

# PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION IN ABORIGINAL SELF (RE) CONSTRUCTION<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Although Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been used as a method of awarding academic or employment credit for prior experience, the exercise of reflecting on one's past experience may generate new understandings with resultant changes to self identity. This dynamic has been used to facilitate the creation of distinctly Aboriginal selves in a process known as "holistic portfolio PLAR," but the technology is not well understood and has generated controversy. This paper uses a memetic self-map of an Aboriginal man to illustrate a process of self-change. Recommendations are made on the use of portfolio PLAR in addressing the needs of Aboriginal people.

**Key words:** self, self development, PLAR, holistic portfolio development, memes

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1. Thanks are given to Northlands College, La Ronge, Canada for allowing the use of information from an internal survey portfolio PLAR trainees in the development of this paper. With over 90% of its students and a majority of its board Aboriginal, Northlands College plays an important role in indigenous education.

The notion that the selves of Aboriginal people have been damaged by colonialism with a resultant need for healing has received widespread support (Brave Heart, 2003; Mitchell and Maracle, 2005; Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski, 2004). The process of self-reconstruction has not been limited to traditional therapies. For nearly a decade, Northlands College in northern Saskatchewan, Canada, has trained staff in a form of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) aimed at building or regenerating Aboriginal identity. It has been suggested this holistic portfolio form of PLAR “seems to link directly to some deeper aboriginal cultural and learning traditions that had been severely damaged by the impact of colonization” (Morrissey and Myers, 2008, p. 33); yet, the reaction of Northlands College staff trained in this method has been mixed. Some staff felt uncomfortable with a process they perceived as similar to religious conversion while others felt unprepared to deal with expected emotional catharsis (Robertson, 2011a). Only one third of staff trained in this method between 2004–2008 said they used Aboriginal portfolio PLAR in their work.

The process by which prior learning assessment may lead to developmental change within the self of the individual is not well understood. In this paper we explore how an application of PLAR may lead to such developmental change by referencing a map of the self of a young Aboriginal male. We conclude with suggestions for the application of PLAR to Aboriginal self-development.

## PORTFOLIO PLAR AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF KNOWLEDGE

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been used by students and potential employees to obtain credit for prior experience. Typically the client submits documentation or demonstrates competencies to a professional trained in such methods, and that person measures or assesses this evidence against previously determined criteria, awarding credit accordingly. This contributes to the efficiency of the educational system by eliminating redundant training for individuals who have developed skills and knowledge elsewhere.

Portfolio development typically involves the creation of a personal binder that may include a resume, work samples, testimonials, photos, records, audio and video tapes, and narratives of specific life experiences. The process also has implications for personal development. Reflecting on one’s past experience, as is done in the generation of a comprehensive personal

portfolio, may generate new understandings of prior experience with resultant changes to self identity (Conrad, 2008; Van Kleef, 2007). Thus, the original mandate of PLAR, which was to assess existent skill-sets, broadens to a more general mental health purpose: to bring positive change to the self definition of the individual. Conrad (2008) posited two distinct forms of PLAR:

While [challenge-for-credit PLAR] honours their right to bring forward their prior knowledge, learners applying to have their prior knowledge recognized in this fashion are obliged to tailor their learning histories to fit into predetermined knowledge clusters.... While this is just one model of PLAR — and an acceptable one — it is not a model that gives learners the opportunity to build new knowledge on the foundation of their prior knowledge. (p. 141)

With this conceptualization, one form of PLAR is concerned with assessment of existent knowledge while another involves the construction of new knowledge. There is an alternative interpretation: Knowledge assessment and creation are concomitant. When we reflect on our experiences we create new understandings. Sometimes reflection will occur immediately after an experience, but it may occur years later when we are asked to think about it for the purpose of building our portfolio. Even when reflection occurred immediately after the experience, re-reflection years later when we have been asked to document an experience can lead to new understandings of the prior experience. Thus the two forms of PLAR are not distinct: Challenge-for-credit necessarily involves the creation of new self-knowledge, but with portfolio PLAR new self-understandings are actively sought.

