case of several participants, it prompted them to access another post-secondary setting where they would benefit from more universally accepted practices of awarding credit. One participant approached two institutions to explore how PLAR policies would be applied to her personal situation. She described the policies of one as inflexible; they did not consider individual circumstance and they were not willing to yield in their decision. She reported, "That did not go along with my perceptions of Prior Learning Assessment". The second institution offered two options that clearly addressed the unique nature of her past learning, "And they really looked at your experiences since you graduated from your diploma program, so I chose to go with them".

Several participants concluded that it would be an unlikely occurrence to have credit awarded through the PLAR process at one specific post-secondary setting. This would indicate that the practice and philosophy of PLAR had not been adopted as an evaluative methodology by some educational settings. In the case of two participants, although a challenge for credit process was listed in the admission policies of the institution, the specific faculty did not appear to acknowledge the individuality of learning; the challenge process applied a universal decision to all students. One of these two participants recalled:

> I found their system very discouraging. . . .I've made comments that this is not Prior Learning Assessment, boys and girls. It doesn't matter to them that it's not Prior Learning Assessment. If somebody from the outside looks, yes, we do participate in Prior Learning Assessment, but in actuality

> it's not that at all. . . .There's nobody that actually directs the whole process. . . .I just said, "I can't deal with that school, so I didn't even bother investigating it any further".

Three participants reported that not all of their experiences with PLAR had necessarily provided any advantages within the post-secondary setting. One of these participants believed that his past learning had not been assessed.

> I had so much done mathematically, so much computer science. If they had let me take that Math course as a PLA instead, I would be graduating this year. That actually held me back three months. It hasn't sped up my graduation date. I would have been finished now.

This individual believed that he was prevented from progressing one semester when he was refused an assessment. Despite the fact that he had previously completed five courses in another educational setting that could have been used in a prior learning assessment, he was prevented from doing so.

From a student perspective, the majority of participants clearly articulated that there were few gains when they were required to repeat learning. Several expressed the belief that within the classroom setting it was unlikely that there would be meaningful class participation if students were not challenged through new learning. They believed this could interfere with class dynamics and the learning of others. One participant reported:

> My instructor said they hated to lose me because of my experience and that I could add to the class, but you can't make everybody happy. (Laugh). . .I could be just sitting in class bored, twiddling my thumbs, being a distraction to the other students. They don't want me there if I'm going to be not paying attention, and if you're bored you don't pay attention, at least I don't anyway.

Encountering Support

Participants recognized that policies governing post-secondary settings have imposed barriers and have not always provided the appropriate supports for the adult learner. It was evident from the participants' comments that the degree of support experienced by students upon their initial return to the educational setting impacted upon their choice of institutions and their determination to risk re-entering the post-secondary setting. It has been reported that minimizing or eliminating these obstacles enhanced the students' educational experiences by allowing them to devote their efforts to their program of study. Participants described PLAR as a supportive practice.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines the term support as "to give strength to, to encourage, to help by giving one's approval and to keep from failing" (Barber, 1998, p. 1457). These elements of support were well documented within the experiences reported by participants. PLAR provided them with the momentum to persevere when they believed that their personal barriers were insurmountable. Participants reported that the encouragement that was realized through this support was immeasurable to them as it affected many facets of their lives. This was illustrated by the following comment:

> The people I have met and there have been quite a few during the summer programs and I haven't met any with you know negative or many negative things to say about it [PLAR]. It seems to be going really well and some of the women were from places like Labrador and the Northern Peninsula. You got this support system behind you that's important.

One type of support that was reported by all participants as relevant and impacting upon their sense of satisfaction with their educational experiences was the positive attitude of faculty who were involved with the implementation of PLAR. As adult learners they were positively affected by the encouragement that was offered in their educational pursuits. Eight of the participants reported that their educational experience was enhanced as a result of the encouragement they received with PLAR. Several participants acknowledged the favorable response they received towards their initial inquiries regarding the PLAR process. They received the type of encouragement that was important at that time. "I felt our advisor was really good and really open, so it was a comfortable situation". Two participants recounted similar experiences:

> I think the biggest thing was his attitude. He was just so positive. I second guessed my decision to go back into this particular field right up until the day I started classes, for that matter I second guessed it right up to the end of my classes for the first semester. . . .I would be exempted from the first year of this co-op program and to me that was excellent. . . He said the college could do good things for me, me being at the college would do good things for the college. It would be a win, win situation and it was just a very positive reinforcement at a time when I was still second-guessing. I think he was the leading force behind me.

> I don't think I would have gone on had I not had the encouragement from that experience. I think that after you've been out of the education system for a while you don't feel capable on your own of going back and even the little bits of support, the encouragement. I found that was excellent.

Most participants commented favorably regarding their personal experiences and the experiences of others with PLAR. Several students who had anticipated that their age would be a personal barrier discovered that they

were provided with the individualized support and guidance that was essential to their continued progress. Two participants reported:

> Without that I don't think I would have had the nerve to even attempt it again. Just with the lack of confidence that I had of putting myself back into the line of fire with young bright students that are dedicated, they know what they want, they have the goal, they're going to do it. You feel like an old has been, but when the College thinks I can do it again having given me the credit that they gave me. . . .It's nice to know that when you put work into something that it's not all forgotten. . .years down the road.

> I don't know if I would have been so confident or gung-ho to go ahead without a lot of support that I got from the staff. They made the difference. I don't think there was ever a person who said, "What are you doing this for now, you're 40 plus years old why don't you just go home, stay home, get social services whatever it takes to do it?" But that wasn't their attitude. "If you want to do this and you can contribute here, you just go ahead and do it". They were very supportive in that manner.

Participants reported an enhanced feeling of self-worth that they attributed to the level of support they had received in the form of positive feedback. Faculty provided support through the provision of advice, guidance, and encouragement. This affected the participants' perceptions of how they were valued by experts within the post-secondary setting. Two participants reported:

> The instructors really made you feel good about yourself. They made you get the best out of yourself. That's the most important thing I think is having good instructors and them believing in you. They truly believed in every single one of us that was there, no matter what type of work we were doing or what little town we came from. They knew we could do it.

> It also kept you encouraged. This is a long process and it's a lot of work. I think if you didn't have someone there saying, "Yea, you're doing great, yea, that's just what we want," and just kind of validating what you were doing and to keep you going, I think it would be very hard to do on your own.

Five participants alluded to the supportive environment they experienced as faculty clearly indicated that they were available to provide assistance at any time with the PLAR process. The constancy of support was crucial to their success. The availability and accessibility of student support services provided the necessary reassurance as illustrated by two participants:

> I found that they were most willing to provide me with all of the support they could. If I e-mailed somebody or called, I always had a response back within 24 to 48 hours and nobody discouraged me in any way. It was basically, "Yes, go for it, do this, do this, do this," and the system worked really well. I kind of got the feeling that if I was located there [on campus] I could bring in my work to them before it was actually submitted and they would have a look at it. I thought they were very committed to the process and really wanted to make sure it worked.

> We were told like anytime at all day or night. I phoned them anytime that I needed them. If I couldn't get them at the college during the day, they gave us their home telephone numbers and we could call them at home if we were having problems with the portfolio.

Participants experienced a sense of partnership with faculty, and they verbalized the necessity of support. Faculty initiated contact with students in order to monitor their progress and provide the guidance that was needed to complete their portfolios and other forms of written documentation. In several instances, faculty partnered with students in formulating the process that would guide their assessment. The inclusion of participants in the decision-making process further helped to allay any concerns that they may have experienced. Two participants recalled:

> I found that they were encouraging on assignments and calling at times to remind you and asking if you needed any help and if you have problems.

> If they'd been out of school for a long time some people had problems with the writing end of it. . .and putting it together. They helped quite a bit with that and where resources could be and how to look for them.
>
> As soon as I said that I was interested they answered, "This is what we can do". You know all of a sudden it wasn't you go do, it was, "What we can do to help you with this process". . . .I always got the impression that I had their support in doing this and that both of them were willing to answer any questions I had. Whatever assistance I needed, I really felt that I could get it from them.

Participants also perceived support through acknowledgement of their individuality and through an assessment process that examined the uniqueness of their learning. Eight participants alluded to the importance of being recognized as distinct individuals, and believed that the assessment process considered the holistic nature of their learning. The transparency of the policies that direct any process is important, so that participants are informed. One participant had an experience with one university that demonstrated their willingness to adjust policies and adapt the process based upon the uniqueness of her past learning experiences. She had been provided with accurate and detailed information on the PLAR process and was able to negotiate with the assessors.

> I was speaking to the professor and told her of my past experiences and that there were just some areas that I didn't think that I had done in enough detail in the program. There were two areas that I identified and she agreed with them. . .I did a case analysis, which brought in the two areas that were lacking, and she said, "Fine". I found that they were quite willing to adapt their process. They were willing to try new things and even though it wasn't the way they normally did it, it worked for me.

> They couldn't give me any more than 15 credits, but I found a loop hole in their course calendar. . .I have an undergraduate degree, I've got a graduate degree for God's sake, if that situation doesn't apply to me who could it apply to. They did go with this clause. . .I could get 24 credits.

Several participants experienced support through the efforts of faculty that provided them with appropriate information on PLAR policies and with guidance in preparing for the assessment. The provision of advice and access to written information demonstrated to participants that the educational milieu was supportive of their actions. Two participants explained:

> They have things on the web, so I went in on the Internet. Then I contacted the contact people that they gave me, again on the Internet, so it was quite easy. Their e-mail address is there. . . .They told me up front the types of things that would be involved in the portfolio and that most people found the portfolio was a very time consuming initiative. They were quite realistic with their expectations and with their suggestions for time commitments. They recommended a book to me and said, "If you want to purchase this book you can get it from our bookstore at a cheaper cost". They were very enthusiastic about her book when it came to portfolio development.

> If you run into trouble in PLA we have counselors there to go see. . . .If you don't know what you're doing or you're not sure about what you're doing, they can go through it with you and help you with it. I went to the head of the department and he sent me out to [faculty] who taught the course. She gave me a course outline, she'd given me assignments that they had done cause this was in midterm when I was inquiring about it. They gave me a little bit of information about the format of any tests that I was taking. She lent me a book, the text,. . .which was good, saved me a lot of cash there.

Four participants were provided with a course on portfolio development prior to commencing their program of study. The portfolio course and written guidelines outlined for participants a systematic process that would assist them

in the completion of this document. This was developed as a pilot project and was designed to augment other supportive measures that were implemented by the PLAR department. Participants were guided through the development of their portfolios and faculty assistance was available through each phase of the project. Participants who had been out of the educational setting for years perceived this level of guidance to be essential to their success. Assistance was even provided with the writing process. One participant commented, "If you were to ask me what have you done in the almost 50 years of your life. . .where do I begin? The step by step process was excellent." Two participants reported:

> They taught you how to do your portfolio and the portfolio was really, really a long process. At times it's very frustrating, but the instructors in there are marvelous. Any time of the day or night if you had a problem we always had their phone numbers at home, we had their phone numbers in at the College. I would have never got through the portfolio without that [portfolio development course]. I know I would have never been able to do mine at home.

> It [portfolio development course] was very beneficial and we also had instructors and advisors that we were in contact with on an ongoing basis to make sure that we were keeping on track. They were pretty fair and they helped us along the way. We also had reading material that you could refer to and teleconferencing. It's not the same as being in a classroom; you don't always have all the same supports. I think at the beginning it was very overwhelming. I think personally I would have found it very hard to work through and understand exactly what was wanted, especially at the beginning of the portfolio, if that wasn't in place.

Three participants reported that it was not only the support of faculty that was important throughout the process of developing a portfolio, but also the support of other PLAR students. They were encouraged by the contact with

other students and the advice they were able to offer. These participants recalled:

> We had the support of each other and we helped each other out along the way. We would periodically meet together and help kind of get on track. We also did things such as teleconferencing, and that was helpful.

