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Introduction

Over the last decade, *PLA Inside Out* (*PLAIO*) has served as a platform to share, discuss, and encourage new thinking and experimenting relevant to the assessment of prior learning. The need for this kind of journal seems even more pressing today, as new perspectives are articulated, practices continue to change, and pockets of sharing across the world have emerged. Our goal — our contribution — is to bring connection and continuity to this vibrant conversation.

There are many individuals and groups engaged in this vital work today. As we look across higher education, workforce development, credentialing and certifications, and public policy formation at so many levels (from the local to the national, the regional, and the international), the value of recognizing the contributions of others, understanding, and building upon lessons learned, and partaking in the conversation benefits all of us. We are awestruck by how much is happening in this field. We can never capture it all. Still, the work we do within *PLAIO* is committed to providing a glimpse into the richness and diversity of ideas and practices. There is so much more for all of us to learn and do.

In 2020, *PLAIO* published a “special issue” in which our focus was on “Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century: U.S. Perspectives.” With the help of guest co-editors, Sarah Leibrandt and Patrick Lane of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), we included nine essays focused on principles and practices of prior learning assessment across the United States. In this new special issue, we wanted to look beyond the United States to exciting work in this field taking place internationally.

Now, with the on-going and critical support of Ruud Duvekot, Professor Validation of Work-based Learning and UNESCO Research Fellow, we have, together, co-edited this new “special issue,” which includes 14 essays from a range of nations including Bolivia, Canada, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Turkey, and the United States. These edited essays are from important practitioners and idea-makers, as well as key presenters who shared their thinking at the 4th VPL [Validation of Prior Learning] Biennale, that took place in Reykjavik, Iceland in May 2022. We hope it is apparent that the theme of the conference, “Building a Common Ground,” reflects the substance and spirit of *PLAIO*.

In 2016, Ruud Duvekot proposed four perspectives on lifelong learning, all of which are crucial to the validation of prior learning and, too, to the more all-encompassing project of

creating a “learning society.” Duvekot defined these perspectives as: qualification (certification/qualification, upgrade); labor (employability), social (second change education and inclusion), and individual (professional and personal development)-focused. That is, his research indicated that only seven years ago, most VPL initiatives fell within one of these four perspectives. Today, we see a blending of qualifications, occupation, social, and individual approaches to the recognition, validation, and credentialing of knowledge and skills. Thus, the world of PLA/PLAR/RPL/VPL/RVA is not only expanding with a vast increase in practices (myriad efforts and experiments across the globe), but it is evolving into a new paradigm within which recognition of prior learning practices are being merged and applied to new contexts to reach a vast array of people and to support economic viability, social acceptance, and personal relevance.

The history of the VPL Biennale offers us insight into important themes, changes in perspective over the last decade, the VPL “developmental pathway,” and as noted here, the further integration of orientations that are no longer distinctive. We include this history as a part of our introduction to show how things have indeed been changing. Our common efforts to build a common ground should be seen “both as a method for linking personal, occupational and qualification learning outcomes, as well as a holistic vision on social progress [that] has evolved from a critical approach to educational processes to a broad and holistic view of the value and need for lifelong learning.”

The VPL-Biennales: A History

The concept of the VPL-Biennale was designed in 2011 by Ruud Duvekot, chairman of the European Centre Valuation Prior Learning (EC-VPL, the Netherlands), for the international project Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education (ALLinHE).

The ALLinHE project linked the issues of underrepresentation of specific target groups and the lack of practical VPL approaches, with a proposal for widening access to higher education (HE) and for validation at HE levels with a focus on social inclusion in higher education. Investigating this linkage in the period 2011-2014 resulted in an overview of VPL practices across the globe, which emphasized the need for creating solutions for the inclusion of diverse social groups in learning and working domains.

The project united ten partners from nine countries to enhance social inclusion for all learners and further develop VPL approaches: the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, France, Romania, Switzerland, and South Korea. The premise of this project was that people need to be encouraged more than ever to invest in their potential throughout their lives and that considering their prior learning experiences could be a huge boost in this effort. According to guiding policy documents from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), the European Union, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the ILO (International Labour Organization), and from national and sectoral levels, this effort should include underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners. Such an effort would be responsive to the European knowledge economy that needs greater higher education participation from all. The project also recognized that even when strong policies were in place, in

practice, stakeholders were hardly paying attention to these target groups, nor were they addressing the methodologies of validating prior learning.

The project aimed to make transparent the need in society for further developing, testing, and implementing multi-targeted VPL methodologies to recognize the skills and knowledge of underrepresented target groups within the context of education and training and to steer them toward their personal learning goals. This approach included the design and testing of a program for the professionalization of staff in schools, universities, companies, and other organizations to enhance their VPL capacities. This professionalization enhanced the existing VPL methodology as a multi-targeted approach for empowering and integrating underrepresented target groups by steering them toward their personal learning opportunities. The second objective aimed at making universities more accessible and adapted to the lifelong learning needs of citizens.

ALLinHE allowed learners to use the learning outcomes of their prior learning gained through different life activities to engage in new learning opportunities. This focus was also at the heart of the VPL-Biennale concept: the learner at the center of all kinds of learning opportunities by gaining tools and practice that help to reflect on one's own learning experiences. The learner can then leverage this self-appreciation by initiating further — or new — learning that adds value to what already exists.