Drawing on historic trauma theory, Aboriginal portfolio PLAR involves the holistic reconstruction of Aboriginal selves (Hill, 1992; 2004). From this perspective, the military, economic, and cultural conquest of people Aboriginal to the American continents was a form of genocide, and their descendents continue to face the traumatic effects of that genocide similar to the intergenerational trauma faced by descendents of holocaust victims. This historic trauma may result in depression, self-destructive behaviour, suicidal thoughts and gestures, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions, and substance abuse. Brave Heart (2003) used retreat-like settings in which historically traumatic memories were “awakened” by using audiovisual materials through which participants “relived” genocidal massacres. She explained, “This is done in order to provide opportunities for cognitive integration of the trauma as well as the affective cathartic working-through necessary for healing” (p. 11).

As used in this paper, “portfolio PLAR” refers to a process of reflectively understanding one’s past events. “Holistic portfolio PLAR” refers to a specific application of that process to Aboriginal peoples.

## HOLISTIC PORTFOLIO PLAR FROM THE LENS OF SELF MAPPING

This paper uses data from two previous studies completed by the writer. The first study reported on a Northlands College survey of staff who had received training in holistic portfolio PLAR from 2004–2008 (Robertson, 2011a). Although the curriculum was ostensibly the same, groups of trainees differed in their understanding of “the Aboriginal holistic model” and the use of emotional catharsis in group settings. The second study referenced qualitatively developed a method of mapping the self (Robertson, 2010). The self-map of an Aboriginal man from that study is examined with a view to better understanding the process of self-change as related to holistic portfolio PLAR.

### THE NORTHLANDS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE WITH PORTFOLIO PLAR

Sixty-five counsellors, instructors, administrative staff, and non-college professionals received training in holistic portfolio PLAR through the auspices of Northlands College from 2004–2008. Trainees were taught an evidentiary method of constructing personal portfolios including consideration of a student’s or client’s interpretation of significant life events. A method of reframing harsh negative self-interpretations was offered; for example, an event interpreted by the client as evidence of stupidity might be reframed to include reference to circumstances that led to failure as opposed to evidence of the client’s inability to learn. Aboriginal content included the use of healing circles, smudging, and a perspective on holism using the medicine wheel concept. Trainees also received a historical review of colonialism and its modern effects.

Thirty of these staff were interviewed in 2009 comprising the following subsamples: Northlands College employees who took their training in 2008 (N=8), college employees who took their training from 2004–2007 (N=8), and non-college professionals who took their training from 2004–2007 (N=14). All eight of the Northlands College respondents who received their training before 2008 said the purpose of PLAR was to develop self-knowledge or give credit for informal learning. In contrast, three of eight 2008 trainees but none of the earlier cohort said the main idea of PLAR was

to was to teach “the Aboriginal holistic model.” This “Aboriginal holistic model” was perceived as a quasi-religion with one trainee stating,

Our provincial Department of Higher Education and Manpower has no more business teaching Native Spirituality — with the intent of conversion — than it has teaching Tibetan Buddhism.

In a submission to Northlands College in summer 2007, the facilitator-trainer to this class explained:

Holistic portfolio development is a powerful process to help people identify and document the learning that they have acquired through life/work experiences....

Through holistic portfolio development, learners can begin to identify how ethnostress has impacted them and begin a process to reclaim their indigenous identity.

All eight 2008 trainees said their program included the exploration of individual trauma within the group with one trainee stating,

She [the PLAR instructor] seemed more sinister when she singled out the weaker, more vulnerable members of our group and encouraged or caused them to cry — the harder and longer the better.

Eight of twenty-two respondents who took their training prior to 2008 said their training dealt with the issue of past trauma, but none said group members were encouraged to disclose in the group setting. A majority (five) of the 2008 college trainees but none of the earlier trainees (college and non-college subsamples) said they would invite students to disclose past trauma in a group setting.

