

List of Available Resources

For further information about PLAR and the S&Gs, there are several websites, an email address and some written materials that can help. A few are listed below.

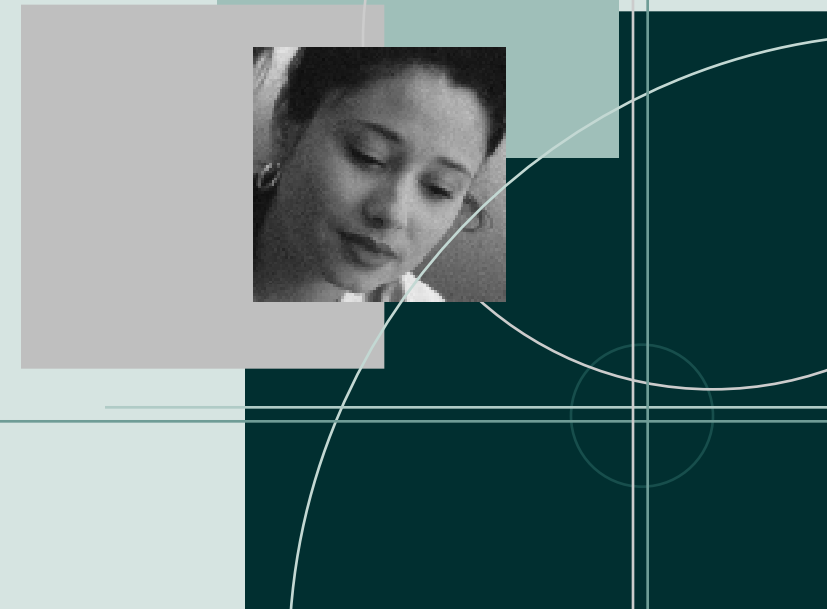
- www.career-dev-guidelines.org provides access to historical and current materials and updates on all aspects of the S&Gs initiative.
- <http://car-dev-car.savie.ca> is the online assessment tool that walks you through identifying and documenting your S&Gs competencies, developing a professional development plan and tracking your progress over time.
- www.capla.ca is the website of the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment. Among its publications is the booklet, "Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition". This document and other related materials can be requested from CAPLA at P.O. Box 20135, Belleville, ON K8N 5V1.
- www.placentre.ns.ca This site, from an organization in Halifax, provides interesting information and links on PLAR.
- <http://www.nsc.ca/lrc/newsite2/pathfinders/path-portfolio.htm> This site is dedicated to portfolio development and contains links to library databases, world-wide web resources, library collections, reference materials and more.
- <http://www.extension.usask.ca/ExtensionDivision/resources/PLAR/figure1.html> This is a comprehensive site offering a definition of PLAR, historical background, provincial links, resources, learner profiles, a glossary of PLAR terms and frequently asked questions and answers.
- <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca> provides a variety of useful written material on PLAR, including an annotated bibliography, descriptions of PLAR methods, and articles.
- Mandell, A. & Michelson, E. (1990). **Portfolio development & adult learning: Purposes and strategies**. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.
- Whitaker, U. (1989). **Assessing learning: Standards, principles, and procedures**. Philadelphia, PA: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.
- Lamdin, L. (1996). **Earn college credit for what you know** (2nd edition). Chicago: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

Further information can be obtained from

The Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners

P.O. Box 67007
Ottawa, Ontario
K2A 4E4
<http://www.career-dev-guidelines.org>
information@ccdf.ca

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THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Applying Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) to Professional Growth and Recognition

The National Steering Committee of the Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Sandra Aarts, S.K. Aarts and Associates and Bonnie Kennedy, Executive Director, CAPLA, to this publication.

Participation in ongoing learning is now accepted as essential for continued successful participation in the workforce. A well developed and implemented Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) system is increasingly being recognized as an important ingredient in a successful lifelong learning system which citizens should be able to access throughout their lifespans. PLAR is however a relatively new discipline (since only the 70's) and is still not generally widely understood and used. It is not yet positioned and integrated within career development practice.

