



Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition with Young at risk Adults Project Final Report November 2008

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition with Young at risk Adults project was completed in November of 2008. A total of 14 venues participated in the project with 98 participants involved including 61 who followed through to complete the PLAR activities.

Results and Conclusions

The goal of the PLAR with young at risk adults' project was to assess the impact of PLAR with this population. In an earlier project, Darville, Coombs and Baker – McDonald had theorized that the outcome of PLAR for young at risk adults should be the participant's articulateness about their strengths. They believed that this would include the participant's experience, learning, skills and abilities and serve three purposes:

1. it could provide the basis for the preparation of a worthwhile resume in the marketplace;
2. it could articulate further education and training plans for participants; and
3. it could enable the participants to more effectively network to locate jobs that are not posted or advertised.

Our research showed that young at risk adults are usually disillusioned with their education or career prospects, lack motivation, have limited economic prospects, lack basic supports, and perceive they have a lack of skills. Thus young at risk adults do not enter a PLAR process with a clear goal in mind and lack the motivation to strive towards setting that goal. Therefore the PLAR with young at risk adults' project focused on a practitioner driven process that worked with the participant to identify their skills, assist them to clarify and set goals, and build self confidence.

The PLAR process utilized in this project, a life review interview, however, was not a short one. It required commitment and effort on the part of the venue practitioner. The final product – the Portfolio Builder - was developed

by the practitioner and presented to the participant as tangible evidence of their skills and a starting place for further portfolio development. The Portfolio Builder was left with the young adult to use or not use at their discretion. As such there was much discussion based around the issue of whether the result of implementing PLAR was worth the effort and time it required.

PLAR is what you value, what you know and what you can do.

The challenges that young at risk adults have faced in their lives result in strong values, a wealth of knowledge and the ability to do many things. Therefore PLAR should apply to this population and potentially have a strong impact in their lives.

The results of the project revealed that for those clients who were 'at risk' - lacked a clear focus or goal for future education or career direction and who also lacked the ability and/or motivation to set that goal - PLAR was effective in building motivation, identifying skills, and encouraging the young adult to set and move towards a goal. Through the PLAR process, venues reported that the PLAR practitioner was in a position to have a positive influence in the life of the participant. For young at risk adults who are use to having their faults and failures pointed out, the opportunity for positive influence both through verbal presentation in the PLAR process and written confirmation through the Portfolio Builder, did have a positive impact on their self recognition. This was demonstrated in the reactions and comments of the participants who expressed their surprise and appreciation in having their skills recognized. They also expressed appreciation to receive the Portfolio Builder as a final product that they were able to walk away with as well as comments that reflected their understanding of ways they could use the Portfolio Builder in their lives.

Practitioners reflected that participating in the PLAR process assisted them in gaining a greater understanding of PLAR and the role it played in the lives of young at risk adults. In addition, through the project questionnaires and conversations with the project staff, the venues practitioners shared that PLAR provided them with insight into the lives of their clients, a greater understanding of the challenges their clients faced, and an increased ability to identify the skills resulting from those challenges. Practitioners expressed that, in their opinion, the Portfolio Builder helped the participants to clarify their strengths, skills, and learning. Practitioners shared that the Portfolio Builder also provided them with a tool s/he could use with their clients as part of resume development. Furthermore, they expressed that the follow up meeting, in which the Portfolio Builder was presented, provided a means of sharing referrals to job sources or resources with the participant that were not posted in areas that the participants would commonly reference in a job search.

The young at risk adult participants also expressed a positive experience with the PLAR process. Participants who completed the process expressed gaining knowledge of PLAR, essential skills, values, and awareness of their personal skills through the process. Participants also expressed gaining self recognition through participating in the project which resulted in a positive impact on their ability to describe their strengths and skills. In the final section of the process where the young at risk adults received the Portfolio Builder, the participant frequently commented on the potential of the information to be used in the development of his or her resume or when preparing for a job interview.

