

What Counts as Research?

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In the previous issue of *PLAIO*, Wihak, Harris, Friesen and Van Kleeef (2012) introduced the [PLIRC \(Prior Learning International Research Centre\) Research Database](#): a single, PLAR-focused, full-text database to provide easy access to research and act as a link between researchers, public policymakers and practitioners.¹ Population of the database with existing literature is currently underway. Maintaining currency of the database will be the shared, ongoing effort of the prior learning research community around the world.

The database was envisioned because PLIRC members, all active scholars in the field of prior learning assessment and/or recognition, have identified significant challenges in locating relevant research in the field. Aggregators and vendors of academic publications (e.g., Educational Resources Information Center [ERIC], Academic Search Premier) treat PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) only very generally – attention that does not reflect the emerging structure and substance of PLAR scholarship. The difficulties that this presents for PLAR research are manifold.

First, phrases and acronyms used to designate the field itself vary across jurisdictions (for example, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition [PLAR], Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL], Reconnaissance d'acquis [RDA], Prior Learning Assessment [PLA], Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning [APEL], Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning [VNFIL]), making the use of standard databases and associated search engines a formidable challenge. In addition, much of the research in this area is policy-focused and sponsored by governments; such “gray literature” is not consistently indexed in standard academic databases.

Second, until the advent of *PLAIO*, no single scholarly journal existed with a focus on PLAR. Hence, research findings are widely dispersed, and since PLAR is a multidisciplinary field (adult education, economics, educational psychology, education policy, human resource development and professional education, among others), relevant research publications are not easily found by simply tracking a few key journals. Indeed, PLIRC members identified upward of 200 journals that need to be tracked to monitor research developments in PLAR.

The primary purpose of the PLIRC database is to provide a practical resource to support scholarship in PLAR. The process of creating the database will also engage the international PLAR research community in the development of a common conceptual vocabulary. The first challenge we face in this regard is to come to a shared understanding of the term “research” itself – a concern that also characterizes educational research more generally.

Van Kleeef (2011) raised the important question “What counts as research?” in her chapter in *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning: International Perspectives* (Harris, Breier & Wihak, 2011). Answering this question is imperative for the development of the PLIRC database. If our definition is too broad, we will have to devote already scarce resources to cataloging, for example, the plethora of practice-oriented resources in the

PLAR field that, although meritorious in their own right, are aimed at knowledge dissemination rather than knowledge creation. On the other hand, if our definition is too narrow, we will exclude much of the “gray literature” (for example, government-commissioned research reports) that has made a valuable contribution to the PLAR field.

We begin our quest to define the term “research” by examining the definitions adopted by contributors to the above-mentioned book. The brief given to the chapter authors to review research within a specific geographic area was broad, and resulted in different approaches determining what counts as research. As Harris and Wihak noted (2011), the way authors decided to include or exclude documents for the review depended “on their professional location, their particular relationship with RPL practice and their own prior experience of research e.g., as a university-based researcher, as a researcher in an international organisation such as the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development], or as an RPL practitioner-researcher” (p. 7). It also depended on their views and judgments of the most important literature in their particular context.

Further, their varied disciplinary backgrounds informed their interpretations of what counts as research. To illustrate, following Bernstein (1996), some disciplines are more strongly “classified” than others; this means that the boundaries between what is in a discipline and what is not are carefully monitored. The same goes for what counts as research: in strong classifications (the natural sciences, economics, psychology and linguistics, for example), research tends to be based on explicit, formally articulated procedures (often but not exclusively quantitative), whereas in the more generally classified human and social sciences, interpretive approaches often prevail (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Different paradigmatic and methodological research approaches involve specific understandings of the nature of reality, the meaning of knowledge production, the status of research findings, and the relationship between the researcher and what can be known.

Van Kleef (2011) herself adopted a definition of research focused on originality, systematic investigation and results relevant to increasing knowledge, as articulated by the University Research Council at Nipissing University (2008). She further clarified her understanding of *systematic investigation* as referring to “a research study which has at a minimum, a clearly stated purpose and methodology, formal findings, and a written report ...” (Van Kleef, 2011, p. 54). Harris (2011) adopted Van Kleef’s definition, finding that it allowed her to consider empirical research (qualitative and quantitative), non-empirical reflective inquiry that is theoretically and conceptually engaged, and research and development, such as pilot projects and scoping studies.

Breier (2011) focused on “purpose” as a way to classify important research, including “1) research to develop policy, 2) research to conceptualise RPL and guide practice, 3) research to monitor and quantify implementation” (p. 202). Her definition of research, while tacit, led to the inclusion of studies similar to those allowed by Van Kleef’s (2011) and Harris’ (2011) more explicit statements.

Cameron (2011) focused primarily on research methods to define empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed method) but further allowed a category of “conceptual” or non-empirical research. Her definition would therefore seem to fall in line with Van Kleef’s (2011).

In contrast, Andersson and Fejes (2011) and Bélisle (2011) each took a narrower approach, focusing on research conducted by university-based scholars. Such research tends to be much more conceptually-based than the policy-driven research included by other contributors to the *Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning* book (Harris, Breier & Wihak, 2011).

The various authors’ solutions indicate the complexity of defining research in a field that draws from so many different disciplines and orientations. We can certainly begin to populate the database with sources that fall within the parameters of the definition used explicitly by Van Kleef (2011) and Harris (2011), and implicitly by Cameron (2011) and Breier (2011). It may, however, be fruitful to designate a subcategory of more

scholarly research, to allow a database user to focus on the types of studies favored by Andersson and Fejes (2011) and Bélisle (2011), and to emphasize the importance of theoretically or conceptually-framed research to further development of the field.

In addition, it may be necessary to create another subcategory for documents that would not be considered “research” but are nevertheless seminal to the field. For example, in the area of Quality Assurance for PLAR, several documents stand out: the CAEL Standards (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker, 2006); the UK’s *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning* (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2004); the European Union’s *Guidelines on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (CEDEFOP, 2009); and the recently published *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (UNESCO, 2012). For a researcher interested in this topic, these documents are “must haves,” since each makes a distinctive contribution to the evolution of quality assurance. Yet, all of these documents would fall outside our proposed definition of research. If we start to include such source documents, however, where do we draw the line? We could be making a risky commitment to including hundreds, if not thousands, of non-research documents (e.g., from the European Union), all of which demand a real cost in time and energy to enter into the database record.

As you can see, we have many issues to discuss and questions to answer as we continue to develop the PLIRC database. To refine our definition of research, we invite all interested scholars to contact the authors with their comments or give feedback through the “Add Comment” button below this article (*PLAIO* login required) on what they think should “count” as research:

- Do you agree or disagree with Van Kleef’s definition of research and why?
- Should we include only peer-reviewed literature or also gray literature?
- Should we include theoretical and conceptual pieces that lack empirical research?
- What are some additional issues that you see in developing a definition not touched upon in this article?

Your input will very much shape the helpfulness of the database to the people who will be using it.

Note

¹ The PLIRC Research Database can be accessed at <http://ideasketch.tru.ca/>.

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