Editorial

PLA/PLAR and Open Learning: Finding Connections

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In our "call" for materials for this new issue of *PLAIO*, we describe various philosophies and approaches to "openness" and conclude that "open learning" and the incredible possibilities that it introduces challenge the status quo of higher education and raise myriad questions not only about the future of institutionalized higher learning but about the ways in which all knowledge is defined, recognized and legitimated. What is knowledge? What are its sources? What is a learning "resource"? Who has access to what forms of knowledge? Who are the "experts" who claim to know what can be learned, how it can be learned and what is worth knowing? The questions are incredible; they bring us back to the basics of learning and assessment.

For all of us in the PLA/PLAR world, what is striking are the incredible similarities between the "open educational resources" (OER) and PLA/PLAR movements. At their core, both are "movements" for change. Both share an anarchistic spirit; both challenge the status quo by demanding the recognition and legitimization of knowledge gained outside the traditional means – outside the academy. Both ask fundamental questions about what definitions and systems we reply upon. Both are about access and raise difficult and trenchant issues about resources, assessment and fairness.

But these two movements are more than kindred spirits; more than elective affinities tie them together. At this moment, while each remains contested terrain for some, both have reached significant levels of recognition and legitimacy. More and more, PLA/PLAR and OER are looked to as offering meaningful and practical solutions to providing learning resources, schooling, training and credentialing to huge numbers of individuals in response to workforce demands and to the acknowledgment that the established academy around the world is not adequately responding to what people need and want to know.

Increasingly, global economies are facing critical shortfalls in knowledge, competencies and skill sets. Nations are desperately seeking better ways to increase employee potential, improve training and bolster educational systems. And individuals are pursuing questions, exploring whole new areas of learning, seeking creative connections with others and developing their own personal learning spaces that respond to their interests and deep desires to explore beyond the bounds of institutions as they know them. PLA/PLAR and OER are both committed to opening up (in different ways; to different degrees) what had been previously closed off.

As we see it, this is an exciting opportunity for the field of prior learning assessment. The PLA/PLAR movement is not in competition with or being replaced by the OER movement. Rather, the two should be seen as complementing each other: OER can provide vast ways to bring access to and provide learning opportunities for those who have been left out of the academy and those who wish to take up what the academy has missed. PLA/PLAR can provide legitimate means for authentic, evidence-based assessments and credentialing of that "open learning." In fact, to imagine OER without a discussion of evidence-based assessment or PLA/PLAR without recognizing OER as a means of gaining new knowledge would cut off what is possible, truncate our discussions and fail to provide the full picture of learning today. As theorists, researchers and practitioners in

both fields, it is our task to examine the issues critically, provide insight into trends, and construct and try out new practices that will support and, over time, sustain these experimenting efforts.

The potential of what is ahead for us is incredible, but it does not come without debate and acknowledgment of tensions. The venues of open learning environments with evidence-based assessments contrast sharply with the controlled, standardized conventions of many employment and educational systems. The marriage of PLA/PLAR and OER suggests that there is legitimate and necessary knowledge beyond what is currently held within the system. It implies that those who hold fast to the traditional systems cannot remain castle guards and, indeed, can and must learn from the "students" who bring to us knowledge and skills gained from work, community and their very own learning projects. It intensifies questions such as: What are the roles of faculty and trainers? What is legitimate learning? What is college-level learning? Upon what units of credentialing do we rely? Who defines the credentials that are to be gained? We cannot forget nor push away these deep concerns.

As these two movements continue to go forward, we also must be ever cognizant of the efforts to commodify them – for example, mass production of open resources that are controlled by the same institutions that, from the start, proclaimed their irrelevance, and the proliferation of standardized exams to assess them. That is, as existing structures seek to "get on the bandwagon" and consume the very thing that is trying to provide their alternative, how can we provide other visions and offer other practices that keep PLA/PLAR and OER "open"?

In this issue of *PLAIO*, we have presented some of these bubbling issues and tensions. Our two invited papers by Dianne Conrad and Judith Harris encourage us to recognize the "the potential offered by PLA for assessing MOOC learning" (Conrad) and push us to reflect upon and re-evaluate our "ways of seeing" what we think and do as PLA professionals (Harris). We also include three interviews with those intimately involved in the world of OER, accreditation and assessment (Sally Johnstone, Diana Oblinger and George Siemens), hoping to provoke our thinking about "mapping competencies" (Johnstone), the challenges we face in a world of "perishable knowledge" (Oblinger) and our response to the presence of "creativity" in someone's learning that is often mismatched with the tools we call on to assess it (Siemens). And in her multimedia piece, Viktoria Popova-Gonci encourages us to think beyond the classic portfolio and include concept mapping as a way to assess learning. In addition to other pieces on both theory and practice, and reports from meetings around the globe on adult learning and assessment, we hope that readers will participate in an "Ask a Question" area (guided by Gabrielle Dietzel and Morry Fiddler) in which we take up the key question, "What Would You Do?" if your institution were asked to evaluate learning gained through the use of open educational resources. Please join in!

We are aware that what we are providing here is only a beginning: OER will inevitably expand their reach; access to resources of all kinds will continue to penetrate the academy; and academic institutions as well as accrediting bodies of all stripes will be compelled to question the models upon which they have relied and create and try out new tools of assessment. We hope that this issue of *PLAIO* will push the conversation and alert us to the critical issues with which we need to grapple and the concerns that we cannot ignore.