

Quality and Legitimacy

Alan Mandell and Nan Travers, SUNY Empire State College and *PLAIO* Editors

Even as the evaluation of prior experiential learning has become a more regular feature of higher education and of the workplace; even as PLA/PLAR and its myriad practices have been recognized as legitimate ways to acknowledge college-level and work-related skills and knowledge regardless of the origins of that learning, questions of **quality** and **accountability** cannot disappear. In fact, as PLA practices become more widespread, the visibility of what we do also increases, and along with that – inevitably – comes scrutiny of our practices. Indeed, PLA critics have raised a steady stream of questions and issues about viability and validity, providing even more reason for those of us who have championed the cause of PLA to take responsibility for regularly and systematically grappling with the important issue of **quality** and **accountability** in every aspect of our work.

But underlying questions of “quality” and “accountability” are assumptions (sometimes explicit, often times tacit) regarding how these terms are defined and who sets the criteria by which each is understood. For example, in our interview with him, Patrick Werquin raises concerns about just that: who is creating the policies that set the definitions and create the assessment standards? Often, when those policymakers are from the higher education sector or reflect its point of view, definitions of quality and accountability seek to replicate what is assumed to be learned in the classroom. So, too, when the workplace sector is at the table identifying the skills and setting the standards, the focus typically shifts to taken-for-granted employability qualifications. In both cases, our terms of understanding are stuck within the boundaries of what we already claim to know.

When we dig even deeper into the quality and accountability agenda being set, the question of *who* literally is sitting at the table is even more significant. Indeed, there are different perspectives *within* academic and workplace sectors. Does each sector have diverse voices represented at the table? Do different sectors have similar purposes or are they at tension with each other? What are the political, economic, social and cultural assumptions upon which these different perspectives depend? Are we sufficiently attentive to the policy directions and to the definitions of quality and accountability that flow from the questions that are asked and the issues that those at the table are trying to solve?

In any particular circumstance, whether at the level of an individual institution of higher learning or a province or a nation, or even at the level of much broader international claims (see, for example the UNESCO document in this issue), **who is given the authority** to determine what “quality” is? Who evaluates based on what? To what degree are our assumptions skewed toward our particular purposes? And, might these purposes include the desire to perpetuate a particular system of expertise and authority? We need to be willing to unpack the underlying purposes of our PLA models and thus to carefully, regularly and critically evaluate the criteria by which quality and accountability are determined.

Finally, what are the consequences of identifying quality and measuring accountability? What are the incentives to improve? And, what do we do when we recognize that there is little or no accountability at all?

The question of quality is one with which we will need to continue to wrestle. It demands that we examine the

goals and the practices of our work: Who is served by what we do? Who is left out? How do our practices reflect our core values? How do our policies and our practices gain legitimation? To what, to whom, are we accountable? The texts offered in this second issue of *PLAIO* try to take up some of these key issues, but, without doubt, quality is a topic to which this journal will continually return, just like we need to do in our own day-to-day PLA practices.

Van Kleef's invited piece explores questions of quality as PLA expands beyond the higher education sector to include immigrant professionals across Canada. Her essay raises significant issues concerning the relationship between employability and higher education criteria and the impact of these different orientations on the question of quality and policy development. The interview with Susan Simosko describes her work with the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) and the efforts to develop materials for employers, professional regulators and educators to support the assessment of learning acquired by immigrant working populations.

Some of the articles in this issue take up practices and barriers to practices as they relate to countrywide policies governing the ways in which PLA is conducted throughout higher education. Andersen and Laugesen examine PLA practices in Denmark by different higher educational sectors – practices that resulted in different orientations based on the purpose of the type of sector. Whittaker and Brown look at work being done in Scotland and propose strategies to overcome barriers and improve the quality of the programs across the country. Andersson and Fejes highlight the new learning gained by stakeholders as part of PLA in-service training programs for elder care workers in nursing homes within Sweden as an alternative path to credentialing. Workman describes PLA practices at her institution and the ways in which these practices support a work-based program model and an opportunity to encourage students' goal setting and educational planning.

Another set of work included in this issue explores assurance issues: how are we assured that the practices meet quality and standards? The study presented by Wilbur, Marienau and Fiddler describes one institution's approach to developing a framework to assist faculty in the evaluation of learning, regardless of topic. The responses by Fiddler and Dietzel in the Ask A Question section illustrate different institutional practices around the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) standards. Travers and Evans propose a framework for evaluating PLA programs that combines research with the CAEL standards. And (as noted earlier), Singh introduces UNESCO's newest standards and, in so doing, offers another perspective on quality programs.

Starr-Glass takes up an even more delicate issue: how do we define validity as we move to measure student learning? His essay questions conventional definitions of validity and proposes a re-examination of the ways in which we identify and try to make sense of learning experiences. Wihak questions how we actually define "research." When we start to build a body of scholarship, which in itself begins to validate and legitimize practice, she urges us to question the ways in which we organize and classify the "evidence" upon which we depend.

Our hope is that the research, essays and interviews presented in this issue of *PLAIO* will raise even more questions regarding quality and accountability. We encourage you to engage in a discussion with us on these issues by using the "Add Comment" link following each of the pieces (*PLAIO* login required). How is quality defined in your PLA/PLAR work? Who are the players involved and how are these voices influencing the conversations, the practices and the policies that set the framework of your activities? Are there voices that are not heard? How is this silence influencing the terms of accountability upon which your work depends? Above all, what is missing and what new questions need to be raised so that we can continue to grapple with the quality of what we do? The very legitimacy of our work depends on it.