A Decade of Prior Learning Assessment: A Systematic Review of Global Literature

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Abstract

Prior learning assessment (PLA) offers a powerful tool to adult learners. The purpose of this review was to systematically examine the global academic literature related to PLA over a decade.
Keywords: prior learning assessment (PLA), recognition of prior learning (RPL), prior learning assessment recognition (PLAR), systematic literature review, integrated literature review

Learning takes place in a variety of contexts beyond the classroom (Gleiman, 2021), such as in the workplace or military, during volunteer or civic activities, and while enjoying hobbies or travel (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010). Prior learning assessment (PLA) uses testing or competency portfolios to assess college-level learning and grant academic credit (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). Empowering adult learners, PLA increases motivation and self-confidence (Snyman & Van Den Berg, 2021) and helps adult learners save time and money while earning a college degree (Boden et al., 2019). Such a degree opens access to a broad range of occupations and careers; higher job compensation, security, and satisfaction; as well as healthcare, retirement, and other employee benefits (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018; Loveless, 2019; Ma et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). PLA offers a powerful tool to adult learners and merits further examination.

Systematic Review Design

To complement an earlier review focused on the US and North America (see Cherrstrom et al., 2021), the purpose of this review was to systematically examine the global academic literature related to PLA. Research questions asked where, when, and how many peer reviewed journal articles about PLA have been published in the last 10 years? What institutions and organizations do published authors represent? What PLA-related findings and results do authors examine and discuss in the peer-reviewed literature? Answering these questions will add to the literature and inform local and global PLA practice.

Systematic and integrative literature reviews use rigorous methods to identify literature, then collect and analyze data to create new knowledge by identifying themes, synergies, and gaps (Booth et al., 2012; Kennedy, 2007; Torraco, 2005). To identify literature for this review, inclusion criteria comprised peer reviewed journal articles in all disciplines, published in English during the past decade, and the more globally prevalent terms (Stenlund, 2010) of *recognition of prior learning (RPL)* or *prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)* in the article abstract and at least five times in the article. After eliminating duplicates and those not meeting the inclusion criteria, the search yielded 85 journal articles.

Data collection comprised Garrard's (2014) matrix method, using an Excel spreadsheet to systematically capture data with each row summarizing one peer reviewed journal article. Over 30 columns organized data collected about each article. We also downloaded, saved, and read each article. Data analysis comprised examination of the matrix data and several rounds of thematic coding of main purpose of articles.

Findings

Major findings included journal and publication years, author perspectives and affiliations, and major themes.

Journals and Publication Years

Authors published 85 global PLA articles in 51 journals with 37 journals each publishing one article and 14 journals each publishing multiple articles. The *International Journal of Lifelong Education* published the highest number of articles, nine. Five to 14 articles were published each year during the decade.

Author Perspectives and Affiliations

This review's 85 articles collectively represented 169 authors with duplicates, resulting from authors with multiple publications, and 137 individual authors. Authors primarily affiliated with higher education institutions (88%), followed by agencies (3%), consulting firms (2%), and businesses, education boards, government, non-profit organizations, and healthcare (each 1%), and one undeclared affiliation. Multiple authors collaboratively wrote 52 articles, while solo authors wrote 33 articles.

The 137 authors affiliated with 22 countries and five continents. South Africa had 35 authors, comprising over one-fourth of all authors (26%), followed by Canada with 26 (19%), and Australia with 18 (13%). The remaining 19 countries had between one and 12 affiliated authors. Two authors affiliated with the US—Brown (2011) who published in an international journal and Kim who published with two authors from Korea (Lee et al., 2016). The countries aligned with five continents—Europe (39%), Africa (32%), North America (28%), Oceania (6%), and Asia (1%)—and excluded Antarctica and South America.

Major Themes

This review identified eight themes, based on the major purpose of each article—studies of programs, policy and systems, studies of PLA, technology tools, theory building, assessment practices, workplace applications of PLA, and immigration.

Discussion of Findings

In the introduction to a special issue of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Andersson et al. (2013) described PLA as a phenomenon with variations in "context, concepts, and conceptions" (p. 405) in addition to practice. The major themes identified in this review illustrate such variation, and in this section, we highlight two—immigration and assessment practices.

Immigration

Six articles spotlighted PLA in recognizing the prior learning of immigrants, including some of the challenges and potential solutions. Bencivenga (2017) investigated the role of volunteers and professionals in their initial assessments of migrants' non-formal and informal learning and skills. She found volunteers and professionals habitually overlooked prior learning due to cultural biases and translational challenges. Such practices perpetuate systemic racism and result in continued exclusion of groups based on ethnic origin. Further, they hurt economies,

especially those that suffer from labor shortages. Thus, constructing programs to accredit immigrants would benefit economies in addressing labor shortages and the need for competent professionals (Van Kleef & Werquin, 2012). Sutherland et al. (2010) offered two possible solutions to increase access to PLA for immigrants: use occupation-specific language assessments to remove language barriers and self-assessments to build immigrants' confidence. These suggestions would help address the accreditation of immigrants' skills once in the country.