> I know a lot of the people who were working at the time and found it really hard. But, I just kept at it and anybody I met, like at conferences or anything, I'd say, "Well, go for PLA, go girl, you know it, you know it". (Laughter)

Participants reported that PLAR had also provided support in the form of financial savings when they were reimbursed for course tuition. The PLAR policies of most post-secondary programs included a stipulation that students would be reimbursed for the cost of each course, if they were successful with their assessment. With the exception of one participant, the cost of completing a course in a post-secondary setting far exceeded the cost of an assessment. This was an advantage to those who were able to waive a number of courses because they utilized PLAR more that once. One participant reported, "To do a night-time course it would cost you probably $250, almost $300 and to write a PLA it's $50. So, that was a lot cheaper." Another participant confirmed this.

> Financially it would help me because it gives me better credentials and really at a low cost. . . .Fifty dollars per course is really cheap especially when you're looking at finishing up a diploma or a certificate program at university. It is so much more expensive per course if you need to sit and attend a course.

The cost of education was a major consideration for many participants. Although some directly commented that they would have had difficulty paying the

full cost of tuition, others indicated that the financial benefits had provided a definite advantage, "I think it would have been almost a deterrent for me to finish the course if I had to pay for the whole thing out of my own pocket". PLAR resulted in a substantial cost savings for some through the exemption from tuition, textbooks, and other course expenses. It was reportedly one of the outstanding benefits of PLAR. Three participants recounted:

> I live on a shoestring. If I had to go back and do the whole ECE course at one of the colleges, especially one of the private colleges, it would have ended up costing perhaps, I'd say in the vicinity of $10,000. I would say perhaps all totalled, with all the books and everything included, mine may have cost me $1200. So, we're talking a massive saving here.

> I think the main thing is the cost and also what it makes you feel about yourself. . . .The fact that you were able to get credit, that meant that you didn't have to pay anything for those. . .that was seventeen out of thirty-seven. . . .I would only have to pay for twenty laps. That really cut mine down nearly half. It was excellent. And there were texts that would have gone along with each. Some of them could be hefty, like the psychology book was fairly pricey.

> It's probably saved me about $2200 just out of pocket you know for tuition. When I look at the cost of tuition and then take away what I had to pay for the PLA. . .somewhere between $2200 to $2400. That was a significant saving as well, it's saved me a tremendous amount of time and it's saved me a tremendous amount of money and it has certainly helped me meet my goals. The PLA process in its entirety only cost me $250.

Participants emphasized that cost was a factor that demanded consideration in their decision to return to the post-secondary setting. The receipt of credit because of success with PLAR allowed more time for participants to seek part-time employment. This participant reported, "Financially it has helped. I don't know a whole lot of people who are in school in an above

average financial position, usually you're going back to school when you're fiscally restrained". The ability to sustain some measure of employment by reducing the number of courses they were required to take was an important factor for the participants. Two participants reported:

> There was no way like I could stop my job and go to school full time because I'd never be able to afford it, but where I could apply for those credits, that was a great advantage to me. I was really fortunate.

> That was really important to me because my husband and I we're unemployed most of the time and I only work when the school year is in. Then he's unemployed, he just does seasonal work also. . . .There was no possible way I could go to school full time. So, by doing the portfolio I had 18 credits that I didn't have to pay for.

Two participants required minimal support with PLAR and encountered no difficulty approaching faculty and preparing for their assessment. They were confident that their level of knowledge and their experience in the workplace had adequately prepared them to be exempted from this course.

> There are counselors on hand all the time. I just basically filled out the application and went on my own through work experience. I knew, I knew what I knew, I knew the information so, I didn't need any help.

It was evident through the reported experiences of three participants that the practice of PLAR can vary widely from one post-secondary setting to another. The term PLAR was not formally adopted by all settings in reference to the practice of awarding academic credit for past learning, subsequently the philosophical approach varied. One of the differences they recounted was the level of support that was initially extended to them when they inquired about

PLAR in these settings. One post-secondary setting did not offer any encouragement to participants that their competencies would be assessed through the PLAR process and that this mechanism could advantage their academic progress. They were discouraged when the challenge for credit process was listed in the admission policies, but it was not practiced according to established PLAR policy guidelines. This demonstrated to participants that the uniqueness and diversity of past learning would not be acknowledged. Two participants reported:

> I received some correspondence back from [university] but it was nothing that made me feel that I would get much credit for what I had. The correspondence that I received back was very vague. I don't think it was individually addressing my situation which is what I had hoped. I've already gone through a three-year process previously. I want the quickest route possible.

> My first feeling is you people don't even know what PLA stands for. I felt that particular co-ordinator knew exactly what I had been teaching, exactly what I was capable of, and I really felt that she as an individual tried to look for any possible loopholes, but it was out of her hands. That to me is not Prior Learning Assessment. Any courses that I wanted to challenge had to be done in June, if I didn't get it done in June and a lot of these courses were pre-requisites to other courses, then I could be a couple of years just trying to get the challenges out of the way. You can't challenge eight courses in a month; it's just not possible. I found their system very discouraging.

Facilitating Personal Growth

Through their experience with PLAR, participants received formal acknowledgement that their learning was valued and equivalent to classroom learning. They reported that it provided the environment to enable more

individual attention to personal growth and the development of a more positive self-concept. The term growth has been defined as, "an increase in size, height, quantity, degree, or in any way regarding as measurable" (Barber, 1998. p. 622). Participants reported that PLAR provided them with a sense of past accomplishment and enabled them to recognize their strengths, resulting in personal changes, such as increased self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem. They reported that they felt better prepared to confront the challenges of their academic programs. This personal growth experience created the momentum for some to continue with their educational pursuits.

Six participants had entered the post-secondary setting following years of absence from a formal educational milieu. They described numerous insecurities relating to school return. Their comments reflected a lack of confidence in their own abilities. They reported that PLAR played a major role in allaying their apprehension by providing a psychological cushion. This was illustrated through the description provided by one participant:

> I had been away from it for so long I just didn't know if I could get back into it. . .not knowing if you still had the ability to study, to retain the information, to give the information back, to understand what you were being taught. Those thoughts were constantly going through my mind. So, being given credit was them saying,. . ."We believe you can do it". If they didn't think I could do it they wouldn't have given me the credit. It was someone at a professional level saying, "Yes, we think you deserve this".

Five participants reported that they also experienced some degree of trepidation when applying for PLAR following acceptance into post-secondary

programs. They reported that they were initially uncertain as to the value of their past learning and the applicability of it to the courses within their programs. Initially, their uncertainties created a personal barrier and some of the participants were hesitant in utilizing PLAR as a mechanism to receive academic credit. As they determined their eligibility for PLAR, course by course, they made comments such as: "My God, I don't think I can apply for all those", and "We were kind of a bit wary of it all and whether we really thought we did know enough, so I think most of us only went for the bare minimum credit because we were not really sure about this". Another participant reported:

> If I had my time back now, I think if I had understood the process more I probably would have challenged for more than I did. Because I know now that I did have the information. . . .The only barrier that I found was probably my own, it was coming from my own self-confidence. I felt like I didn't understand it well enough, what was involved in the course, and I should have probably challenged for more in the beginning. . .which meant I had to do a lot more courses. . . .But, that was a learning experience too.

One of the meaningful experiences reported by participants was the formal acknowledgement and valuing of past learning through the PLAR process. It provided them with affirmation that they had the requisite learning to enter the program with advanced status. Ten participants reported that they were empowered by this experience and had developed a greater self-awareness regarding their knowledge, skills, and abilities. The benefits of the formal recognition of past learning were tangible to participants. They experienced an enhancement of self-worth, which was evident through

comments such as: "You feel good, you feel I've accomplished something and you hope this will be the basis to make life a little bit easier. . . .It gives you a very positive feeling." Two participants shared these beliefs:

> I was the type of person always putting myself down. . . .If you were to talk to my instructors you would know that I had no self-esteem whatsoever and to apply for credit, like I had a really hard time convincing myself that this is what I knew. . . .It really made me feel good about myself. It made me realize that I had a lot more strengths than I thought I did. I guess that's where the self-esteem came in and you know I started looking at myself as a better person then.

> The self-esteem boost I think is really one of the major hurdles because it's overwhelming to go back and have to start from the very bottom and do it. When you realize that there are things that you do know and even little things, that's really a boost.

They perceived that PLAR played an invaluable role in promoting self-development. It effectively enhanced participants' level of comfort with the post-secondary setting. They were emphatic that PLAR had made an impact on their feelings of self-worth as students re-entering the educational setting after a protracted period of time. It created within them a sense of hope that they were capable of success. One participant reported, "I got seventeen credits, which was really good for me and my self-esteem. You kind of thought to yourself, "Well, I know a lot of this stuff so I can do this", and it made you feel good about yourself". Two participants recounted:

> It was nice to know that the three years that I had spent in school, the two years that I had worked at it wasn't a total waste, that it could be transferred and used to upgrade me back to an employable status. . . .It's nice to be able to say that the College as an institution thinks I'm capable of going on with the rest of this course even without a certain course that I

> did ten years ago. When you got an institution that will allow this, it definitely helps in the confidence area.
>
> You didn't realize how much you knew before and how much of it was worth something. You kind of go through your life doing these things, but to have somebody sort of put an onus on it, it's really good. And I think it also promoted me to thinking, well yes, I can do more. I think it's made me feel that I can do things, I can take on more now. I can do more courses and I think when you live in outport Newfoundland then there's not a big lot for you to challenge your mind.

Conversely, participants recognized the potential impact on self if they had been denied credit for experiential learning: it would have been demoralizing. These participants reported: "I think having to be put in the position that the things you know were of no value would bring down your self-esteem", and "I think it would have slowed me down tremendously and I don't think I would have this same enthusiasm about it that I do have now".

Participants reported that the portfolio was a beneficial tool in reviewing one's accomplishments, recognizing the vastness and diversity of one's learning experiences, facilitating the identification of one's strengths, and providing a basis for new learning. The primary intrinsic value entrenched in the portfolio was the resultant increased self-awareness: recognizing one's own accomplishments and identifying their present value. It was significant to note that five of the ten participants, who reported that PLAR had empowered them as individuals, had utilized the portfolio as the main method of evaluation. They related how the development of a portfolio had provided them with insight into the meaningfulness of their lives. It revealed to them the perspective that all of

life's experiences have provided a diversity of valuable learning opportunities that have contributed to the shaping of their individuality. Two participants recalled:

> I had grown, perhaps you don't think you are growing within yourself, so this kind of verified that you were. . .It is self-affirming that you have matured and as a result of your experiences, they add up to your essence as a person.

> It has made me see what I learned and what I did over the years has made me the person I am now and that means something to the world, not just to me but to the world. . . .I didn't have the confidence and I think it really helped my self-esteem. There's some really interesting jobs coming up in child care that I probably wouldn't have even looked at before or tried. . . .I'm putting in my resumes and I'm trying because I feel that I have something to offer. It's sort of changed my attitude a bit. . . . You think about your life like that it's quite amazing.

A common self-perception recounted by four female participants was in the context of de-valuing their own experiences as wives, mothers, and community volunteers. They reported that the portfolio had created the opportunity for them to reflect on the past and discover the value of these experiences. This was predominantly reported by females in this study, who had no formal post-secondary education and who had been assessed through the portfolio method. Retrospectively, these participants verbalized regret that they had not pursued continuing education at an earlier stage in their lives. As two participants illustrated:

> For myself and for a lot of women, when you're at home with the children . . .you kind of lose yourself in your children. You're kind of looking at yourself as not being a person that had anything to offer to the work force, or to society. I think you can get into a shell where you're not being

> productive in society because you're not viewing yourself in that light, you don't look at yourself as an individual.
>
> I think it does a lot, the prior learning experience. . . .It was self -searching and you could accumulate your life and put it down. . . .I have a lot of strengths that I didn't realize I even had and I have a lot of learning. I've done a lot of things in my life that I hadn't even realized were there. It gave me encouragement and it gave me a feeling that I could do this after being out of school for so long. I had been home for eight to nine years. You can kind of lose yourself sometimes I think like that.

The development of a portfolio was an exercise that reportedly nurtured the confidence of all who completed one. One participant recalled:

> It gave me more confidence in what I was doing, that the learning, that the things that I had got on my own through my own research was valuable. It gave me that little bit of confidence and self-esteem. It also showed me that I was pretty strong in what I was doing. . . .Those were things that you didn't even see in yourself. . .

