MOHAWK COLLEGE

PORTFOLIO GUIDELINES

"Guidelines for Preparing a Portfolio For Course Credit"

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT & RECOGNITION (PLAR)

Assessment of learning acquired through noncredit courses, work experiences and/or other life experiences.

WHAT IS A PORTFOLIO?

An ***academic portfolio*** is a folder of information that has been compiled about a learner's past experiences and accomplishments. It is a tool for organizing work/life experiences into a manageable form for assessment. Normally, a portfolio contains descriptions of learning with supporting documentation to verify learning claimed. A portfolio is not only a product, it is a process by which prior learning experiences can be translated into educational outcomes, documented and assessed for academic credit.

This guide will focus on the development of a portfolio for academic assessment. In order to earn academic credit, it will be necessary to prepare a portfolio of one's learning relative to the learning outcomes of a specific Mohawk College course. The learner may intentionally omit descriptions of experience and learning that are not relative to the College course in which credit is being requested. We will refer to the preparation of that paper, as the "Learning Outcomes Paper".

WRITING A LEARNING OUTCOMES PAPER

- Assemble the various documents that you will need to write about your learning outcomes. This includes the course outline. Read the course outline carefully. This will help you to more fully understand the course content, and what the faculty assessor will be focusing on. It will also help you by bringing to your attention any gaps in your learning which you may need to fulfill before applying for an assessment.

- Develop a strategy for presenting your experiences and learning before writing your learning outcomes paper. Think about **why** you are writing the paper - you want to be considered for credit for a specific Mohawk College course. You will do this by explaining **how** you acquired learning in specific course areas and **what** you have learned. Remember who you are writing for - a faculty member who will be deciding whether or not you have mastered the same course outcomes as the traditional classroom student. Remember to write in a clear and concise fashion.

A separate learning outcomes paper is completed for each course in which you may be eligible for credit. There is no rule regarding the length of a learning outcomes paper. Complete as many pages as necessary to cover all of the outcomes on the course outline. The paper is normally prepared using the following headings:

1. **Description of Experience**
    - In describing experience, consider including the following information:
    - Where the learning took place. (i.e. company name)
    - Describe the organization, service provided or product produced.
    - When and how long the learning took place. (dates)
    - Supervisor's name and title.
    - Your job title and responsibilities.
    - Departments worked in. (if applicable)
    - A description of any seminars and workshops attended.
    - Titles and authors of books and articles which contributed to the learning experience.
    - Any information that will give the faculty assessor a better understanding of the circumstances of the learning.

2. **Learning from Experience**
   Your goal is to match your learning with each of the outcomes listed on the course outline(s). Include a detailed description of the competencies, skills and knowledge acquired relative to the course. Remember that the primary criterion for awarding credit is a demonstration that your learning is comparable in content and level to the learning outcomes as listed on the course outline(s). Be sure to include specific examples (case studies) that would demonstrate that you have a sound knowledge base in addition to the practical experience. Your evidence of learning should also demonstrate whenever appropriate, that your learning has progressed over time, and is not simply a repetition of the same tasks but represents continuous learning that can be transferred to other situations.

3. **Documentation**
   List all relevant documentation from the various sources that you will be including in your portfolio to verify the learning claimed. Be sure to label each document for easy reference and indicate why it has been included. Employer guidelines for writing a letter of verification have been included.

   For example:

   A. Letter from Supervisor
   B. Job Description
   C. Job Appraisal
   D. Work Samples

PROCEDURE:

Portfolio-Assisted Assessment

1. Complete the PLAR registration form indicating the program name, subject/course code and course name for which you are applying for an assessment. A registration form may be obtained in person at the PLAR Office or online.

2. Forward completed registration form and payment to:

   Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition Office
   Mohawk College, Fennell Campus
   135 Fennell Ave West
   Hamilton, Ontario L9C 0E5
   Fax: 905-575-2348
   Email: PLAR@mohawkcollege.ca

   We gladly accept the following payment methods:

   - Certified Cheque or Money Order (payable to Mohawk College)
   - Direct Payment/Debit and Cash (in person only)
   - Credit Card; Visa or Mastercard

3. Once your registration and payment have been processed, you will be provided with a copy of the course outline, including learning outcomes, for reference while you create your portfolio.

4. Write a learning outcomes paper, appropriate to the course, explaining why you believe you are eligible to receive credit for your prior learning. Be sure to address each of the outcomes on the course outline as you prepare your paper. Remember to detail the competencies, knowledge and skills you have acquired in addition to the experience in which the learning took place. (Refer to the "Guidelines for Preparing a Portfolio for Course Credit")

5. Attach all relevant documentation to verify your learning. e.g. resume, academic transcripts, performance appraisals, job descriptions, recommendation letters, course outlines, work samples, etc.

6. Submit your portfolio to the PLAR Office (as above) and it be forwarded to the appropriate academic department for assessment.