How do PLAR and Career Development Practice connect?

Career Development Practitioners, through their work with clients, have an influence on the degree to which people decide to connect or reconnect with learning, training and upskilling. Career Development Practitioners work to build motivation, hope and confidence in the capacity of people to learn and relearn.

PLAR processes encourage citizens to identify what they already know, find evidence to substantiate that they can demonstrate their knowledge and help build the personal confidence individuals need to invest in further learning.

Career Development Practitioners who are able to apply and teach PLAR processes to clients can be very important influencers in helping individuals access learning and training and in doing so, build a lifelong learning system which works better for all citizens. PLAR processes can strongly support the work of Career Development Practitioners.

People learn in all kinds of ways – formal, informal and non-formal. With formal learning (education and training systems), it has been easy to get recognition for learning accomplished. Success on exams is accepted as evidence of learning; skill demonstrations are concrete evidence that learning has been acquired. However, with informal and non-formal learning, providing evidence and getting recognition for learning are not so easy. People learn on the job, from each other, as a result of volunteer work and of course from life. How to prove this kind of learning is less “obvious” but the learning acquired is not less valid.

Many Career Development Practitioners have acquired their professional development and specialized competencies as a result of all three types of learning. Many know first hand the challenge of “proving” their own informal learning, whether for a competition, or for acquiring some academic equivalency. These practitioners well understand the challenges faced by their clients who are also required to “prove” their informal learning to institutions or employers. Career Development Practitioners who actually undertake this challenge, regardless of the outcome for themselves, acquire knowledge and skills which are directly transferable to work with clients. Those who formally study and add PLAR to their existing competencies value add substantially to their practice.

This brief guide is intended to get Career Development Practitioners thinking about PLAR for themselves and for their clients. It is an overview to help get started by:

- Introducing and explaining PLAR and its potential benefits;
- Outlining suggested steps for using a PLAR process with the Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (S&Gs) as tools for personal and professional development;
- Discussing the challenges and opportunities of using PLAR in Career Development practice; and
- Suggesting additional supports and resources.

A portfolio is an organized collection of materials that records an individual's learning achievements and relates them to personal, occupational and learning goals. A portfolio process helps you remember the learning experiences you have had in the past so that all your knowledge, skills and abilities can be uncovered.

There are three essential portfolio components:

- **1) A goals paper** – goal setting is a very important step in the prior learning assessment process. Clearly defined goals (professional, educational or learning goals and personal goals) provide a road map for future accomplishments and assist individuals in determining exactly which learning should be presented and verified in the portfolio.

For example:

- a) Kelly has identified (in a goals paper) that within the next 5 months s/he will apply for a position of increased responsibility within his/her current place of employment;
- b) through research s/he has determined the specific job to apply for;
- c) knowing the requirements of the job, s/he is now ready, through the portfolio process, to identify past learning experiences and to identify and document learning that demonstrates that s/he meets (and perhaps surpasses) the entrance requirements for the job.

- **2) Learning outcomes and/or competency statements** - learning outcome or competency statements are clear and concise statements describing the learning (knowledge, skills, attributes) that has been acquired through various experiences. For the purpose of this example let's assume that, among other things the job requires competence in the area of specialization, Group Facilitation, as defined in the S&Gs.

SSC2.1, (Facilitating Groups) and Facilitated and Individual Group Learning (S2) Pages 57 & 61, Canadian Standards and Guidelines.

- d) Kelly will reflect on the knowledge and skills that are outlined under each of the two areas (SSC2.1 and S2) in the Canadian Standards and Guidelines and will then identify past experiences through which s/ he has acquired the knowledge and skills as outlined in the S&G;
- e) S/He will now proceed to write clear concise statements that describe learning in relation to the competencies to be demonstrated (facilitating groups and facilitated and individual group learning).