Adult learners reportedly derive encouragement from not having to start at the beginning of a course of study with other younger and relatively inexperienced students. The formal recognition provided through PLAR confirmed for these participants that they were starting with a firm foundation. They were bringing with them a level of competency that would be an asset. Participants perceived that prior learning would serve as the basis upon which to build and would facilitate their entry into and their progress through a post-secondary program. It was self-affirming that others recognized the value of one's past. One participant commented, "I realized I wasn't starting from scratch. I wasn't starting back at kindergarten". Other participants also maintained this view:

> Starting where you're to and going on from there is a good feeling too. You don't have to go back over things you know. You start where you are now and go on from there. I have learned some valuable things, especially after being out of the workforce. I needed that bit of extra support I think that it offered.
>
> It takes you from this feeling of I don't know anything at all to this feeling of God, I can, I do know, I have learned something. I've gotten older and maybe a bit wiser and it gives you really a feeling of self-confidence. I was out of the work force for 22 years, so it was a big jump for me to come from being at home with my mop and bucket. You realize that you have learned a lot. . .and it's useful.

Six participants referred to their age as a perceived barrier to the learning process. They perceived themselves as being different from and compared themselves to the predominately younger group of students. They expressed self-doubt as to whether they had the ability to be successful in the student role at their age. Educational settings that advocated the practice of PLAR reinforced to participants that their policies were supportive of their individual needs, and that age was not perceived as a barrier. Participants reported that PLAR provided reassurance that they had achieved a portion of the program expectations and at an acceptable level. Two participants recalled:

> I was terrified of going back, although in school I had no problem learning, but somehow I've got it stuck in my mind that as you get older you lose these skills. You don't lose them, they get rusty, it's like riding a bike. It comes back, but I was terrified by going back.
>
> The fact that they gave me the credit said to me. . ."We feel confident in your abilities, so we will award you this credit for what you are about to do now". . . .The most intimidating thing about it all was my age compared to the age of the other students. . . .The idea of going back in to school with students that are ten, twelve years younger than you, it's almost still an adjustment, it'll probably be an adjustment until the last day I'm in classes

> with them. It's even going to be an adjustment going into the work force with my age difference. But, because I had been given credit I think it kind of re-enforced the fact that. . .if the coordinator of the entire program sees fit to say you can start in second year, you have no reason to be concerned with not meeting the expectation that this course requires. It makes you kind of believe in yourself a little bit more when someone else says, "I believe you can do it, it definitely helps in the confidence area".

Eight participants reported that their self-confidence had been negatively affected by recent experiences, such as the need to upgrade educational qualifications to maintain employment, the loss of employment, unsuccessful attempts to procure employment, the acceptance of employment unrelated to one's educational field, and the loss of financial security through divorce. PLAR reportedly helped to restore their self-confidence and create hope for the future. The receipt of PLAR credits created the incentive to proceed with a program of study for two participants:

> I job-hunted for eleven months, trying to get a position based on my first diploma and the work experience that I had achieved. It kind of depletes your confidence level when you job hunt for that long and you get no response. You kind of lose the confidence. . .and all of a sudden it's like well nobody cares. When ten years later they were telling me that I was capable of coming into this course and completing it successfully, I just found it to be a little bit of a boost that helped me to decide to go back to school because it was still a debate in my mind.

> It made a great deal of difference to my self-confidence. . .I didn't have a lot of formal education, I had a high school education. . . .I was married right out of high school and had a child. I had been at home for years before I went back into the workforce. . . .I did in-services and I was trying to educate myself, like reading as much as I could and I wanted to be able to go back to school. Through PLAR it was a boost to my self-confidence for sure and my self-esteem and everything else by feeling that I was more prepared to be in the role that I was in.

Participants perceived that PLAR provided equity to those who had years of experience in the field, but had no formal education. The experts in the field had acknowledged that learning occurs through different modes: formal classroom and self-directed experiential based learning. This signified to them that value had formally been attributed to their learning. Two participants reported:

> It was a little bit fairer. . .especially someone who had been in the workforce for so long and even though it wasn't formal education you had done so many in-services and what-not that you would be given credit for your life and for something that you had done. That you would be given some credit it helped build your self-confidence and made you feel better about yourself.

> When you know you can apply for credits it really makes you feel good that they're going to look at skills that you already have, interests that you already have, where you are in your work, or what you can accomplish in your job, what you have accomplished, even through life experiences. You can get credit just through life experiences.

Participants reported that the insight and support of faculty and staff played a major role in facilitating their personal development. They were instrumental in assisting them to recognize the value of past experiences. Five participants reported a notable improvement in their self-concept through the encouragement of others.

> I think that after you've been out of the education system for a while you don't feel capable on your own of going back and even the little bits of support. . .the encouragement especially from [faculty], "Well, you know, you're not too old to do it, you've done this before so just take this and apply it there", kind of thing and letting you see what you've done. I found that was excellent because you don't realize what you've done until they see and that little bit of encouragement just keeps boosting you along.

> She'd (faculty) say, "Don't you know how to do this and did you ever do that", and I'd say, "Oh god, yes". You know it opened up your mind a little bit. Without that portfolio course I would never thought that I knew so much through my training and my work experiences. It made a big change in my life.

This participant reported the benefit of self-reflection that transpired through the process of completing a portfolio. It seemed to be an invaluable means of revealing the strengths that she possessed.

> You're doing your portfolio then you're pinpointing all your skills. What a lot of skills I have that you never think of. That's what's so good about it, like it makes you sit down and realize what skills you have, what interests you have, where you put those skills because you don't even realize you're using those skills.

Two participants did not identify any change in self-perception as a result of credit awarded through PLAR. They seemed to have an inherent level of confidence and were self-assured in the knowledge that they were well prepared to proceed with PLAR for a number of courses. In contrast to other students, they expressed no apprehension regarding their chances of success with the PLAR process and viewed the process as a formality in being awarded credit. One participant commented, "Having gone through the prior learning assessment process and well, really having taken only a couple of nights to study for these courses, it really came easy to me and so it doesn't really mean a lot to me".

A third participant felt that PLAR affirmed that she had program equivalent learning:

> It was very validating for me. Being able to do the Prior Learning Assessment and getting the credit for so many courses was a very positive experience and self-esteem building for me. It made me realize that people were able to look at the things that I had done and say, "Yes, you know, she's a bright girl, she's a smart girl, give her credit for what she knows". I thought that it was very empowering, and overall a very positive experience.

Confronting and Embracing Time

The primary factor that influenced many decisions made by the post-secondary student was time. Their concerns regarding time centred around several issues, such as the length of the program, the possibility of reducing the number of courses, the recommended amount of time to devote to study, and the availability of time that would remain for other aspects of their personal life including leisure, work, family, and organized activities. PLAR had an impact upon these time related issues and they were experienced in unique ways by each participant. Participants described the paradoxical effects of PLAR as it impacted on personal time; it was an element that acted both as a stressor and a strength for participants. They reported that PLAR eased the transition into the educational setting by creating more personal time; however, the preparation for an assessment imposed upon personal time.

When participants were exempted from specific courses through PLAR they were provided additional time, which they eagerly embraced. The term embrace is described as, "to accept eagerly, as with an opportunity" (Barber, 1998, p. 456). They perceived PLAR as such an opportunity that was

advantageous to their academic progress. It provided them with additional time for both academic and personal life. One participant reported, "Being given complete credit for first year meant that cut down eight months of study and a four month work term. It greatly reduced the amount of time that I would have to spend in this full-time study situation". At times the preparation for the PLAR took a fraction of the time it would have taken to complete the course. Another reported, "In actual fact, it probably only took me a matter of weeks really to complete what other people had completed in months".

PLAR was also reported as an obstacle in relation to time as participants struggled to prove the depth of their learning. This was a barrier that they confronted as they prepared for the assessment. The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines the term confront as, "to face up to and deal with, as with a problem or difficulty" (Barber, 1998, p. 298). The majority of participants reported that it was a necessity to initially sacrifice time as they validated their learning for assessors. The amount of time that each participant devoted to the assessment process was dependent upon the method of assessment established by the assessor. This was illustrated through the following comment:

> Everything had to be verified. It's a long process. It took me from June that first year and I think by October I had all mine completed, 17 of it, but I worked like all through the Summer, day in and day out sometimes until two and three o'clock in the morning. It's a long process and I would never ever tell anybody that it's easy.

Adhering to personal schedules.

One of the prevailing time-related concerns recounted by participants was the opportunity to reduce the number of courses through PLAR and, in some cases, to graduate prior to the expected date of completion. Through PLAR, ten participants were able to reduce the length of their programs from periods of four months to two years. PLAR expedited the process of completing a degree or diploma, which was a primary consideration for some participants who perceived time as a constant foe. Six participants had previously completed degrees, diplomas, or equivalent educational experiences and were compelled to further their education in a post-secondary setting. They perceived any reduction in program length as a benefit. It was a factor that seemed to pervade all educationally related decisions. This factor was identified by two participants:

> That was excellent because I had invested already three years and in choosing what do I do, do I continue with this and upgrade or do I go into something else? Anything else that I would have chosen would have been at least two years. . . .I was getting another three-year diploma that would be totally up to date for one year of study.

> When you look at that sheet of credits that you need, it's enormous. If you have to do all those courses, one course at a time, you'd be there as long as I'm in MUN. But, actually for me I'd say a little over half of it that I could come through with prior learning.

The daunting task of completing endless courses could have presented an insurmountable time barrier to participants if they had been denied the opportunity to reduce the number of courses. Several participants reported that they would not have proceeded without the PLAR credits and that it would have

affected their spirit for new learning. One participant related, "It might have been overwhelming for me and I don't know if I would have the same enthusiasm for it". The opportunity to reduce the time for program completion played a definite role in the decision to pursue a specific educational pathway. Similarly, others reported:

> It was a clincher, if I had not been given the amount of credit that I had been given I would not have bothered because I knew I didn't want to spend any more than two years back in the school situation.
>
> That was definitely an important element for me. It took me two to two and a half years to do. So, if I would not have had that 18 credits. If I had to do the 36 credits it would have taken me another two years, maybe another two and a half years, which would have brought me to being too frustrated, cause you're looking at five years in school.

The opportunity to obtain credits through PLAR was the main incentive for several participants to initially proceed with entry into their programs. Eligibility for PLAR was the key consideration in their educational planning. They were confident that they had the requisite knowledge and competencies, and that they were qualified to progress through the program with expedience. This mechanism significantly reduced the number of courses for these participants and enabled them to adhere to their personal timelines.

> I did a whole year basically in a month and so it compressed it for me. . . It's a real beneficial thing to be able to do it that way. It eliminated a lot of wasted time and a lot of boredom. I was doing it my own pace. . . .If you attend a course you have to go along with the pace that they're setting out for you. If I had been in a classroom situation, I would have been held back by the pace of the instructor and the other students.

> It saved me from having to do six courses. I had set my own goals that I was going to convocate in December of 1999 no matter what I had to do and I firmly believe that I would have reached that goal, but the intervening time would have been really, really difficult. . . .The primary benefit to me was the time-savings, being able to meet my goal for December 1 convocation. My time commitment to meeting that goal had been reduced tremendously

Repetition of learning was viewed as an unnecessary imposition on personal time. Participants who were highly motivated and goal oriented expressed frustration with being required to duplicate learning that they had previously mastered. An important element in the process of learning was the opportunity to maintain some degree of control over one's personal time.

> When I was doing the course for the first year instructor lead, I had to sit through a lot of things being presented that I didn't really need to learn over again. Whereas, with doing the assessments, I studied what I needed to study. I didn't go ahead and re-study things that I already knew, cause I was sort of a bit more in control of what I was paying attention to.

Facilitating adjustment.

Participants noted that reducing the workload through PLAR provided more study time for other courses. This effectively minimized stress by creating a more manageable workload. This was crucial for adult learners entering the post-secondary setting, especially during the first year of an academic program when they were adjusting to the demands of study. One participant reported, "We've had people in school drop classes because of the load itself, it's so demanding. . .because of the PLAR I didn't have to drop any courses. In the first

couple of semesters it helped". Two participants who supported this view reported:

> PLA gives me the option to spend time on other subjects. . .I didn't have to attend classes, so I can go into another lab and spend my time on something that I need to know. Time is why I basically did it for both courses.