7. An assessor may contact you to arrange an interview, exam, or demonstration.

8. Once your learning has been assessed, the assessor will forward a grade form to the PLAR Office.

SAMPLE: LEARNING OUTCOMES PAPER

Course Description: SP101 Effective Oral Communication

This course is an examination of the process of spoken communication, with an emphasis on small group interaction. It includes public speaking experiences, problem solving techniques and approaches to discussion. Audio and video recording equipment is available for use in the course. Prerequisite: None

Description of Experience:

My claim for the course of Effective Oral Communication is based upon my current position of Corporate Training Analyst with the Region's Health Company, and an in-house course I attended on Effective Presentations.

My work experience began in May of 1987 when I was promoted to training analyst. I was one of three analysts whose main responsibility was to present customer service training to new hires and current employees who successfully bid on customer service positions. Our class size is approximately ten people, although I have presented to classes as small as two people and as large as twenty or more.

After six months in the training department, the two other analysts left, and I therefore became the customer service administrator. The responsibilities in this position are to plan and implement all customer service classes, decide on class content, revise training materials, and preview any new materials that become available. I must also work very closely with area management to ensure that the classroom knowledge is relevant to the job.

In mid-1977, I attended an in-house course entitled "Effective Presentations." Although only a two-day course, it gave me many tips on making an effective and professional presentation. We were videotaped during each presentation. This was then played back and reviewed by each participant and the trainer for self-analysis and any constructive criticism she was able to offer. There were several presentations I was required to make, beginning with a short two minute presentation and ending with a fifteen minute presentation of my choosing.

Learning from Experience:

Several of the techniques learned during this course and during my two years of training include the following:

The importance of eye contact. I feel this is one of the most useful techniques. It is very important to look directly at one member of the audience for a period of approximately five seconds, state a complete thought, and then move to another individual in the audience. By the end of the presentation, I will have covered all areas of the room. This technique accomplishes two things. First, it gives the impression to the members of the audience that I am speaking to each one of them individually. Secondly, I find I become less nervous and am able to think more clearly.

Use of the hands. The effective use of the hands emphasizes what you are saying. During the course, I also explored how the incorrect use of the hands can give unspoken messages that I may not wish to convey. For example, by over gesturing, I appear nervous. If I do not make any use of my hands, I appear stiff. If I cross my arms in front of my chest, I appear defensive. If I put my hand on my hip, a very feminine gesture, I may lose some of my credibility with a group comprised mainly of men. The correct procedure is to keep the arms at the side, raising one or both hands to emphasize a point, and then dropping them to the side. This conveys to the audience a person who is assured, in control, and interesting.

Correct stance. Rocking back and forth on the heels or pacing across the room conveys nervousness or impatience. Women very often shift their weight to one leg. which again is a feminine stance. The best technique, it was noted in the course, is to stand evenly on both legs, without moving around. However, I find I present more effectively by using the room. I prefer setting up the tables in the room in a horseshoe shape, which allows me to approach each member of the group. I feel I establish a closer relationship with each trainee. This is very important because much of the training I provide is based on group interaction and open discussion. By approaching each member of the group, I make them feel more comfortable with me and allow them to enter into group discussions. However, if I must completely control the class, and wish only limited group interaction during a lecture, I always stand in front of the class and remain as stationary as possible.

Use of the voice. A monotone voice is very dull to listen to and does not hold the audience's attention. In contrast, if I were to speak with great emphasis all the time, my class would also lose interest. I would seem over-enthusiastic and very irritating. I generally speak at a normal rate and tone, modifying my voice for more emphasis
when needed. I also find that silence is a powerful tool. Initially, I felt very uncomfortable with silence, and felt I had to speak at all times. However, I learned that short periods of silence, lasting from several seconds to a minute or so, is generally appreciated by the audience. This allows them to absorb what I have said, or to write notes. In addition, this gives me time to gather my thoughts so that I am assured that I have covered all necessary points.

Use of equipment and visual aids. When any of these are used to present material, they should be a part of the presentation and should not get in the way of the presenter. For example, I stand with a flip chart to my left, and use my left hand to turn the pages. Therefore, I do not turn my back to the class. Also, I find that pictures on a flip, rather than words, are more effective to emphasize a point. I use overheads in the same manner. While they generally do not contain pictures, they should emphasize what I am saying and should not direct attention away from me.

Planning. In my customer service classes, my material must be well planned and presented in such a way as to be easily understood by each and every trainee. My class plans, which I can present as evidence, show my meticulousness with subject continuity. Without this continuity, my presentations would be very confusing and my students would be unable to follow my train of thought. Therefore, I make it a point to be very well prepared. After I have reviewed all my materials and class plan, I do a dry run and note anything I may have missed at this time. I find this allows me to be as fluid as possible. I allow short pauses during the lecture to answer any questions or if necessary, to include any points I may have missed, before I go on to the next point.