- **3) Documentation that substantiates your learning claims** - documentation provides the evidence that you have achieved and are currently competent in the learning you are claiming.

- f) Because all learning claimed in the portfolio must be documented, Kelly will gather evidence to verify learning. This evidence could include audio or video taped sessions of Kelly facilitating groups, an essay where Kelly describes the principles of group facilitation, and explores the stages of group development and the various roles group members assume while participating in the group. Third party validation letters written by supervisors to attest to the fact that Kelly indeed demonstrates the competencies (learning) that s/he is claiming to possess add solid evidence of competence to the documentation.

Typically, optional portfolio components include a chronological record of significant learning experiences, an autobiographical narrative, a resumé and the external benchmarks or standards against which you want your learning assessed. When preparing their own portfolios, practitioners may find it useful to use the guide prepared by the Career Development Association of Alberta, available from The Career Shop at www.alis.gov.ab.ca/careershop.

- A portfolio is seen as an appropriate tool for beginning the reflective process for career practitioners because:

- It is an efficient, systematic tool for describing, in detail, evidence to support competence in relation to the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for effective career development practice;
- It is a concrete, practical way of demonstrating one's current competence and it provides a process and framework with which to record and document one's ongoing personal and professional development;
- You are the best person to identify your knowledge and skills and to identify your learning needs;
- Patterns of experiential learning are unique to the individual. Portfolio processes lead to uniquely individual assessments;
- Once completed, your portfolio can be used for other assessment purposes such as challenging courses and programs within colleges and universities, and as a valuable resource in the job search process;
- Career practitioners must 'walk the talk' and be prepared to manage their own careers through keeping their personal learning portfolios up to date for their own job security and mobility.

From a present and future perspective, the portfolio can be conceived as an ongoing plan in which the individual establishes goals, shows evidence of reaching the goals, reflects on and analyzes changing skills and knowledge, and sets out areas for further workplace learning. (Stewart, John B., *Using Portfolios to Direct Workplace Learning*, University of New Brunswick.)

Testimonials

from Career Practitioners

This guidebook has introduced and explained PLAR and its potential benefits for Career Development Practitioners. Suggested steps in using PLAR with the S&Gs have been outlined. To help you further consider the personal and professional value of PLAR to your own situation, here are comments from other career practitioners in the country who have used PLAR and the S&Gs:

"I found the opportunity to provide evidence challenging the competencies in the S&Gs to be very confirming."

"Using the unique PLAR portfolio approach to address competencies has been a challenging and rewarding experience. Not only identifying, but placing professional value on formal and informal learning was an empowering and satisfying experience. It has been time well spent both professionally and personally."

"It was gratifying to go through this process and realize that I am able to provide proof of my skills and knowledge. But it reminded me that there is always a need to continue to develop my abilities, to ensure that I continue to be aware of my own learning, and to ensure that I keep the documentation that will provide evidence of that learning. Each individual needs, more than ever, to take responsibility for their own learning and the proof thereof."

"Having completed the competency portfolio has not only empowered me to strive to achieve goals in this profession, which I would never have set for myself in the past; but it has enhanced my own recognition of the potential I truly have within me."

"Challenging the S&Gs via PLAR provided an invaluable framework for identifying and validating critical competencies that had previously been subsumed within the context of a broader career path. Finally, I could confidently assert my role as a career practitioner."

*"Iroquoian people believe that the decisions made today will affect seven generations into the future. Therefore, all (your) decisions and the actions that result must be deliberated with the utmost care and intention. Learning is a life-long process ... what (you) decide today will definitely impact (you) in the future."
(an excerpt from http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/-plar/values/first_nations.html).*

What is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition ?

The Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners define PLAR as, **"a systematic process that involves the identification, assessment, documentation and recognition of competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that have been developed through many formal and informal means."**

The belief that learning only takes place in formal educational settings, with a teacher in the classroom has been replaced with an understanding that virtually any experience can lead to learning. For example, career practitioners learn:

- On the job
- From reading and studying independently
- As a result of their volunteer work
- By taking courses offered in the community and at work
- From significant life experiences

Each component in the PLAR definition is important. Let's look at each:

Identification

identifying learning that has resulted from experience, be it formal or informal, and being able to document it so it is accessible to self and others. This is often very difficult as people have a tendency to not recognize or credit the extent of their own learning or even to acknowledge that their experiences have resulted in real learning.

Assessment

Two main types of assessment, self and external, are part of PLAR depending on one's goals for using PLAR:

- **Self-assessment:** includes not just one's own subjective opinion, but gathering "evidence" or "proof" that competencies have been acquired and can be demonstrated; and/or
- **External assessment:** objective examination by an assessor of the evidence provided as a basis for making some decision related to equivalency of learning.

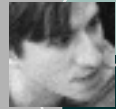
Documentation

Evidence gathering is often the most challenging part of PLAR but is absolutely essential. It is answering the question, "What proof can I provide that I actually "do know" and "can demonstrate"? Work samples, evaluations, certificates, letters of endorsement, course credits and videotapes are all potential sources of proof.

Recognition

Two types of recognition are part of PLAR depending on goals:

- **Personal recognition:** a boost to self-esteem and a practical basis on which to build an appropriate professional development plan; and
- **External recognition:** receiving from an outside party some level of credit or equivalency for acquired learning.



Here are some examples of PLAR in practice:

When applying for a job or seeking job mobility within their current workplace, Career Development Practitioners may use PLAR as a significant tool to demonstrate competence, giving evidence of their essential skills related to current and future employment.

(N.B.: Career Development Practitioners knowledgeable in PLAR can assist clients to do the same thing when they are applying for jobs or job mobility.)

Career Development Practitioners may wish to complete some level of education (college, university, or occupational designation) that may have been left unfinished or may be required as a prerequisite for employment or career advancement. They may use PLAR to have their relevant learning from all informal sources recognized and evaluated against the learning outcomes of the courses, programs or certificates at the post-secondary institutions they have chosen.

(N.B.: Career Development Practitioners can assist clients to begin this same process to complete their own incomplete learning goals.)

Immigrants who want to work in Canada can use PLAR as a means of demonstrating what they know and can do. If formal credentials from another country need to be supported by evidence of competent practice, PLAR tools can be used to ascertain that occupational standards have been met.

(N.B.: Career Development Practitioners working with immigrant populations can lend strong support to this process.)

When service personnel leave active duty, they want to be sure that the knowledge and skills acquired in the military will be recognized in the civilian labour force and amongst non-military accrediting bodies. Wasting time and money is not an option for most adult learners with work and family responsibilities, yet not having a credential is a distinct disadvantage in a knowledge economy. PLAR practices provide the means of having all learning considered and no learning wasted. This same principle applies to all individuals with significant work experience who change their field of work.

Professions and trades may use PLAR to ensure the competence of applicants, many of whom are foreign-trained. Academic institutions may recognize experiential learning for the purpose of granting credit.



Challenges of PLAR Applied to the S&Gs

There are two major challenges facing you as you prepare to engage in PLAR. The first is to acquire the ability to reflect on your past experience and identify the learning that has resulted from those experiences. In the PLAR process, learning is credited, experience is not.

The second challenge is to find ways to verify that the learning you are claiming has in fact taken place. Verifying informal and non-formal learning through documentation is always challenging. Remember, it is not what you have done that is the focus of PLAR, but **what you have learned** from what you have done.

Opportunities of PLAR Applied to the S&Gs

Support for PLAR is growing and the expertise on how to apply PLAR to the S&Gs is also expanding. This opens opportunities for Career Development Practitioners. Given that the S&Gs were delivered to the career development field in 2001, you can consider yourself an innovator in applying these guidelines to PLAR. By engaging in the PLAR process you can become a pioneer in advancing the application of PLAR within career development practice. In addition to adding PLAR skill sets to your own professional practice you will find that you are a stronger resource to your clients and your peers as you share your developing PLAR expertise with them.