> I was able to study other subjects, so it made it easier when I went home in the nighttime, so that I didn't have to study as much. I could spend more time on a subject that was probably giving me difficulty

When students were novices within the educational arena, time was a factor that was a constant source of concern. It was the enemy against which these students battled to establish a personal sense of harmony: a balancing of time. There was an adjustment period for mature students: learning how to study, establishing study-schedules, and organizing daily routines around school life. They required additional time to adjust to the demands of student life and to establish priorities in their personal schedules. Initially, it often took them longer to complete tasks, sometimes to absorb new information, and adjust to school routines. Any additional time that could be captured by using PLAR was a personal gain. Two participants recalled the personal benefits that were derived:

> You have to re-train your mind to concentrate. . .to learn how to study and prepare yourself and your time. . . .There was a lot of reading and I had to read it three or four times to really comprehend it. Trying to concentrate and focus on the material, that's what I find hardest right now. I'm spending all my time at it. That's all I do now is school: evenings, weekends, everything and that's what it will be like for 18 months. This is why any courses that I could get rid of through PLA. I was going to.

> It cut down the amount of time that I had to spend as opposed to what the other students had to spend. . . .It allowed me an extra bit of study time going back into the study situation after ten years. I think it was a real benefit to myself to have that extra time. . .to get back into the swing of studying and what school brings. . . .It was a bit of extra adjustment time.

Through the PLAR process participants reportedly became more self-aware and insightful of the benefits of prior learning. They held the view that prior learning had established a foundation for new learning and facilitated the ease with which new concepts and knowledge were assimilated. Many participants reported that this provided a comfort level that enhanced their self-confidence within the post-secondary milieu and created for them the advantage of additional personal time. Two participants shared this belief:

> I didn't have to take home a book and start from scratch, I've had those experiences I know what to do. . .you just had to show that you did know that which saved an awful lot of time.

> You didn't have to start at the grass roots with a lot of the things that you had already done. I didn't have to start from the very basics and learn it all over again.

A view held by participants was that time in and of itself can create personal dead lines and the necessity to proceed with as much speed as possible. Several participants expressed that their age created a sense of urgency, if they couldn't complete the program by a specific date they questioned the value of proceeding with their educational goals. Age was a constant reminder to them of the time-lines created by life, which direct the personal choices one makes. As one participant reported, "That one year to

someone twenty years old is not a big deal, at my age it's a big deal". It was a motivating factor that propelled participants to avail of opportunities that would maximize their time. This sense of urgency was illustrated through the comments of two participants:

> I have time against me as well, I'll be 50 years old next month, I can't slow down. If I want a teaching degree before I'm sixty-five, I have to do it now, it has to be done now or never.

> Because of my age, because I've already gone through a three-year process previously, I want the quickest route possible. I definitely don't think I would have enrolled in a three-year program to start off again.

Balancing roles.

Adjusting to the demands of the post-secondary setting was not an easy transition. Seven participants identified the lack of personal time as the factor that was the most disruptive, and one recounted, "That was the main adjustment, it was definitely the time thing". Their quality of life was negatively impacted by the amount of time that they devoted to course preparation. One of the main advantages of PLAR, as reported by participants, was the time that was recaptured for one's personal use. "The personal time commitment that it has saved me is even more significant than the months that it would have added on to my program". Another two participants concurred:

> The main benefit to me was that I have a life now outside of university. . . Like I did nothing else other than do courses and I was very motivated to do it. I don't know if I would have been able to keep up that pace to actually meet that goal of graduating in December if the PLA had fallen through on me.

> I'm finding that study is difficult, having to discipline, to organize my time to study. I had a portion of every day that was mine and I found once I became a full time student there was no portion of any day that was mine . . . .I don't have time to do what I want on the weekends. . .I have to go study because there's exams, there's projects, there's assignments. It's all a very big adjustment.

Personal responsibilities interfered with the available time that participants had to devote to their education. It was a challenge to attain a balance between work, home, and leisure. Time was highly valued by participants, many of whom were employed and had family responsibilities. It was difficult to fulfill all of one's obligations, "It's hard trying to balance family and studies". This participant reported:

> Just to be with family. I think after a full day's work you need time just to relax and do nothing. Certainly that would leave me more time to do things at home, family things. . .which was helpful.

The reality of student life was that frequently part-time employment was a necessity to assist with the costs of tuition, books, transportation, and accommodations. This was the only way that most students could afford the rapidly rising costs associated with post-secondary education. Six participants were employed on a part-time or full-time basis while completing a program of study. The opportunity to receive credit through PLAR created one less worry with a workload that was already perceived as intense, "It eased back on the course load. I was working part-time so it freed up some hours throughout the

week for me and I kept up either work or study. So, it worked out perfect for my particular situation". Two participants reported:

> It certainly saved me time, because within a year or so I probably got credit for maybe even eight, nine, ten courses. I just finished doing one course and it took me a full semester to do it. It's not like being in school where all your time is given to your studies. I'm doing this in my spare time and my weekends.

> Because I worked two full time jobs and I'm a single parent, to be able to take the time off from work and go back to school and find the time to study is very difficult. . . .I don't think that I estimated that I need time for this and time for that. I'm a single parent, which means I'm it, I do the band scene, the picking up, the dropping off, the parent teacher's, so it's a lot at the one time.

Time was a valuable commodity to participants: to be able to accelerate the time to complete a program was an advantage. A priority of many participants was to graduate at the earliest possible date in order to continue with the pursuit of employment. For many adult learners time was equated with finances and lost income. The more expediently they were able to achieve their educational goals the greater were the personal gains of both time and money. Six participants were married with children, who were also approaching the post-secondary level, and three participants were self-supporting. Financially there was an urgency to establish or re-establish themselves in a full time position of employment.

> It really helped me in getting into this program. If I never had to write a PLA I wouldn't have been able to get into this program in January. Otherwise, I would have had to wait till the next session started up which was April. . . .It put me ahead 4 months. . .to be able to go ahead and go on with everyone else. . .look for a job. . . .I could move on.

Coping with portfolio development.

In a number of situations completing the requirements for PLAR was viewed as time-consuming. As part of the PLAR process some participants were required to complete a written exam, written reports, short assignments, projects, and/or perform practical exams. Although these methods of assessment may not have required extensive periods of time, it was a matter of devoting the time to complete them. When students had other responsibilities it was often difficult to make these tasks a priority.

> Instead of taking two months to get it all done, it's ended up taking me eight months and I'm still not finished. I have found it a little bit difficult now that I am working full time and I have children, to sort of focus on getting a course done. I know that it really is only going to take me a couple of days to finish up this program that I have to write, but it's just getting the time, sitting down and doing it.

One of the more time-consuming methodologies recalled by participants was preparing a portfolio for assessment. It involved writing life-history essays and learning statements, contacting individuals who could provide verification of learning, and occasionally, faculty lead interviews to further validate learning. These students were attempting to document their learning through written exposition. This process demanded a great deal of self-reflection and a critical analysis of one's experiential learning. Initially, this involved a notable sacrifice of personal time, but participants accepted this as a necessary part of the process to ensure that the portfolio provided a credible means of conducting an assessment and validating learning. One participant reflected on her personal

effort to complete a portfolio, "That was very time consuming. I don't know if I needed to go to that much detail with it but I didn't want to risk it. . . .I really wanted the course". The comments of two participants further supported this view:

> I wrote all my essays and got my verification papers and it seemed to be like an awful lot of work at the time. Some of it was a bit repetitive. That's the only thing I found about it, you were bringing out your points and you put them in short form and then you had to draw out further from that. . . an awful lot of writing.
>
> It was so involved and so lengthy, the actual portfolio. If it hadn't been so time consuming you probably could have got through your course faster. That's what I'm looking at. It took almost a year to put this portfolio together.

Participants confronted obstacles when completing a portfolio that impinged upon their limited time. One of the main obstacles they identified was procuring the written documentation that would verify past learning. Verification was not always easy to obtain, especially if considerable time had elapsed since the learning experience had occurred. It was a challenge to locate people, records, and documents to validate the learning. Participants expended a great deal of time and effort to ensure that the finished product was reflective of learning that had occurred in both formal and informal settings. These obstacles were accepted as a necessary part of the process, "In regards to time, it was easier to prove that you had the learning than learn it over again". Other participants recalled:

> Time was a big factor with me, because I am a single parent. The finding of some of the documentation, sometimes that was a bit difficult. If you didn't keep certificates you had for different workshops you attended, what year was it, where were they. . .I could say I was the Queen of Spain, but unless I could prove I was Queen of Spain what good would it be. If you couldn't find your documentation then you would have to write something, or do something to prove that you did have these experiences.
>
> It was sometimes difficult to trace back people and find people. I hadn't been living in different communities or different provinces and countries, so a lot of things were right in my immediate area, but it was a long process. You had two or three forms you had to have filled out, and by two or three different people. . .i think you had to have a number of people back up your information. So, it was a lengthy process to do that part of it.

Organizing time.

Participants established personal time-lines to guide the completion of their PLAR activities. The belief of PLAR facilitators was that the establishment of institutional dead lines would have created a more stressful environment. Four participants reported that they would have preferred it if dates had been established for the submission of assessment documents, such as the portfolio, written assignments, and projects. The paradox of this situation for two participants was that the absence of a specified date provided the opportunity to procrastinate with the completion of PLAR projects. They believed that deadlines would have motivated them to persevere with more speed. One participant believed that she needed this. "I think it would have been beneficial if they were more stringent with the time, like give me a bit more of a deadline".

This practice could have been perceived as retrogressive, but some participants believed it would have been a supportive practice. One participant recalled:

> They haven't really been strict with the time limit for me. They have been understanding enough to know that I'm busy, but on the other hand not having a time limit makes me put it on the back burner all the time. I'm the type of person to put things off until the last minute. When they did the assessment of my past experience and education, if I didn't feel like it this week, I'd wait until the following week, and so I'd keep putting it off.
>
> I know that an awful lot of people who were on the course with me have never finished. . . .When the college came and said it's either put up. . .a lot of them said, "Well, we can't do the work within the time frame you're telling us now". I think it was probably a mistake from the beginning in letting us go at our own speed. Some of us were slow. With [university] I've got assignment dead lines and everything; I have to work towards them.

The Essence

According to van Manen (1997) the essence is "that what makes a thing what it is (and without which it would not be what it is); that which makes a thing what it is rather that its being or becoming something else" (p. 177). Although the researcher was able to isolate each of the previously discussed themes from the narrative accounts provided by the participants, they were inextricably interrelated. Each theme is interdependent and interwoven into the complex fabric of the lived experience. The essence of what it was like for the adult learner to have experienced the awarding of academic credit through PLAR was best exemplified by the phrase "it opened doors to the future."

It was evident from the reported experiences of participants that adult learners entering the post-secondary setting bring with them a diversity of personal concerns and issues that must be addressed before they are able to make a successful transition and immerse themselves within an education program. Participants noted that if post-secondary institutions intend to take an active role as facilitators in this transition, their policies must be reflective of this notion: they must be able to open doors.

Participants reported that policies must be congruent with a philosophy that advocates for the erosion of barriers that have traditionally reduced accessibility for adult learners. PLAR reportedly minimized some of the barriers experienced by these learners and resulted in benefits, such as providing guidance in deciding an appropriate education and career choice, providing support to continue with an educational program, reducing the number of required courses, reducing the time required to complete an education program, reducing program costs, eliminating the repetition of previous learning, affirming the value of the past, and promoting self-awareness and self-confidence. Participants recounted how their experiences with PLAR had affected them as individuals and had opened doors to a future of lifelong learning.

Participants have reported that the practice of PLAR provided them with the opportunity to further their education by facilitating entry into the post-secondary setting, and by facilitating progress through a program of study.

During the interviews, participants discussed ways in which their education and careers were impacted by the availability of PLAR. From their accounts, it was evident that PLAR had provided educational opportunities that "opened doors" for them in very individualized and meaningful ways. Each participant related their story, explaining the impetus for returning to school at this time in their lives.