One college’s experience cannot be assumed to be representative of all; however, this college’s experience demonstrated a spectrum of understandings is possible. In its emphasis on inviting disclosure of past trauma in a group setting, and in its subsequent teaching of “the Aboriginal holistic model” as part of identity construction, the approach learned by the 2008 class most closely resembled the Historic Trauma model. The suggestion that Aboriginal people need to reclaim their indigenous identity implies a template outlining such an identity. Thus, we have a process whereby the effects of colonization on the Aboriginal self must be dealt with by cathartic means with a subsequent Aboriginal identity offered participants. While the possibility of traumatic memories surfacing was part of earlier versions of this training, none of those trainees would invite students to disclose such memories.

## A METHOD OF MAPPING THE SELF IN UNITS OF CULTURE

If the self is defined as a cognitive structure, then it is necessarily a cultural construct (Harre, 1984; Lock, 1990 [1981]; Mead, 1990 [1912]) which may be understood as consisting of units of culture (Blackmore, 1999; Donald, 2001; Price, 1999). Culture, in this sense, consists of all the ways of knowing, interpreting, and doing that proliferate within a given society. Dawkins (1976) coined the term “meme” representing elemental cultural units that exhibit attractive and repellent properties with respect to other such units. In an earlier study, I suggested that to have utility a meme must be more substantial than a simple idea; it must also take into account individual differences in referent definition, connotation, affect, and behaviour (Robertson, 2010). For example, any two people may differ on what it means to be a father, the associations made with the idea of fatherhood, the emotions engendered, and the behaviours produced. The differences create competing memes centred on the idea of fatherhood. Such memes attract (or are associated with) other memes sharing connotative, affective, or behavioural properties.

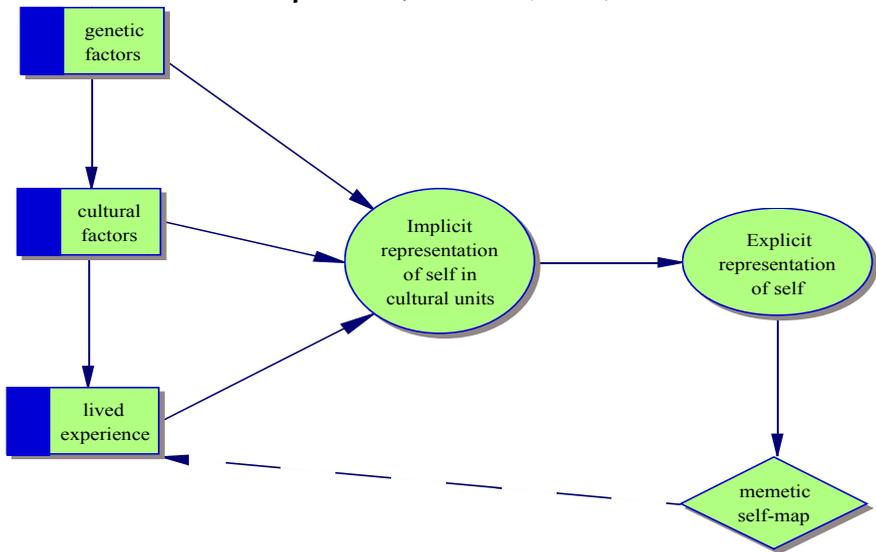
Using the notion that the self consists of such interlocking units of culture, I created maps of the selves of a diverse cross-cultural sample of eleven volunteers (Robertson, 2010). Participants described who they were in increasing detail until they were satisfied that the self-descriptions were complete. Those self-descriptions were transcribed and segmented on the basis of ideas presented. Similar ideas were grouped together in “bins” and those bins that displayed referent, connotative, affective, and behavioural dimensions were declared to be memes. Maps were then prepared of the selves of each participant by linking memes that shared one or more of these dimensions with other memes.

All of the participants in this qualitative study had a self-structure that included an emotive basis (a feeling of “me”), volition, individuality or distinctness, continuity, connectedness to family or community, social interest, intimacy, and productivity. None of the participants in this research were in therapy at the time of the study; therefore, it was not assumed that the selves of such clients would exhibit the same characteristics. As an example of such a divergent self, a memetic map used to develop a treatment plan for a suicidal youth revealed that the youth lacked social interest and connectedness to family or community, and the core of her being was presented as “depressed person” (Robertson, 2011b). In this case, the client and therapist co-constructed a new core meme that reflected a social interest motive centring value-laden memes such as animal and children’s rights that were

deeply felt. Over the course of treatment the client increasingly identified with her new core meme, and her level of suicide ideation decreased.