The concept of the VPL Biennale is organized around international biennial meetings focused on the state of the art in VPL's knowledge base, new instruments and methodologies, presentations of best practices, master classes, and implementation strategies for target groups. Since 2014, there have been four VPL-Biennales:

2014 1st Rotterdam, the Netherlands *The Power of VPL*

2017 2nd Aarhus, Denmark *The Learner in the Centre*

2019 3rd Berlin, Germany *Making Policy Work*

2022 4th Reykjavik, Iceland *Building a Common Ground*

The themes of the VPL-Biennales mirror the developmental pathway of VPL from 2014 into the 2020s. In this period, much has been accomplished. One could say that VPL both as a method for linking personal, occupational, and qualification learning outcomes and as a holistic vision of social progress has evolved from a critical approach to educational processes to a broader and more holistic view of the value and need for lifelong learning. It has advanced from a focus on instrumental development to a goal of integrating VPL into

dynamic learning and working processes of schools, universities, training institutions, and human resources departments:

1. The theme of **the 1st VPL Biennale** was *"The promise of Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) as the motor of social and economic change."* Its aim was to share information, knowledge, ideas, and visions on VPL and on the creative process of learning from each other's successes, problems, and solutions in the VPL world. This entailed a focus on the systematics of Validation of Prior Learning as the motor of more effective learning and working processes, all-inclusive for all citizens, regardless of status, gender, age, philosophy, special need, heritage, or any other personal feature.
2. The mission of the **2nd VPL Biennale** was *"The Learner in the Centre."* Its aim was to focus on the learner, the worker, the unemployed, the volunteer, and the employer, and other key stakeholders such as educational institutions, trade unions, and governmental authorities. The key question of this Biennale's activities was: How can we improve VPL practice with the individual user at the center?
3. The **3rd VPL Biennale** focused on *"Making policy work, Validation of Prior Learning for education and the labour market."* It aimed at strengthening the platform for policymakers, practitioners, users, researchers, and other stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of Validation of Prior Learning.
4. The **4th VPL Biennale**, *"Building a Common Ground,"* focused on how validation processes can become an integral part of policies and services to support lifelong learning. Participants were able to explore various validation processes and support measures and learn from the results achieved around the world. Validation is about making visible and giving value to all learning, irrespective of where and when it has been acquired. It plays a significant role in widening participation in education, work, active citizenship, and democratization.

Moving Forward

It is thus most telling and appropriate that the 5th Biennale (planned for May 2024 in Kilkenny, Ireland) focuses on the theme of "Validation and Democracy." This renewed attention to citizenship, democracy, and the role of VPL in the creation of a learning society is the next logical step in a process of integrating the four perspectives (qualification, labor, social, and individual) and in our approaches to the validation of prior learning. Our efforts to grapple with the central question of this 5th Biennale, "Does validation force a re-evaluation of valid knowledge and of the relationships between authorities in the development of different kinds and ways of knowing?" are central to our work today.

We believe that the collection of essays presented in this special issue of PLAIO emphasizes the building of common ground. As part of that foundation of theory and practice, we continue to see that what were once divergent practices in the world of prior learning are now coming together as integrated, holistic practices.

We hope that these newer practices continue to emerge and the essays within this issue will continue to encourage new ideas, practices, and policy alternatives that can animate work in this assessment/validation field and can thus serve as new tools for the kinds of broader educational, workplace, and social changes to which so many people are enthusiastically engaged.

We sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to this “special issue” of *PLAIO*. We continue on together.

About the Authors



Alan Mandell is SUNY Distinguished Service Professor and College Professor of Adult Learning and Mentoring at SUNY Empire State University (ESU). Over more than four decades, he has served as administrator, mentor in the social sciences, and director of the Mentoring Institute. Mandell edits the journal, *All About Mentoring* and co-edits (with colleague Nan Travers) *PLA Inside Out*. He has authored and co-authored books and essays with Elana Michelson, Lee Herman, Katherine Jelly, and Xenia Coulter. Recognition of his work includes the Eugene Sullivan Award for Leadership (2009), the SUNY Chancellor’s award for Excellence in Teaching (2001) and for Professional Services (1991), ESU’s Foundation Award in Mentoring (2000), and the Susan Turben Chair in Adult Learning and Mentoring (2008-2009).



Nan L. Travers, Ph.D., Dr. Nan Travers, Director, Center for Leadership in Credentialing Learning at SUNY Empire State University, focuses on research, policies and practices of the recognition, validation, and credentialing of learning. Currently, she is the PI and co-lead for a U.S. Department of Education grant Credential As You Go: Transforming the Credentialing System of the U.S. She has been the PI for multiple grants focused on prior learning assessment and credentialing. Travers serves as founding co-editor for the journal: *PLA Inside Out* (www.plaio.org).



Dr. Ruud Duvekot (1960) studied Economic and Social History at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His thesis 'Leren Waarderen' [Valuing Learning] (2016) analyzed the impact of validating prior (formal, non-formal and informal) learning experiences (VPL) on personalised learning, and the worlds of learning and working. At present his functions are: (1) director, Centre for Lifelong Learning Services (CL3S), (2) Professor, 'Validation and Work-based Learning, NCOI University of A.S., (3) Associate professor, Utrecht University of A.S., (4) UNESCO Research-Fellow, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, (5) Chairperson, European Centre for Valuation of Prior Learning, (6) committee member, VPL Biennale (<https://vplbiennale.org>).