One participant described the impact of receiving a significant number of credits through PLAR.

> I was so lucky just to get into this program and to be able to get all those credits. . .I can't believe how far I've come. . . I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't. I often think about it. . .where I would still be.

One of the primary impediments experienced by several participants was the uncertainty of success. Uncertainty was a constant presence during the period of applying for admission into the post-secondary setting. Participants reported that it was a daunting prospect to confront the probability of one's success in an academic program. The receipt of academic credit through PLAR provided reassurance and eased anxiety. It provided them with the confidence that enabled them to proceed. Often, it was the fear of challenge that was a barrier for returning students. If they did not perceive that the supports were there to assist them, they were reluctant to pursue their chosen pathway. PLAR reportedly acted as a morale booster and provided the self-affirmation to one participant that, "I can do it." Another participant commented:

> I don't think I would have gone on had I not had the encouragement from that experience. It definitely had more to do with getting me to start,

> getting me to apply, getting me to choose to go back than when I got in there because when I got in there, I was just fearful.

Several participants indicated that PLAR had affected them on a personal level by enhancing their feelings of self-worth. They reported a lack of self-confidence initially, but the realization that others had faith in their abilities provided them with the conviction that they could succeed in the educational setting. It seemed to provide the impetus that they required in pursuit of their goals and aspirations. Two participants recalled:

> It definitely gave me more confidence to go on to get my B.A.. . . .without that I would never have dreamed of going on. . . .It just opened up something in me that it's like I'm non-stop now. . . .And from there, I'm even thinking about going on for my Masters. So, I know for me it was an eye opener, a great eye opener.

> And then when ten years later you apply to a college that had a good reputation for placing its graduates, they were telling me that I was capable of coming into this course and completing it successfully. So, I just found it to be a little bit of a boost that helped me to decide to go back to school because it was still a debate in my mind whether I should or I shouldn't start this all over again.

Two participants were dependent on receiving credit for courses through PLAR in order to gain admittance into a program of study. The course was a pre-requisite and, without it, admission would have been denied at that time. One participant noted:

> This was my lifeline. . . .This is the course that was keeping me back. If I would never have gotten a chance to do a PLA, I wouldn't be able to get into this program. That was a big thing for me because I had quit work to go back to school full time.

Most participants reported that it was a monumental decision to enter the educational arena following years of absence. Their reluctance was based on the knowledge that every facet of their lives would be affected: social relationships, family life, work responsibilities, and finances. They were aware that it would be a major commitment to persevere for the duration of their programs. Several participants admitted that they would not have had the same level of commitment without the credits they were able to earn through PLAR. Participants reported that the award of course credit for past learning provided the motivation and, in some cases, provided the essential support for them to enter the post-secondary setting. They were encouraged when they were not required to repeat learning that they perceived to be course equivalent. The ability to reduce the length of the program, the number of courses, and the costs were significant motivating factors. In the words of one participant:

> Oh, it was a clincher, if I had not been given the amount of credit that I had been given I would not have bothered because I knew I didn't want to spend any more than two years back in the school situation.
>
> What it's meant to me? It allowed me to have credit for what I did. I think if it had not allowed me to have credit for a full year, I don't think I would have bothered with it. I think I would have gone a totally different direction or I would have just built on the experience that I had achieved working with Hibernia.

Four participants, who had credited PLAR with providing the impetus for a return to the post-secondary setting, completed their diploma programs and continued on to attain degrees. Two participants spoke of fulfilling a lifelong

dream through PLAR. It had helped them to realize that the reality of obtaining a diploma was achievable and it had facilitated the attainment of their personal goals to become teachers. They reported that this process had such an impact on their self-esteem that they decided to continue with their education and to complete a university degree. One is now contemplating entry into a Master's program. Two participants recounted:

> When this opportunity came up, I said this is just a little bit closer to being a teacher. [laughter] So, this is what I went for and I said if I could get that I'm going for my degree. So, that's what I'm doing now, I'm taking my degree program through a university. . . .It gave me the courage to go on to do my B.A. and from there I'm even thinking about going on for my Masters.
>
> Academically, I've mentioned that it has given me the boost that I needed to go on because right now I'm half way through my university degree. So, it's propelled me on further and who knows maybe if I live long enough to finish it! [laugh]

Several participants had experienced personal crises and were compelled to upgrade their level of education. PLAR reportedly provided them with the reassurance that they had already mastered a portion of the learning outcomes and that it would not be an insurmountable task to complete the remainder of the program. It required a great deal of courage for them to move on, and PLAR provided them with the momentum to begin. One participant described entry into the post-secondary setting as, "A depressing feeling and a bit overwhelming". Two participants expressed similar opinions:

> For me it's been a boost so that I could go on and do other things. . . I know there are quite a few women coming back into the workforce like

> myself but when you've been out for 22 years and I had just gone through a divorce. . . .It was quite a bit at the one time and to get into that state of, I can't do anything, I can't go on, my life is here; it can be a depressing feeling. When you realize the things you've done do matter and you can get credits for them, it makes a difference.
>
> I think that's where I got so determined. When I knew that I wouldn't have to do all these 36 credits. When we first went in I said, "There's no way we'll be able to finish that like in a couple of years, thirty-six credits is just too much." When we were told that we were going to be given these credits I was thinking on the lines of maybe one or two, even three or four. I was so excited I couldn't believe it.

Five participants completed portfolios as part of the process of demonstrating prior learning. According to participants, the process empowered them by providing greater insight into the experiences that have shaped them as individuals and by facilitating their ability to plan for future education and career development. This self-reflective process guided participants in their decision to pursue specific career pathways. Two participants recollected:

> It's made me feel that I can do things, I can take on more now, I can do more courses and I think when you live in outport Newfoundland then there's not a big lot for you to challenge your mind. . . .It's sort of made me look at other courses that are around and doing more things. . .I'm doing now a diploma in the ministry.
>
> I feel it gave you encouragement to go on. . . .It made you look at things differently and realize that you can do things and that there are ways of getting education. . .I think sometimes people get stuck and they think I'm here now and there's no way I can do this. . . .I can't leave the situation, but there are alternatives out there.

For eight of the participants it was a necessity to further their education in order to meet the requirements for employment, maintain a current job position, enhance marketability for employment, enable a change in career following a

loss of employment, or enhance opportunity for future promotion. PLAR had created alternatives for these participants, the opportunity to complete programs on a part-time basis or to reduce the length of the program. This was especially significant for those who chose to maintain full-time positions of employment. This view was shared by two participants:

> It was very important. . . I couldn't go to school full time. . .I needed that extra education. . . .It was coming out even then with the government that you needed at least one worker that had Early Childhood Education training. . . .Then I was hired on with her for three years after. . . .It made a big change in my life.

> I don't think I would have gone to register for the course full time to get the diploma, if I couldn't do it by PLA. I probably wouldn't have finished at all . . . .Even though, I have a permanent job now. . .I've never been the type to stay in one place, I just like to reach for higher things all of the time and perhaps I'd like to go into management. . . .I see the value in having the diploma because I know it will probably open doors for me if I'm looking for other jobs.

Several participants viewed PLAR as an opportunity for individuals with rich workplace experience to validate learning for the purpose of certification and credentialing. They recognized certification as a necessity for maintaining or procuring employment in many work environments. Two participants concurred:

> Some of these people have been running daycare centres for years and years. . . .If they could just prove to somebody that they have the knowledge to be in a certain level I think that would be really helpful. . . . They're not going to go back to school. . . .They're probably like myself in their fifties now. . . .But the province or the registrar wants to know that they're giving a level that is meeting the requirements of childcare.

> I found it [PLAR] to be a fantastic experience, I think perhaps more of it should be done in other areas. For the early childhood educators, especially like myself in my 40's after coming into the workforce I really

> wanted my certificate in early childhood and to start from the very bottom was where I would have to start. . . .There's people out there, they know the work, and they have the skills, but they just don't have the piece of paper to say they do. And it is shameful because without that piece of paper nowadays you're nothing.

Many participants identified a sense of a responsibility to significant others as impacting on their decision to pursue an education. All of these individuals felt that their primary obligation was to family; the attainment of an education had to be compatible with their ability to meet the needs of significant others. For one participant, family responsibilities had been a barrier to re-entering the post-secondary setting on a full-time basis. Her seeking and acquiring credit for previous learning enabled her to displace a number of courses that were a requirement of her program, and this provided her with the freedom to pursue a career without leaving home and disrupting family life.

> I'm very glad that I did it. It's been very involved for me because I've also worked full time and had a family, but. . .doing it this way enabled me. . .to do it. Because I don't think, especially at that time I would have felt comfortable. . . .It gave me a chance to be able to further my education and keep the job I had at the time and be home with my family. . . .That was an important part for me. I could. . .work this course in around my life and my work experience.

It was evident that participants were opposed to the repetition of previous learning. One participant exited a program when she was refused the option of applying for further course credits through PLAR. Rather than duplicate past learning she applied for entry into another program. She explained that it was important to obtain the credentials, but also important to experience a sense of

accomplishment. If it had not been for the availability of PLAR when she transferred into the second program, she would not have proceeded with work on her diploma. For this participant it was the awarding of credits through PLAR that opened several doors into an educational pathway that enabled her to complete not one program, but two.

> It wouldn't have been a challenge [to complete the program]. . . .If I couldn't do prior learning assessment I don't think that I would have done it. I don't think I would have sat through those courses. It [PLAR] eliminated a lot of wasted time for me, and a lot of boredom for me, and it was just a way for me to accomplish my end goal.

The participants' perceptions of their lived experience were unique, and yet similar. With the exception of three individuals, who recounted some inequities with the PLAR experience, participants described how PLAR had impacted on their educational experience and afforded them with opportunities, as individuals with diverse needs and motivations. Their personal priorities varied, but they reported that their PLAR experience had provided rich and meaningful opportunities within the post-secondary setting. Consistently participants affirmed that PLAR had created options for them, which contributed to their academic success. PLAR had opened the doors to a world of lifelong learning.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to ascertain and construct through the description and perceptions of adult learners, an interpretive account of the meaning of living with PLAR. This study sought to uncover the meaning and significance of prior learning assessment for participants. It attempts to provide a description of the nature of the lived experience and insight into the essence of the phenomenon.

This chapter provides a summary of the researcher's findings and the identified themes in relation to the literature, a conclusion, and recommendations for the practice of education and research in education.

Summary

Each theme discussed within this study comprises an integral component of the adult learner's lived experience with PLAR. While each theme is distinct, they are all clearly interwoven in their relationship to create an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The experiences described by each of the participants needs to be viewed in totality in order to fully understand the value PLAR has had on their desire to progress in an educational endeavour. These are best described through the themes that resulted from this research.

The experience of participants with PLAR, as related through interviews, portray feelings of gratitude and respect for administrators, faculty, and staff who enabled them to acquire academic credit for past learning. Many of these individuals became aware of the availability of this process upon acceptance into an academic program. It was an unexpected benefit for many participants that they were qualified to access PLAR.

Initially, some participants were cautious in their use of the process, however, the support provided by the assessment team and the transparency of PLAR policies encouraged them to seek additional credit. In contrast, other participants were confident that they were eligible for credit for prior learning and were not hesitant to assert themselves when they were informed of the availability of PLAR. Although not all experiences were positive, each participant was able to recount benefits that had been accrued through PLAR. The personal advantages far outweighed the lack of support perceived by several participants.

Participants reported that through PLAR they were enabled to recognize the value in their past. In most cases, they were actively involved in the process. Assessment of prior learning has been viewed as a process that is conducted in full collaboration with the learner and relies on active involvement of the learner (Slusarchuk & Nicholl, 1990). This recognition was reportedly empowering for participants in this study and was further reinforced by the efforts of faculty and

assessors. Adult education involves the establishment of a relationship for learning between the educational institution and the learner; the methods used to promote this relationship are critical to the process (Verner, 1995). The provision of support to the participants encouraged them in their pursuit of PLAR with successive courses as they advanced through a program of study.