Overall, the results of the PLAR with Young at risk adults' project showed that PLAR did have a positive impact on the ability of young at risk adults to describe their strengths and skills. Furthermore the process assisted the young at risk adults in:

1. developing and preparing a resume based on their skills, values, and learning (by referring to the Portfolio Builder);
2. exploring education, training and career interests (through completing the PLAR process); and
3. providing young at risk adults with Next Steps they could take to locate training and/or jobs.

Therefore the project did validate the previous research and show PLAR to be a viable and useful tool with young at risk adults.

Consideration for future research could include;

- Structuring the process so that participants had the option of completing all or part of the Life Review on their own. This would allow participants with higher levels of motivation to participate in the live review process, identify hidden skills, and gain self recognition. It would also allow testing of the tool's versatility.
- Setting up the process as a fully interactive web based tool. This would decrease the time commitment by venue practitioners.
- Setting up the Portfolio Builder as a web based portfolio. This would allow the participant to build and use their portfolio over time and have it referenced on a resume. It would also allow the venue and the researchers to track use of the Portfolios after the process was completed which would assist in assessing the value of the process.

Comments from our project:

Participants ...

- Participants used their portfolio builders to assist them in job hunting. Participants commented that the essential skills and values portions of the portfolio builders to be of assistance in writing resumes and in identifying and describing their skills when applying for jobs. Where they had previously struggled to find the words to put on a resume that described a skill they had, they now had a resource that provided them with listing of skills and the words they needed (the Portfolio Builder).
- Participants reflected to the PLAR practitioners that the PLAR process assisted them to see themselves differently. Prior to PLAR they could not identify skills learned from life. After the PLAR process they could identify skills from life and apply these skills as transferable to educational or career situations.
- Comments included ...
 - "Thank you for taking the time to figure me out --- no one ever has before"
 - "Taking the PLAR program was an excellent experience for me. I learned stuff about myself and great job experiences that I know I will look into."
 - "This really helped me to see how far I am in my skills, and how useful the portfolio is to me"
 - One participant, in conversation with the practitioner during the final meeting, requested the practitioner to write down the words she used to describe him. The participant viewed himself as 'dysfunctional' and "learning disabled" with little potential. The practitioner described him as 'unlimited potential, an over comer and an achiever.'" The participant was so surprised that someone thought of him that way he wanted the words in writing. As he left the room he turned and commented that the practitioner should remember his name – he was going to be someone someday because he now knew who he really was and who he could be.

Practitioners ...

- Venue practitioners noted that the PLAR process assisted them in identifying soft skills – communication skills, people skills, etc. – that can be difficult to assess.
- Practitioners noted that, though the PLAR process was not short, in comparison to existing methods of identifying essential skills it was effective in identifying skills that would otherwise go unidentified. They also noted that in direct comparison the process was not time consuming overall. For instance a group of 10 people would meet 35 hours a week for 8 weeks to identify essential skills through an

- experiential program (a program that assessed skills through demonstration of experience in various skills). This is 280 hours of time commitment. PLAR would require 40 – 60 hours to complete with the same group also resulting in identification of skills.
- Practitioners noted that working on the portfolio builder alone (without the client) allowed them to have a different perspective on the process. They were able to focus on the client and not on relationship building, discussion, etc. This allowed them to have a greater depth of perception in the process of developing the portfolio.
 - Practitioners felt self recognition was the greatest gain for the participants.
 - Practitioners reported an increased awareness and understanding of PLAR and the PLAR process for their clients and overall.

Thank you for your assistance in implementing the PLAR project. **If you would like to utilize the PLAR with Young at risk adults project tools in the future they can be found on our web site www.uclc.ca/plar** All tools are available on the site including tools to create the Portfolio Builder for your clients.

Questions about the project may be directed to Jane McLaren, PLAR Project Coordinator at jane.mclaren@uclc.ca.

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