In summary, the self may be understood as based on heritable physical and psychological characteristics and interpreted into existence based on lived experience mediated by cultural factors. The result is an implicit representation of the self which is made explicit through self reflection such as may be afforded by the practice of building a PLAR portfolio. That explicit self could be then graphically represented by displaying interrelated memes flowing from self-reflection. Figure 1 displays this conceptualization of the process of building and understanding the self.

**Figure 1: An Understanding of How the Self may be Interpreted into Existence Referencing Genetic Factors, Cultural Factors and Lived Experience (Robertson, 2009).**



## AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELF OF ONE ABORIGINAL MAN

The young Cree man represented by Figure 2 told me “his story,” and this narrative was then segmented with each segment coded according to its content. Our first interview produced 13 pages of single spaced transcript that was then divided into 110 segments. Thirty-eight memes were identified from these segments and are produced with associations in Figure 2. The numbers within the ovals represent the number of segments coded for that particular meme. Themes that were recurrent in groups of memes were



was uniquely his, his collective memories gave him a sense of both continuity and uniqueness. His memories helped bind his self together beyond that afforded by attractive forces between individual memes. Many potential starting points and resultant narratives are possible dependent on the audience, context, and purpose of the story teller. The self does not change substantially with context although the stories might. This does not mean the self is unchanging.

As a youth this young man wondered what it meant to be a “Big Indian.” After consulting others including Elders, he went on a vision quest to confirm his identity. He developed ideas about what it meant to be an Aboriginal person and Aboriginal spirituality, and he found these ideas to be compatible with Taoism and the practice of meditation learned while taking martial arts. The memes added to his self-definition as a result of this developmental transition are highlighted in yellow. These changes which reflect a unique understanding of spirituality combining Amerindian and Asian traditions were built on an already existent self.

When the young man first saw the initial self-map prepared as a result of our first interview, he declared it “prophetic.” He would not have defined himself as an Aboriginal activist at the time of the initial interview four months previous, but he had recently become involved in political activity focussing on Aboriginal health and housing issues affecting his band. The inclusion of “Aboriginal activist” had been based on belief statements made during our first meeting. He also made changes to his self not anticipated in our initial self-map. He reframed the meme “overweight” to “big,” and he began dating with resultant reported improvements to his self-esteem. In addition to defining himself as an Aboriginal activist, he now considered himself to be an artist in support of this activism. “Artist” was not present in his initial self-map, but it was a new self-defining meme that flowed from his political activism, his drive toward doing (animator) and his self-definition as a learner. He began writing and performing songs and poetry with a political flavour designed to encourage solidarity and community.

After reflecting on his initial self-map, this Cree man developed the theme of “humanness” to encompass much of what he did. To be human is to feel a range of emotions. Many men, prostitutes, and people on mood modifying drugs are prevented from feeling and this inhibits their capacity to be fully human. This theme is connected to being caring and kind, a unique experience who defines himself as a leader and someone who relates well to youth.

The changes to this young man's self, both with respect to defining himself as an Aboriginal person and his more recent changes as an activist and artist were evolutionary. They consisted of small incremental changes built on an already existent structure. Incremental change allows for the preservation of a sense of constancy and empowerment while becoming a different person. By assisting the student or client to reflect on his prior learning experiences, we can help develop new and better self-understandings without the need to introduce further catharsis into the self-system.

## DISCUSSION

The Historic Trauma model operates from the assumption the selves of Aboriginal people are damaged and in need of replacement. Ironically, this has led to a process similar to the Christian notion of conversion where a cathartic or rapturous experience stimulates self "rebirth" as a new person. This new self is then situated within a sanctioned community worldview. As we have seen, the similarity between this application of the Historic Trauma model to religious conversion led some Northlands College holistic portfolio PLAR trainees to the controversial notion that Native Spirituality is a religion like Christianity.