As participants became increasingly assured with the inherent value of their experiential learning, many reportedly experienced a renewed sense of self. The perception of many participants was that this provided the needed impetus to pursue their educational goals and aspirations. The adult learner's motivation is derived from personal goal satisfaction and need, and is promoted when adults retain some control over the learning environment (Knowles, 1984). According to some participants, PLAR erased their initial hesitation to enter the post-secondary setting, and provided the motivation for others to climb the educational ladder in pursuit of higher education.

Analysis of the participants' interviews revealed the following five themes: (1) validating the learning, (2) valuing the past, (3) encountering support, (4) facilitating personal growth, and (5) confronting and embracing time. Several of these themes were further divided into sub-themes. The essence is captured by the participants' perception of their PLAR experience as opening doors to the future, and is evident throughout the data collected in the study.

Validating the Learning

Participants related stories of their efforts to validate learning that portrayed the process and methods of assessment as rigorous, but fair. This confirms the results of a cross-Canada research project that examined the PLAR activities of colleges (Aarts et al., 1999). The findings of this study suggest that PLAR evaluative methods were challenging and were perceived to be a credible means of determining the equivalency of informal and nonformal learning. Sansregret (1995) contends that institutions have the responsibility to ensure that evaluative procedures used to assess prior learning are able to verify that learning has been acquired. The selection of an appropriate method of assessment and the competent judgment of the assessor are essential for a valid and reliable assessment.

As a result of the uniqueness of past experiential learning, participants encountered varied methods of assessment through the PLAR process. Assessors in this study commonly employed written examinations, written assignments, projects, portfolios, and performance appraisals (demonstrations) to verify learning when participants had completed courses that were not recognized for transfer credits. Bélanger and Mount (1998) report that the two most recognized methods of assessment were the challenge examination and the portfolio. Data collected by Aarts et al. (1999) identified the challenge exam as the most common method of assessment utilized by partner colleges in the

study; they had all utilized demonstrations as an assessment methodology, and only one college had not used portfolio assessment.

The predominant use of the challenge exam as the primary assessment method was attributed to the familiarity of faculty with it as a traditional mode of assessment (Aarts et al., 1999). The assessment process was reportedly a positive experience, with the exception of several participants in this study, who encountered a lack of flexibility within the educational setting to recognize learning that occurred experientially and occasionally formal learning that had occurred in other post-secondary settings.

Participants who had completed written portfolios shared the most descriptive accounts of the PLAR process. They encountered unique challenges as they attempted to validate learning, such as a lack of familiarity with the post-secondary education system and the expectations of assessors, and the amount of detail required to prove course equivalent learning. Portfolio assessment is labor intensive for the learner, but it is a valid method that forces the candidate to specifically relate learning outcomes and learning goals.

Marsh and Lasky (1984) identify one of the main disadvantages of portfolio development as the time involved for faculty to review and evaluate the document, and for students to initially prepare it and submit the necessary revisions. Writing the narrative statement was a challenge for those participants who were not familiar with the course objectives. The ability to procure direct

evidence of prior learning was an additional challenge that passing time had created. According to Butler (1993), the student is required to provide evidence of qualifications, the recency of the qualifications, the endorsement of informal learning, and evidence attesting to the attained level of competency. There is a preference for direct rather than indirect evidence, and current competency is more acceptable than historical documentation endorsed by others. Despite the dilemmas they encountered, and the length of time they required to complete the portfolio, none of the participants in this study expressed regret that they had utilized PLAR.

Participants were acceptant of assessors' requests that additional methods of assessment were sometimes required to substantiate evidence of learning. During the process of assessing prior learning the nature of what constitutes acceptable prior learning was closely prescribed by faculty. It was an arduous process for participants to provide a detailed account of past learning and accompany it with the required documentation. The completion of a portfolio demanded that participants expend a concerted effort in order to produce a quality product, which would assist them to achieve credit for prior learning. It is the responsibility of the learner to demonstrate that the learning has resulted in the appropriate balance of theory and practice and is equivalent to the outcomes of a specific course (Burke & Van Kleef, 1997; Evans, 1992). Well-defined learning outcomes are essential for the delivery of a valid assessment.

Two participants experienced situations whereby they were refused transfer credits for prior knowledge and were required to undertake formal assessments through the PLAR process. They believed that a more in-depth assessment of past learning would have revealed their eligibility for a PLAR.

Valuing the Past

To varying degrees, the notion of the educational institution formally acknowledging and valuing the past was an important aspect of the participants' experience with PLAR. By providing accreditation for experiential learning, PLAR formally recognizes that a specific body of knowledge and skill are provided credit towards vocational certification or academic credentials (Evans, 1992). PLAR formalizes acknowledgement of the value of all modalities of learning (Michelson, 1996). For some participants, PLAR was their initial awakening to recognize that past learning had educational value. These participants had no recent exposure to the post-secondary setting and had no prior knowledge of the process of PLAR.

Adult learners often enter the educational setting with life circumstances that affect their image of themselves as learners (Herbeson, 1996). They may experience uncertainty that any past learning is valid (McCormick, 1990). Herbeson (1996) metaphorically compared PLAR with the Trojan horse for its ability to transform individuals. Participants reported that as they engaged in the

process of PLAR, they gained valuable insight into past experiences and emerged with the affirmation that learning had been valued within the formal educational setting. The acknowledgement provided by the receipt of academic credit and the exemption from required courses was reported to have a powerful effect on these participants. The valuing offered through the support of faculty and others was also a strong motivator for their continued progress.

It was evident that the process of PLAR provided affirmation to participants that the past was meaningful to their present circumstance. It appeared to assist them in the realization that learning is a lifelong process; the present builds upon the learning of the past. PLAR has enabled individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and attitudes to receive credit, irrespective of how learning is achieved (Kerr, 1996). Initially, several participants viewed themselves as inadequate in comparison to the younger student population. PLAR reportedly altered their perspective and assisted them to appreciate what they could offer others based on their experiential learning.

The flexibility that existed in one post-secondary setting was an impressive display to one participant that valuing the individuality of the learner was an important element of PLAR. In one situation, the assessors realized that current policies were not applicable to the participant's unique situation and they adapted their policies to ensure that they provided maximum benefit to the learner.

For other participants, the formal acknowledgement of their past accomplishments strengthened their beliefs in the value of the past. Six participants requested credit through PLAR with the clear certainty that they should be awarded credit. They believed that it would be no advantage if they had been required to repeat learning. Many reported they would have experienced boredom, loss of personal control, and frustration if they had not been successful with PLAR. Adults spend a large portion of their lives in transition and the decision to return to education is often a response to a significant life change (Creel, 1996). These times of transition may be unplanned, undesirable, and associated with varying degrees of stress.

Adult learners in these circumstances value learning that is pragmatic in nature and is applicable to their present needs (Creel, 1996; MacKeracher, 1996). Three participants were adamant that they would not repeat past learning and transferred to another setting where they would not be required to repeat past learning. They achieved their goal of receiving a recognized diploma/degree and they benefit from the challenge of new learning.

Three participants recounted inequities with the administration of PLAR policies, two experienced this in the university setting and one in the college setting. They reported that the courses they had completed at another post-secondary setting were not always thoroughly evaluated for the purpose of transfer credit or eligibility for PLAR. One university did not have a formal PLAR

policy; it advertised a challenge for credit process. Two of the participants reported that this process was restrictive and inflexible. One participant opted to attend an alternate university and the other participant chose to attend a college, both offered the opportunity to utilize PLAR. Institutions that are too restrictive with the award of credit will exclude themselves from market opportunities in order to enhance their image of excellence (Edwards, 1997).

Encountering Support

Participants recounted the immense degree of support they were provided during the PLAR experience. Assessors and faculty, who were intimately involved with the process, offered the essential support, guidance, and motivation that encouraged participants within the educational setting. The effects of this supportive and nurturing milieu impacted upon the remainder of their educational experience. Educational practices that eased the transition of participants were reported to facilitate the learning process. According to the findings of Merriam and Clark (1993), learning is enhanced when one's life is in equilibrium. When personal and work life are in a positive balance there is likely to be a dramatic increase in the level of significant learning.

Frequently, participants reported that essential support had been provided through the positive attitude of faculty. From their initial contact with staff and faculty responsible for PLAR, they felt encouraged in the process. In a study by

Aarts et al., learners expressed appreciation for the assessors who facilitated their progress (1999). For several participants in this study, this was a vulnerable period as they proceeded with their decision to continue in a program of study.

Many participants cited personal issues that could have adversely impacted upon their continued progress. They alluded to increasing age, low feelings of self-worth, uncertainty, and financial instability as personal barriers that could have impeded their pursuits, if PLAR supports had not been available and accessible. The lives of the adult learner are complex and the realities of their life-world can exclude them from participation in education (Edwards, 1997). It was evident that participants felt they had been included in the PLAR process and perceived their relationship with faculty and staff to be of a collaborative nature. The intention of PLAR is to approach the assessment co-operatively with the learner: it is not a process that is "done" to the learner (Slusarchuk & Nicholl, 1990).

Once participants had initiated the PLAR mechanism to request credit, they reported that the standards, guidelines, and policies guiding the assessment process were accessible and transparent. The constancy of support and guidance that they received was a vital element in their continued success. The clarity of the PLAR process enabled one participant to realize that the policies did not address the uniqueness of her educational background. She

received a considerable number of credits when the policies were adapted pursuant to her inquiry. These findings were consistent with the initiatives advocated by Shaughnessy (1995) to ensure an integrated approach to PLAR within the educational system. Shaughnessy proposed the need for clearly articulated standards, learning outcome statements, collaboration amongst faculty in the assessment process, and the provision of comprehensive advising and support for the learners.

The success of participants, who had utilized the portfolio method of assessment, was credited to the availability of a portfolio development course. The detailed guidance provided by the course and continued feedback offered by faculty served as essential links in supporting participants through each phase of writing their portfolio. According to Sansregret (1995), assistance provided to the learner prior to portfolio development facilitates the establishment of the inter-relationship between past learning and future learning objectives, the transition between adult life and that of the adult student, and the clarification of future goals. Several participants commented that the encouragement from other students, who had experienced success with the portfolio, was another valued source of support.

Two participants verbalized that support was available to them, but they did not require assistance with PLAR: they were confident as they proceeded with the process.

Financial savings was another factor that was perceived by participants as supportive. In a study by Aarts et al. (1999), learners reported that PLAR had the effect of being a cost-saving measure. Several participants in this study doubted their ability to complete their programs if they had not received the financial benefits offered through PLAR. The cost may have prohibited completion of course work for these individuals. Additionally, many participants were able to maintain part-time positions as a result of the reduced workload.

There were only three participants who described experiences with PLAR in which they perceived no support. They were not encouraged to pursue PLAR in several situations, despite a challenge for credit process being listed in one university calendar. They felt it was unlikely that the assessment would be approached with consideration being given to their individual learning. A review of university calendars reveals that most universities claim to practice PLAR by offering challenge exams (Bélanger & Mount, 1998).

Facilitating Personal Growth

Participants attributed a noticeable development in their personal growth, which included self-awareness, self-confidence, and self- esteem, to the PLAR experience. The positive nature of their experience fostered significant personal growth and helped to erase personal barriers. The uncertainties and apprehensions that many participants initially felt in the post-secondary setting

were replaced with acknowledgement and valuing of past learning. Participants perceived that they were empowered by the insight of others who recognized the extent of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. These findings were consistent with a study by Aarts et al., which revealed that PLAR enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem of learners in the role of student and employee, and promoted their interest in and motivation to complete programs (1999). An important role of the educator is to assist learners to recognize the diverse learning experiences they have had during adulthood and open them to the reality that they have been active learners (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

The PLAR experience was reported to have been a definite boost to the self-esteem and self-confidence of some participants. It facilitated their transition into the educational setting by providing reassurance that they were capable of success. According to Keeton (1985), one of the more beneficial outcomes of PLAR has been the achievement of an increased self-awareness and self-esteem. The ability of the learner to become engaged in the learning task is directly related to the learner's perception of the likelihood for success (Boud, Walker, & Cohen, 1993).

Several participants in this study reported that they doubted their own motivation to continue without the encouragement of PLAR. It has been proposed that PLAR improves self-esteem and self-worth, provides recognition of existing skills and knowledge, improves motivation and performance,

promotes empowerment, facilitates the identification of future goals, and promotes a commitment to lifelong learning (Evans, 1992; Kerr, 1996). The findings of this study are consistent with these anecdotal reports.