Fostering understanding. Since all the material will eventually be used on the job, it is critical that each trainee fully understand each point. Therefore, I stop several times during my lectures to question the trainees on certain points, and use role plays. These techniques can be used to promote class discussion because it allows the class to become actively involved. If any trainee seems uninterested or shy, these methods allow them to enter the discussion. It is important that I do not force anyone into the conversation; since this can make the trainees reticent to join the discussion for fear of embarrassment. I usually speak privately to any individual who refuses to take an active part in the class and we discuss how these problems can be overcome.

Overcoming problems. One of the most difficult problems I face as a small group speaker is dealing with a person who openly tries to contradict me. Usually these people fall into one of two categories. One type is the person who feels well versed in the particular subject. Occasionally, I find they are misinformed or have little understanding how this point relates to customer service. They are generally current employees who have come from other departments and are used to doing things in one particular manner. The other type of person is one who has no desire to attend the class. While I do not see this type in my customer services classes, I do have this type in my classes that teach new job skills to current customer service representatives. They are generally fearful of changes and are trying to find reasons why these changes are a poor idea. I have found several ways to handle successfully both types of people. First, if I am in the wrong, I admit it, openly, and without excuses or embarrassment. A combination of humour and grace clears the air and allows the discussion to continue. Of course, I can do this only a few times without losing my credibility, and it is imperative that I come to each session well prepared. If, however, I know I am correct in what I am saying, I need to reinforce it. My first inclination may be to defend myself. However, I find this results only in further alienating the rest of the audience. Chances are, there are others in the group who feel as I do, and I can call on these people to agree openly with me. In this manner, the group renders its own form of chastisement and is more effective in keeping the individual at bay. Finally, if all methods have no positive result, I advise the individual that I will speak to him or her privately after the session. This allows me to continue with the class. Later, we can air our differences, and the individual can be advised that this form of behaviour is unacceptable. In the few times that I had to resort to this method of control, I found that the person in question was not aware of the disruptiveness, and we were able to settle our differences amicably.

Humour. Finally, one of the most effective and interesting communication techniques is the use of humour. It helps maintain audience attention and can be used to emphasize a point. I usually find that a few simple humourous phrases during the course of the discussion is enough to hold their interest and also fosters group interaction. Without it, the material would be extremely dull and many points would be missed because of a lack of interest in the class.

As a result of the above statements and the evidence I have presented, I feel I have acquired the knowledge needed for effective oral communication. Therefore, I believe I can claim the three credits for this course.

Documentation:

A. Letter from Supervisor
B. Job Description
C. Evaluation Forms from Last Training Session
D. Video Tape Presentation
E. Workshop Outline
F. Reference Books

Adapted from: Thomas A. Edison, State College's Portfolio Guide, 1990-91

Employer Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Verification

A student has asked you to write a letter of verification. Your letter will help this student as he or she attempts to receive college credit for learning acquired outside the classroom - perhaps on the job or in other life experiences.

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process provides students the opportunity to receive college credit for their learning. Your letter is very important to the student because it provides evidence that the candidate does have the learning he or she claims to have. Here are some guidelines, which we hope will help as you write the letter:

1. Send your written evaluation on letterhead stationary if possible. If you do not have letterhead, be sure to include your address and daytime telephone number in case the department needs to contact you with questions.

2. Please indicate your current position and pertinent past experience/credential as it relates to the field.

3. Mention the candidate by name and identify your relationship to the candidate (e.g. co-worker, supervisor, etc.). Explain the situation in which you observed him or her and give the dates of the observation.

4. State specifically which competencies, skills, or knowledge you are verifying. In most cases, the student provides a description of learning or a course outline.

5. Describe the candidate's specific skills, knowledge, and competencies in your own words. Please comment on the level of difficulty of the skills performed, and the amount of supervision required.

6. Evaluate how effectively the person performed by using statements such as: average, above average, exceptional, etc. Use examples, whenever possible, for the standards you have used to evaluate the candidate, such as: performed at the same level as my other employees who possess a certificate or diploma; or performance exceeded all other volunteers under my supervision who have performed these same or similar duties, etc.

7. Remember, this is a letter of verification rather than recommendation. We are more interested in validating the candidate's learning than predicting future performance.

8. You may wish to indicate that this letter of verification is for scholastic purposes only.

9. Sign your letter and send it directly to the PLAR Office:

Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition Office
Mohawk College, Fennell Campus
Hamilton, Ontario L9C 0E5
Fax: 905-575-2348
Email: PLAR@mohawkcollege.ca

10. The PLAR Office will forward the letter to the academic department conducting the assessment. Please send a copy to the student and keep a copy for your records.

Your letter will be most helpful to the student and to us if it is an accurate evaluation of the student's learning. Thank you for taking time to write a thoughtful and candid letter.