The contrast between the experience of the young Cree man who developed his own individual self-definition as an Aboriginal person (represented in Figure 2) and the experience of the PLAR workshop trainee who said "Our provincial Department of Higher Education and Manpower has no more business teaching native spirituality — with the intent of conversion — than it has teaching Tibetan Buddhism" is stark. In the first example, beginning with the self-descriptor "big Indian," the young man set out to explore who he was as an Aboriginal person gradually incorporating resonant Native beliefs and practices into an already existent self. With this approach he was able to identify both "Aboriginal Spiritualist" and "Taoism" as his spirit helpers. In the second example a much older man felt he was being presented with a template for being that conflicted with his already existent self.

If the purpose of PLAR is to assess prior learning, then there is no need to attempt to teach any particular belief system or worldview as part of the process. A holistic portfolio involves a complete self-description, like that provided by the young man in his self-map. In the process of portfolio building, the individual will naturally reflect on the significance of past events. Such reflection will incrementally lead to revised understandings

and self change, but there is no need for an outside instructor to direct this change. The answers that are true for the individual are best found within that individual.

The competent PLAR portfolio developer is more facilitator than teacher, but the art of facilitation involves inviting new interpretive possibilities. Often the student or client will not have recognized skills and abilities that are evident in the portfolio or will have downplayed their significance. It is the duty of the facilitator to point out evidence of possible skill sets and their applicability to new contexts. The client may have been overly harsh in his interpretations of past events and the facilitator may point out that alternative interpretations are possible while empowering the client to make the final “correct” understanding. On reflection the client may wish to engage in areas of self-development. The facilitator may suggest resources the client could utilize in pursuit of such a quest.

Not only is there is no need to seek emotional catharsis in holistic portfolio development, such catharsis could be psychologically damaging to an individual who feels pressure to disclose in a group setting. On the other hand, even without an invitation to disclose, it is still possible a student could experience a significant emotional reaction while reflecting on life events. In such cases it would be ethical for the facilitator to refer the student for individual counselling.

A distinction can be drawn between counselling and therapy. Counselling involves planning, problem solving, perspective building, goal setting, and other activities involving a client who has an essentially intact self. Psychotherapy involves self-reconstruction such as was undertaken with the suicidal youth referenced earlier (Robertson, 2011b). While recognizing that self-change is ongoing, counsellors need to recognize the limits of their competence and make referrals to psychotherapists where self-reconstruction efforts are necessary.

While we do not accept a suggestion that all Aboriginal people suffer from trauma and need psychotherapy, some do. In extending Brasfield’s (2001) definition, I suggested the defining causal factor in Residential School Syndrome was the damage done to the selves of students in a process of attempted memetic reengineering (Robertson, 2006). The botched church-directed attempt to re-make the selves of Aboriginal children led to the distinctive symptoms of Residential School Syndrome even in individuals who were not sexually or physically abused at school. Since the self both creates and is created by the surrounding culture, this understanding ex-

plains how the syndrome may be transferred intergenerationally. That being said, it would be a mistake to assume that all who went to residential school suffer from the associated syndrome or that therapeutic self-reconstruction can be done by PLAR facilitators.

PLAR facilitators have a role to play in self-development as part of a team. Students in the group setting may need individual counselling on personal issues as they arise or on developing individualized career plans. Psychotherapists should be available for referral where self-reconstruction becomes necessary.

The ethical standards for facilitators using portfolio PLAR in self-development should be similar to those of counsellors. The client's need for confidentiality must be respected, and this includes the provision that the client must not feel pressure to self-disclose in a group setting. The PLAR facilitator recognizes the interrelatedness of emotion, thought, and behaviour and the inseparability of the client from his social context. The facilitator understands that truth and reality can vary according to circumstance, context, and experience. Finally, action and thought must be rationally oriented to future consequence recognizing the client as the final determiner of his own plans, goals, and choices.

In Northlands College, instructors and counsellors have a role to play in both major forms of PLAR: the awarding of credit for verified past learning and the use of portfolios for self-development. Students are not told how they should be to be Aboriginal, and emotional catharsis is not sought although counsellors are available on site for any student in distress. By being nondirective, respecting the uniqueness of each individual and that person's right to decide who they wish to become, we believe we are supporting the counselling traditions of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

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