If you decide to add PLAR competencies to your career development competencies, there are opportunities for additional training and certification in the field as well as emerging career opportunities. You may wish to join a professional association like the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA: www.capla.ca) where you will have the opportunity to meet PLAR professionals from across Canada and to participate in conferences, workshops and other activities dedicated to developing effective practices.

Developing an excellent and accessible lifelong learning system is a high priority in Canada. Evidence-based practice and standards of service are also increasingly high priorities in many fields, including career development.

Consider that your personal and professional future can be closely connected to developments around PLAR and the S&Gs in Canada. Both are extremely valuable tools whereby career practitioners can expand their own professional roles, the contribution of the sector as a whole, and its recognition outside the career development sector.



Steps 5 and 6 are the core of the PLAR

5 Identify and Assess the learning

The questions to be answered are:

- What did I learn?
- How well did I learn it?
- How did I learn it?
- How have I demonstrated that my learning has sufficient breadth and depth to meet the standards I am trying to achieve?
- Where did I learn it?
- Why did I learn it?

The purpose of the assessment is to determine if your learning meets accepted standards. Knowledge and understanding are critical to competent performance. It is important to be rigorous in your assessment of the areas in which you are competent, and those that you would like to develop or improve.

6 Prepare Documentation (Evidence of Learning)

Many of us can prepare documentation of experience but documentation of learning is much more difficult to obtain. Here are some samples of strong documentation:

- Samples of your work, on paper or a computer disk; audio or video tapes of interviews with clients and/or workshops conducted; products or tools you may have created to assist clients; case notes and copies of client action or training plans;
- Letters of verification – letters written by your supervisors who are competent professionals in your field;
- Job descriptions and evaluations;
- Certificates of training, awards and licenses;
- Copies of formal academic certificates, degrees, diplomas;
- Letters of corroboration from co-workers and clients served;
- A professional portfolio where you may organize and index documentation that clearly reflects or demonstrates what you know and can do relevant to the area in focus. (Learn more about the portfolio in Appendix A of this Guide)

7 Locate resources to assist you as you go through the process

There are groups and individuals across Canada involved in PLAR and there may be structured portfolio development courses offered by academic institutions in your geographic location or on-line. (*A current list of PLAR resources can be found on the back cover of this guide.*) Most people find it best to conduct their own research to find helpful resources and contacts. Contact professional associations, universities or other educational institutions.

8 Enjoy the results of your efforts!

You will have experienced tangible and intangible benefits. You will likely have renewed sense of confidence. You will have created the opportunity to gain a greater sense of professional satisfaction both through professional growth that results from self assessment and by opportunities to now transfer everything you have learned through the PLAR process to increase your effectiveness and usefulness with clients.



Current PLAR research studies clearly demonstrate that individuals who engage in PLAR experience both tangible and intangible outcomes.

The tangible outcomes of a PLAR process range from the short-term goal of gaining new insights into professional practice to the long-term goal of advancing career possibilities. PLAR may enable individuals to:

- Assess and verify developing knowledge and skills;
- Identify gaps in competencies that can be addressed in practical ways, for example through training or participation in a mentorship program;
- Formulate a learning plan that is tailored to learning needs and take a proactive approach to training and professional development;
- Develop a portfolio that demonstrates competencies and documents learning over time;
- Seek formal recognition from an employer, educational institution or professional body;
- Acquire valuable, practical tools, and apply newly acquired PLAR knowledge and skills to personal practice with clients.