The female participants who had completed personal portfolios reported that this experience had the effect of assisting them to realize the meaning of past learning experiences. Gathering the evidence and organizing it into a portfolio requires self-awareness and skill in self-reflection (McGrother, 1993). According to participants, they gained insight into their personal strengths, past accomplishments, and the value of their past.

This reflective process especially impacted several middle-aged female participants, as they were able to attribute value to their unpaid work experiences. It is a means to enhance academic self-esteem (Herbeson, 1996). One of the primary benefits of the portfolio for adult learners is a "revaluation of self-value", which is particularly important for women (Evans, 1992).

Many participants were returning to the post-secondary setting as a result of negative life experiences. They described how the realization that PLAR recognized learning beyond the formal setting had offered them a sense of hope for the future. The qualitative data in a separate study revealed the valuable role of PLAR in supporting adults in transition (Aarts et al., 1999).

Only two participants reported no alteration in self-perception throughout their experience with PLAR; they were fairly confident that they should be awarded credit for past learning and did not gain a renewed sense of self.

Confronting and Embracing Time

Time was a motivating factor for many participants to complete their programs of study. Several participants perceived time as an obstacle when they confronted difficulties associated with completing a portfolio. They encountered delays in the portfolio assessment process that hindered the attainment of their educational goals. The development of a portfolio created additional demands on time for some participants; it reduced time spent in an educational program, yet it demanded an extensive allotment of time for completion.

For most participants, time gained through PLAR was perceived as an element to be embraced. The receipt of credit through PLAR was a benefit to all participants by reducing course loads and/or reducing the length of a program. These findings are consistent with the data reported by Aarts et al. (1999). Institutional recognition of prior learning has encouraged adults to attend or return to college and complete a course of study in a more efficient and time-reducing manner (Schwartz & Swinerton, 1995). It facilitates progression and

avoids duplication of previous academic achievements (Evans, 1992; McGrother, 1993).

The opportunity to reduce the number of courses and to reduce the time to complete a program was a priority for many participants. Time was a constant presence to participants within the post-secondary setting. Many participants were experiencing a transition within their personal or professional lives. They were challenged to cope with pressures to upgrade their educational qualifications, resume full-time employment, or seek employment as they competed against the passing of time. The implementation of PLAR can ensure that individuals do not needlessly repeat training and learning (CLFDB, 1996).

Adult learners report that they experience, "a sense of fleeting time" (Schatz, McHugh Huber, & Spencer, 1981) and the need to proceed with life (MacKeracher, 1996). Age was a constant presence that reminded some participants in this study of the need to complete their education with expedience. The need to achieve academic qualifications within a reduced time frame was the primary motivating factor for participants. They reported that the motivation to pursue their educational goals would have been affected if they had not been able to adhere to their personal timeline.

Other participants valued the opportunities to utilize PLAR, as it provided them with additional time to devote to other courses. This was a benefit in

facilitating their adjustment to the post-secondary setting as they attempted to organize a schedule for school related activities.

Participants also valued PLAR for the additional time it allowed them to devote to their personal lives. It provided them with the opportunity to fulfill their responsibilities to family and other significant individuals. Many participants were employed on a full-time or part-time basis out of financial necessity, and they were able to maintain employment as a result of a decreased course load.

Several participants reported that the preparation for PLAR was a process that demanded a concerted effort and the devotion of considerable time. Those participants who utilized the portfolio route experienced the most notable sacrifice of time. It was an intense method of assessment; yet it yielded the greatest amount of course credits for participants.

Many participants described their experiences with PLAR as self-motivated in relation to the assigned date for completion of the assessment. Frequently, faculty did not impose deadlines for an assessment. Several participants would have preferred a more structured approach with a target date designated by faculty. They felt that they would have been more conscious of passing time and the urgency to complete their assessments with expedience.

One of the relevant observations recounted by many participants was the realization that learning was a lifelong process. Their self-perception as adult learners had been altered: they no longer envisioned themselves on the bottom

rung of the ladder of lifelong learning. They recognized that they had been constantly climbing.

Conclusions

The underlying issue for adult learners appeared to be access. Access implies a means of entry and can refer to the psychosocial and economic barriers that impede entry. It is the ability to avail of existing opportunities, in this case for learning, when the opportunities present optimal conditions for the learner.

Evans (1992) identified two gateways or doors into the educational setting that must be accessed by the adult learner. The first door is internal and is defined as the ability to assess, identify, analyze, and reflect upon one's knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. Access would be facilitated by the development of mechanisms that offer support, guidance, and direction to the learner. The second door is external and represents the ability to avail of the appropriate services and personal requirements that will support entry through this door. This study collected data to conclude that PLAR provided significant support to adult learners as they negotiated access into the post-secondary setting by informing, advising, counseling, assessing, enabling, advocating, and responding to the needs of adult learners.

The themes that were identified in this study describe the participants' experiences and were indicative of the impact of PLAR in providing access to the educational system. The participants of this study have claimed that PLAR has opened doors for them and they have attributed educational success to their PLAR experience.

Recommendations

The perspectives of participants presented within this study provide insight into issues that are relevant to the field of adult education. The findings of this study have implications for future practice and research in education.

The Practice of and Research in Education

The data collected from participants in this study indicated that adult learners respond to a learning milieu that they perceived to encourage supportive relationships and to provide security for self. The following recommendations are based on the data that has been collected and analyzed within this study:

1. Participants in this study attested to the necessity of being provided with a portfolio development course or modules. Adult learners claim that it is an essential provision for post-secondary settings to offer formal guidance to direct the process of portfolio development. The development of a portfolio is

most effectively facilitated as an academic course offered within the post-secondary setting and it is recommended that this option be available to students using portfolio assessment. Further research that better describes the experiences of students with portfolio assessment is needed.

2. Houston, Hoover, and Beer (1997) acknowledge that reflection is a critical element of portfolio development, yet many learners lack skills in this area. They advocate for the use of educational tools that will provide practice with the process of self-reflection, such as reflective journals and problem solving exercises. Data collected in this study points to a need to further study the approach utilized during the initial stages of portfolio development.
3. Participants alluded to the essential support provided by their peers within the educational setting. The use of student mentors would provide practical assistance. It is recommended that further research is needed in the manner in which student mentors, who have successfully utilized the PLAR process, could provide strategies for the completion of a comprehensive portfolio, and provide a supportive role.
4. Many participants expressed an initial lack of awareness of the availability of PLAR within the post-secondary setting. This indicates that educational settings need to provide comprehensive information on PLAR to students prior to entry into the post-secondary setting. Further investigation is needed

to explore possibilities of disseminating information, such as advertisements, websites, registration packages, and student orientation sessions.

5. The findings of this study indicate that participants were able to benefit from PLAR policies that were supportive and provided clear guidelines for assessors and students. It is recommended that more explicit documents that clearly articulate PLAR policies and guidelines be drafted and made more accessible. These documents should dictate a process that is compliant with recommended standards for practice.
6. As the practice of PLAR proceeds there must be continued emphasis on maintaining quality assessments. The foundation of a valid assessment process mandates clearly articulated learning outcome statements or terminal objectives for each course; the provision of appropriate counseling, guidance and support for adult learners; the use of valid and reliable assessment tools; and a consistent coordinated approach to PLAR within the post-secondary setting. There must be greater confidence in the validity and reliability of PLAR assessments throughout the educational system. It is recommended that these supports should be available to ensure the success of PLAR and the development of a seamless educational system.
7. There has been minimal research in education that has explored issues surrounding the practice of PLAR. The aim of this study was to further develop the base of knowledge related to student experiences with PLAR in

the post-secondary setting. The findings of this study have implications for understanding the experiences of adult learners with PLAR, and how aspects of this experience were meaningful to them. Understanding these experiences will enhance student, faculty, and administrative relationships; assist in the development of learner-focused policies; and improve educational outcomes for the adult learner. It is recommended that further studies be conducted in this area.

8. Thomas (1998) suggested that although PLAR has a thirty-year history in Canada, there is little known about the students. To date there have been minimal longitudinal studies that provide descriptive data of PLAR students, their academic achievements and their ability to relate knowledge, as compared to the traditional classroom learner. A study by Aarts et al. (1999) investigated these issues in seven Canadian colleges. It would be useful to replicate this study in university settings and in other colleges across Canada. Further research is needed to evaluate the progress and educational success of learners who have utilized PLAR.
9. Advocates suggest that the implementation of PLAR has not been embraced within the university milieu. In order to strategically plan for the future practice of PLAR it would be relevant to explore the perceptions and experiences of faculty and administration with PLAR in the university setting. It would also be prudent to explore faculty perceptions of the barriers within

the PLAR process and the initiatives that are needed to facilitate the practice of PLAR within the post-secondary setting.

10. Quantitative data are needed to provide more comprehensive information on the PLAR students. It is recommended that further research is needed to explore the number of students accessing PLAR within the post-secondary sector, the number of credits that students have been able to acquire through PLAR, the assessment methods employed, and the type of learner who accesses PLAR, including: age, sex, previous academic background, employment history, program of enrollment, and year of academic placement within a program.
11. It would also be beneficial to explore why some adult learners choose not to utilize PLAR. This data would yield vital information for the development of marketing strategies and the policies that guide the implementation of PLAR. It has been reported that the expected influx of PLAR learners has not occurred and there is a need for more active dissemination of PLAR information.
12. At the post-secondary level one of the inhibiting factors for more widespread implementation of PLAR is cost. There are many financial implications in the administration of a PLAR program, the cost of assessors, administrative costs, materials fees, and assessment fees. Some institutions reimburse assessors for the time devoted to the assessment; other institutions include

PLAR as inherent in the roles and responsibilities of faculty. This would be an area that requires additional research and would assist in budgetary projections of the institution and in soliciting government funding to support PLAR services.

Final Summary

The results of this phenomenological method of inquiry have exposed several commonalities in the experiences of the adult learner with PLAR. Participants of this study have encountered validation of learning, valuing of the past, provision of support, facilitation of personal growth, and the provision of additional time, which may be attributed to the PLAR experience. The participants of this study perceived PLAR to be a process that assisted them to attain their chosen educational credentials and opened doors into their future.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LETTER OF REQUEST TO POST-SECONDARY SETTINGS

December 7, 1997

President
College of the North Atlantic
Provincial Headquarters
P.O. Box 5400
432 Massachusetts Drive
Stephenville, NF
A2N 2Z6

Dear

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As a partial requirement for the degree of Master of Education I am conducting a research study on students who have applied for academic credit through Prior Learning Assessment. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore student experiences with Prior Learning Assessment. It is the intent of this study to contribute to the base of knowledge that may be used by educators and other individuals involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of PLA.

The sample for this study will consist of students who have utilised PLA to gain academic credit within the past year. Participants will be asked to meet with the researcher for two interview sessions of approximately 45 - 60 minutes. An open-ended interview format will be utilised and permission will be requested from the participants to audio-tape the interviews. My plan is to interview approximately 15 - 20 students from public post-secondary settings.

I am requesting your permission to approach administrative staff and faculty within the Provincial College System. I would like to request their co-operation in providing information to the students regarding this study and to subsequently release the names of interested students to me. I will then contact these students to further explain the study, answer any questions and schedule a time for the initial interview.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education and the Ethics Review Committee. All information gathered is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and the students may withdraw from the study at anytime. The results of this research will be made available to you upon request. I have enclosed for your information, a sample consent form and a sample interview guide.

I am hopeful that you will be in agreement with having these students participate in this study. If you have any concerns or wish to discuss further the nature of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 744-3034 (residence) or 737-3698 (work). If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact my thesis advisors - Dr. G. Hickman (Director of Human Resources, Memorial University) or Dr. G. Haché (Faculty of

Education, Memorial University; or Dr. Linda Phillips (Associate Dean of Graduate Programs and Research, Memorial University). I look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Centre for Nursing Studies
Littledale Complex
250 Waterford Bridge Road
St. John's, NF
A1E 1E3 E-mail ksmith@nurse.nf.ca

I,_____, President of the College of the North Atlantic, hereby give permission for students within the Provincial College System to participate in a study on "Student Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment used in the Post-Secondary Setting". This study will be conducted by Karen Smith, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education Post-Secondary Program at Memorial University. I am aware that participation is voluntary. All information is strictly confidential and the anonymity of the students will be maintained.