Another way to increase immigrants' access to PLA comprises online assessment prior to immigration. Santa Mina et al. (2011) presented an accessible, fully online, affordable PLA assessment tool for internationally educated nurses immigrating to Canada. Beginning the PLA process from home countries, participating nurses found the experience challenging but rewarding, enjoyable, and easy to use. These findings illustrate the challenges of and solutions for accrediting the prior learning of immigrants, which could, in turn, improve labor shortages.

Assessment Practices

Seven articles addressed a variety of issues surrounding PLA assessment practices. To begin, the PLA assessment process fails to recognize certain aspects of non-traditional knowledge which restricts opportunities for PLA candidates. Further, PLA candidates will continue to have restricted opportunities in relation to traditional students unless PLA is integrated into formal learning (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011). Thus, scholars have suggested innovative approaches to PLA assessment and differentiating PLA from academic learning to increase PLA's efforts to meet non-traditional learners' needs.

Naudé (2013) considered three views of knowledge with boundaries—the traditional view that knowledge occurs through curriculum learning, the permeable view which emphasizes general skills and personal qualities, and a possible third space. The third space encompasses the area between disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge in which all forms of learning come together for recognition and validation. This opens opportunities for those excluded from communities of practice by asking the question, "How can this knowledge be recognized?" (Naudé, 2013). From this perspective, PLA must consider learner aspects such as identity, learning, and assessment (Hamer, 2011). Additionally, assessment practices are an important part of whether participants accept the process.

Other scholars support a unique form of knowledge accreditation that should not be compared to academic knowledge. Cooper et al. (2017) posited experiential knowledge is not readily equated with codified, academic, or professional knowledge. However, PLA candidates still must take assessments, a practice typically related to academic knowledge. Thus, PLA tends to recognize specialized forms of experiential knowledge that parallel formal knowledge. Likewise, Hamer (2010) discussed disappointments and hazards, such as PLA benefiting those with formal training, leading to disengagement in non-traditional learners. To widen access, Cooper et al. (2017) proposed viewing PLA as a specialized form of pedagogy differentiated from academic learning. These findings illustrate an opportunity to increase the reach of PLA, using assessments tailored to the non-traditional learner through methods like acknowledging the third space and constructing PLA as a specialized form of pedagogy. Collectively, the findings offer implications and ideas for future research.

Implications and Future Research

This review offers implications for theory and practice with the latter leading to recommendations for future research. For theory, the review adds a systematic examination of the academic literature related to PLA beyond North America. Major findings over a decade included journals and authors publishing articles about PLA, authors' perspectives and diverse country affiliations and primarily higher education organizational affiliations, and eight major themes based on the major purpose of articles. For future research, we recommend continued examination of global PLA literature to share findings and results for enhanced practice and expanded use of empirical studies in PLA using a variety of methods.

For practice, we highlight one finding and one issue with major implications. First, PLA assists immigrants in demonstrating professional competencies and equivalating credentials when migrating to a new country. In this review, authors reported such efforts in immigrant countries such as Canada and Sweden. Due to language barriers and cultural biases in the new country, immigrants' skills are frequently overlooked (Bencivenga, 2017). Such practices perpetuate labor shortages as they prevent immigrants from joining the workforce. However, fully online PLA and credit conversion tools support credentialing of immigrants before arriving in a new country, offering accessibility, affordability, and standardization of PLA (Santa Mina et al., 2011; Biletska et al., 2010). Future research can examine technology tools to assess knowledge or accredit skills for immigrants prior to immigration.

Second, this review found PLA assesses academic knowledge rather than tacit knowledge, which creates a barrier for nontraditional students (Hamer, 2010; Ions & Suttcliffe, 2020; Shakentange & Kanyimba, 2016). This barrier seems to originate from a misunderstanding of the formation and assessment of experiential knowledge forms. Collectively, these findings indicate a need to learn how to assess tacit knowledge and meet the learners where they are. Future research can identify and test assessment methods that better grasp the tacit knowledge demonstrated by PLA candidates.

Beyond the classroom, PLA takes place in a variety of contexts, encompassing a broad range of theory and practice. Around the world, researchers and practitioners study PLA and related programs, build theory, influence policy and systems, harness technology as tools, improve assessment practices, assess prior learning in the workplace, and use PLA as a tool to integrate immigrants into the workforce. Locally and globally, PLA offers opportunities and empowers adult learners.

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