The intangible outcomes include the sense of confidence and self-knowledge that come from engaging in a process of self-examination and developing a better appreciation of one's achievements. Individuals may, for example:

- Experience a sense of accomplishment as a result of having undertaken a more reflective and investigative look into competencies as a career practitioner, and in turn be able to take proactive steps in support of personal career development;
- Feel empowered based on new insights gained about personal learning and potential for growth;
- Achieve a greater sense of professional satisfaction. Having gathered a total picture of competencies, individuals can be much more certain of the standards they meet and be motivated to raise them higher.

The tangible and intangible benefits which a PLAR process provides to individual practitioners can also be applied to organizations and to clients of their services.

Here are steps to consider

1 **Review and understand the S&Gs**

Review the 4-sided document entitled “The Canadian Standards for Career Development Practitioners: A Quick Overview”, found in the marketing kit of the S&Gs entitled “Stepping Forward” and on the website at www.career-dev-guidelines.org. The Overview provides an introduction to the S&Gs and prepares you for a more in-depth reading of the competencies you select for your assessment.

2 **Clarify what you want as a result of engaging in PLAR using the S&Gs; knowing specifically the desired goal is essential to the process.**

For example:

Personal Learning Plan - this will require:

- deciding what competencies are of most importance and interest;
- doing a rigorous and thorough self-assessment of those competencies;
- looking at the differences between existing and desired competencies; and
- researching the best way to fill the learning gaps.

Taking Charge, the on-line interactive tool is designed for this purpose (<http://car-dev-car.savie.ca>). Career Development Practitioners might also decide to gather evidence of these competencies and assemble them in a file or a portfolio.

Organizational Recognition

Other Career Development Practitioners may have the goal of organizational recognition by being able to compete for a position, which traditionally requires academic qualifications. This goal will require:

- a rigorous self-assessment using Taking Charge (or an alternative); and
- a focus on documenting evidence of equivalent competencies. These may include videotaped interviews; co-worker and supervisor statements; client evaluations; a personal narrative describing the learning and how it was acquired. Career Development Practitioners who wish to do this will want to ensure that those responsible for staffing understand the PLAR process, have the authority and are sufficiently informed about PLAR to accept PLA evidence in the competitive process.

Equivalency Recognition

Other Career Development Practitioners may want to pursue a formal degree or diploma program in career development but perhaps do not want to start at the beginning. They may be certain all the in-service training they have pursued as well as their own professional development has resulted in them already having many of the competencies covered by a number of the course requirements. They may want to acquire some equivalent credit so that they invest time in new learning rather than repeating learning. Their process would include the steps followed in the Organizational Recognition example above, as well as:

- discussing their plan with the program head or administrator; and
- getting agreement in advance on the evidence that will be acceptable as well as the maximum number of equivalent credits the institution is willing to grant.

Advocacy

Career Development Practitioners may want to advocate with local training institutions as a means of helping clients who have a great deal of relevant learning but not the traditionally demanded prerequisites to gain entry to an advanced training program. They would need to:

- negotiate and come to agreement on what evidence the institution will require to allow entry;
- compile and document the evidence; and
- follow-through with the training institution.

It is important to be very clear about the goal and who else needs to agree to the goal and the procedures so that energy is not invested poorly by doing too much, too little or doing, from the institution's point of view, the wrong thing which will not be recognized, (the “R” in the PLAR process). It is very important that these procedures and protections be negotiated and agreed upon. Being clear on the goal is critical to both selecting the right process and achieving the desired outcome.

3 **Focus on the competencies relevant to your goal**

Don't gather competencies you don't need for the task at hand. When preparing a resumé you only include information relevant to the job description for which you are applying; the same is true in demonstrating competencies - competencies should be targeted toward the standards you are trying to demonstrate.

4 **Create support systems**

Perhaps there are others of like mind in your community with whom you can exchange information, find mutual support and develop a network. One or more of your colleagues may wish to enter into this process with you. Adults who have completed the process report that working in pairs or small groups has many benefits such as increasing motivation, enhancing the learning process, and making the process more enjoyable.