_____ _____

Date Signature

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF PERMISSION FROM POST-SECONDARY SETTINGS

Fwd to: Karen Smith

cc. DA
↳ District Administrator
↳ Associate DA
↳ D. Chief

December 7, 1997

President
College of the North Atlantic
Provincial Headquarters
P.O. Box 5400
432 Massachusetts Drive
Stephenville , NF.
A2N 2Z6

Dear Dr. Sparkes:

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As a partial requirement for the degree of Master of Education I am conducting a research study on students who have applied for academic credit through Prior Learning Assessment. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore student experiences with Prior Learning Assessment. It is the intent of this study to contribute to the base of knowledge which may be used by educators and other individuals involved in the development. implementation and evaluation of PLA.

The sample for this study will consist of students who have utilised PLA to apply for academic credit within the past year. Participants will be asked to meet with the researcher for two interview sessions of approximately 45 - 60 minutes. An open-ended interview format will be utilised and permission will be requested from the participants to audio-tape the interviews. My plan is to interview approximately 10-15 students from public post-secondary settings.

I am requesting your permission to approach administrative staff and faculty within the Provincial College System. I would like to request their co-operation in providing information to the students regarding this study and to subsequently release the names of interested students to me. I will then contact these students to further explain the study. answer any questions and schedule a time for the initial interview.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education Ethics Review Committee. All information gathered is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and the students may withdraw from the study at anytime. The results of this research will be made available to you upon request. I have enclosed for your information. a sample consent form and a sample interview guide.

I am hopeful that you will be in agreement with having students participate in this study. If you have any concerns or wish to discuss further the nature of the study. please do not hesitate to contact me at 744-3034 (residence) or 737-3698 (work). If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study please contact Dr.

Linda Phillips (Associate Dean of Graduate Programs and Research, Memorial University) or my thesis advisors - Dr. G. Hickman (Director of Human Resources, Memorial University) and Dr. G. Riche (Faculty of Education, Memorial University). I look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience.

Yours truly,
Karen Smith BN RN.

Karen Smith, B.N.R.N.
Centre for Nursing Studies
Littledale Complex
250 Waterford Bridge Road
St. John's, NF.
A1E 1E3

E-Mail ksmith@nurse.nf.ca

I, Dr. Ron Sparkes; President of the College of the North Atlantic, hereby give permission for students within the Provincial College System to participate in a study on "Student Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment used in the Postsecondary Setting". This study will be conducted by Karen Smith, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education post-secondary program at Memorial University. I am aware that participation is voluntary. All information is strictly confidential and the anonymity of the students will be maintained.

Dec 12/97.
Date

Signature

May 10, 1998

Director
Littledale Complex
Centre for Nursing Studies
250 Waterford Bridge Road
St. John's, NF
A1N 2E3

Dear Mrs. Daley:

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As a partial requirement for the degree of Master of Education I am conducting a research study on students who have applied for academic credit through Prior Learning Assessment. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore student experiences with Prior Learning Assessment. It is the intent of this study to contribute to the base of knowledge which may be used by educators and other individuals involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of PLA.

The sample for this study will consist of students who have utilised PLA to gain academic credit within the past year. Participants will be asked to meet with the researcher for two interview sessions of approximately 45 - 60 minutes. An open-ended interview format will be utilised and permission will be requested from the participants to audio-tape the interviews. My plan is to interview approximately 15 - 20 students from public post-secondary settings.

I am requesting your permission to approach administrative staff and faculty within the Centre for Nursing Studies. I would like to request their co-operation in providing information to the students regarding this study and to subsequently release the names of interested students to me. I will then contact these students to further explain the study, answer any questions and schedule a time for the initial interview.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education and the Ethics Review Committee. All information gathered is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and the students may withdraw from the study at anytime. The results of this research will be made available to you upon request. I have enclosed for your information, a sample consent form and a sample interview guide.

I am hopeful that you will be in agreement with having these students participate in this study. If you have any concerns or wish to discuss further the nature of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 744-3034 (residence) or 737-3698 (work). If at any time you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, please contact my thesis advisors - Dr. G. Hickman(Director of Human Resources, Memorial University) or Dr. G. Haché(Faculty of Education, Memorial University); or Dr. Linda Phillips (Associate Dean of Graduate Programs

and Research, Memorial University). I look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,
Karen Smith

Karen Smith, B.N. R.N
Centre for Nursing Studies
Littledale Complex
250 Waterford Bridge Road
St. John's, NF
A1E 1E3

I, Mrs. Katherine Daley, Director of the Centre for Nursing Studies, hereby give permission for students within the Centre for Nursing Studies to participate in a study on "Student Experiences with Prior Learning Assessment used in the Post-Secondary Setting". This study will be conducted by Karen Smith, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education Post-Secondary Program at Memorial University. I am aware that participation is voluntary. All information is strictly confidential and the anonymity of the students will be maintained.

Date

Signature

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: Student Perspectives on the Experience of Prior Learning Assessment ascertained in a Phenomenological Study

INVESTIGATOR: Karen Smith, B.N., R.N. 737-3698

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As part of the requirements of the Master's of Education program I have chosen to investigate student views on Prior Learning Assessment from your experience with this process.

As a student who has demonstrated interest in this research study your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decide to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

All information disclosed during the interview process will remain confidential. If you have any concerns during the course of this study I will be available or you may contact my thesis advisors Dr. G. Hickman (Director, Human Resources, Memorial University) and Dr. G. Hache (Faculty of Education, Memorial University); or Dr. Linda Phillips (Associate Dean of Graduate Programs and Research).

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of students with the PLA process. The findings will provide insight into the benefits and negative aspects of PLA as perceived by the student.

Procedure for Information Gathering: The researcher will conduct unstructured interviews that will be divided into two phases lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes duration. The first interview will allow the collection of background information and provide an opportunity to clarify the purpose of the study. During the second session you will be asked to talk about your experiences with the PLA process. I will request permission to audio-tape these interviews and make a written copy of the recordings.

Duration of Participant Involvement: Interviews will be scheduled within 4 - 8 weeks following notification of your intent to participate in this study. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience in a setting of your preference. During the process of reviewing the collected data it may be necessary to contact you for a third interview for the purpose of further exploring specific issues.

Potential Risks: There are no potential risks in relation to your educational or career goals. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained at all times.

Potential Benefits of Participation: There are no obvious benefits that are directly related to participation in this study. It is hoped that the knowledge gained through the results of this study will create an awareness of the effects of PLA on the adult learner. A copy of the research results will be provided upon request.

Anonymity: Your anonymity in this study will be maintained by identifying the written copies of the interviews through the use of code numbers and the absence of identifying information in the written report of the study.

Confidentiality: This will be maintained by securing consent forms, audiotapes, transcripts and other identifying information in a locked file. The data will only be shared with members of the thesis committee for the purpose of guidance and verification. Subsequently all data will be destroyed following completion of the research study.

I, _____, the undersigned, hereby agree to participate in a research study describing the experiences of students with PLA. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary. The confidentiality of all information will be maintained and the anonymity of all participants in the written report.

_____ _____

Date Signature of Participant

I have explained the nature of this research study to the participant and have clarified any questions posed by the participant. The consent to participate has been voluntary and explanations have been provided as to the procedures used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

_____ _____

Date Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

Demographic Data

Age: Place of Residence:

Sex: Marital Status:

Describe the program in which you are currently enrolled and future education plans:

Previous Educational Background:

(start with most recent education institution, type of program, number of years of program completed and dates)

Employment History:

(start with most recent place of employment, position, type of work and dates)

Amount of Credit Received Through PLA (to date):

Method of Assessment Used to Obtain Credit:

List any unsuccessful attempts to gain credit through PLA (include courses, dates and the reason they were unsuccessful):

APPENDIX E: LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM THE ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE, FACULTY OF EDUCATION, MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND

Memorial
University of Newfoundland

Faculty of Education

April 9, 1997

Dear Karen,

After reviewing your proposal submission, the ethics review committee finds the proposal to meet the guidelines for research, conditional upon the following changes:

- include the name of a third party contact not associated with the study (typically Pat Canning, Associate Dean of Graduate Programmes and Research)
- a statement of assurance that tape recorded material will be appropriately disposed of at the end of the study
- a stronger statement of confidentiality and anonymity in the letter to research participants

We wish you all the best in your research.

Sincerely,

T. Seifert
Ethics Review Committee

cc: George Hickman, George Hache

[illegible]

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

The following questions will be used as a guide to facilitate the interview if the participant requires prompting to explore his her experience. The interview will be initiated with the following dialogue:

During our first interview I explained that I am interested in knowing about your experience as a student who has used PLA to gain credit for past learning. I would like you to share any thoughts you have regarding your experience. If you would begin from the time you initially heard about PLA and tell me about your experiences since then. Use your own words and feel free to talk about whatever comes to mind.

Guiding Questions to Focus the interview

1. How did you first find out about PLA?

2. Why did you decide to apply for PLA?

3. What benefits did you hope that PLA would be able to offer you?

4. Describe what you had to do when you applied for PLA?

5. Describe the information you were given
   a) verbal
   b) written
   c) both

6. Who played a role during the assessment of your prior learning?

7. Describe the role of these individuals during your assessment.

8. Can you describe what type of assistance these individuals provided?

9. Can you describe any sources of support that were available to you?
   a) Who was most helpful?
   b) What was most helpful?
   c) How did this affect you?

10. Can you describe any difficulties you experienced?
    a) Who was the least helpful?
    b) What was the least helpful?
    c) How did this affect you?
    d) How could these difficulties have been prevented?

11. How much credit were you awarded through PLA?

12. How did you feel when you were told the result of the assessment decision?

13. Did you feel that it was a fair assessment?

14. If not, did you follow the appeals process?

15. Were you satisfied with the result of the appeal process?

16. Has PLA affected your educational experience in any way?
    a) If so, how has it affected your educational experience?

17. Has PLA affected you personally in any way?
    a) If so, how has it affected you personally?

18. Can you describe any changes you would like to see with PLA?

19. Are there any other thoughts, feelings or comments that you would like to share with me about your experience with PLA?

Throughout the interview I will clarify any responses and or elicit further detail through the use of reflection by comments such as:

Can you explain what you meant by.....?
Are there any other comments you have concerning.....?

APPENDIX G: LETTER TO PROVINCIAL PLAR COORDINATOR

December 4,1997

Provincial PLA Coordinator
Newfoundland and Labrador Council on Higher Education
Confederation Building
3rd Floor, West Block
P.O. Box 8700
St. John's, NF.
A1B 4J6

Dear Ms. Evans:

As a partial requirement for the degree of Master of Education I am conducting a research study on students who have applied for academic credit through Prior Learning Assessment within the post-secondary setting. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore student experiences with PLA. It is the intent of this study to contribute to the base of knowledge that may be used by educators and other individuals involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of PLA.

The sample for this study will consist of students who have utilized PLA to gain academic credit within the past year. Participants will be asked to meet with the researcher for two interview sessions of approximately 45-60 minutes. An open-ended interview format will be utilized and permission will be requested from the participants to audio-tape the interviews. My plan is to interview approximately 10-15 students from public post-secondary settings.

Although I am utilizing a semi-structured interview to explore student experiences I have developed a " draft " questionnaire to facilitate the interview. I would like to request your opinion, as an expert in the field of PLA, as to the appropriateness of these questions in prompting the participants to share their thoughts, perceptions and feelings. I would greatly appreciate your co-operation and I will look forward to your comments. Once the recommended revisions have been made a pilot interview will be conducted.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education Ethics Review Committee. All information gathered is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and the students may withdraw from the study at anytime. The results of this research will be made available to you upon request.

I have enclosed a copy of my research proposal, which includes the interview guide.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss further the nature of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 744-3034 (residence) or 737-3698 (work). I look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience. Thank-you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Karen Smith
Centre for Nursing Studies
250 Waterford Bridge Road
St. John's, NF.
A1N 2E3