A Profession Engaged Learning Model for Industry Placements

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A relational model is proposed for sustaining and growing industry placements that encompasses the individual, social and contextual dimensions of work-based learning. The Profession Engaged Learning Model (PEL) Model for industry placements is designed around three interdependent, interlinked activities that encourage individual and social agency through (a) engaging in mutually satisfying and rewarding workplace relationships (relationship development), (b) promoting work-related knowledge construction and re-construction (knowledge development) and (c) nurturing and growing communities of practice (network development). The proposed Model necessitates the engagement of stakeholders across various levels of organisations and the University so that placement programs can be responsive to changing needs, strategic in direction, intentional in design and sustainable in practice.

Keywords: work-based learning, professional formation, industry engagement, identity development

Background

The fundamental concept of industry placement programs is neither novel nor new. Vocationally orientated programs such as nursing, engineering and education have included practical placements as graduate work preparation since certification was introduced. However a recent report published by the ACER (2010) state only 29% of final year university students in Australia have done internships or work experience in their field of study. One reason for this situation is that placement programs struggle for recognition as sites for learning. Although there has been some research promoting the educational value of placements the evidence is seen as anecdotal with little reference to learning theories (Coll and Eames, 2004). Consequently placements are not highly regarded by educators and continue to be sidelined in university curricula and not fully integrated within program design (Patrick & Peach, 2007). A number of authors (Wyn (2009); Fenton-O’Creevy (2007); Sovilla & Varty, 2004) suggest the educational potential of placement programs is being held back by universities’ outdated views on learning. Informal learning (in workplaces) is considered inferior to teaching delivered at universities. However substantial literature across the fields of workplace learning, professional development and adult education promote an admixture of both formal and informal knowledge to better equip students for the uncertainty of life and work. Eames and Cates (2004) amongst others suggest that drawing distinctions between learning in the workplace and in the classroom is unhelpful, and that each should be seen to complement the other in developing the “whole” student.

A lack of understanding and poor appreciation of the learning opportunities within placements generates industry-based programs (IBL) lacking innovative pedagogy. However, harnessing the educational potential of IBL programs requires highly qualified educators and practitioners to design appropriate curriculum and assessment. Yet universities have been found to under-resource co-op programs, offer few reward systems (e.g. promotion structures) to entice academic participation (Forbes, 2007) and promote traditional views of learning that handicap student learning and individual development (DEST, 2007).

An industry placement is unique with its own unique set of individuals, work activities and settings. However co-op programs are situated within a university curriculum and often delivered with a “one size fits all” approach to curriculum design, pedagogy, management and assessment. Also, the literature claims there is a general assumption that students will learn simply by being immersed in the workplace and that work supervisors and work colleagues will readily provide the scaffolding and resources for student learning and development. This “hands off” approach sees some students returning to university after their placement dissatisfied and unhappy. Research literature in the areas of workplace learning and professional practice highlight the need for supporting structures within workplaces. Such structures encourage social interaction, engagement and reflective discussions within a community of practice and ‘self-correction’ can be instigated and change initiated. There is little recognition and acknowledgement of the part both the workplace supervisors and the workplace context play in promoting student learning, professional formation and individual development.

Much of the research literature in the area of IBL and WIL programs is impressionistic with little evidence of studies that delve into the various assumptions and expectations held by the various participants of co-op on the
role of co-op programs and the part they and others play in it. This paper seeks to share findings of a study conducted to identify support structures for IBL programs that are most likely to maximise benefits for all the stakeholders involved and to sustain and grow such programs.

**Method**

A single case study approach was selected with an IBL program, within an undergraduate business information systems degree at an Australian University degree, as the unit of analysis. The degree is delivered over 4 years with a mandatory 40 week co-op work placement in the 3rd year. At any one time there are approximately 120 students working in co-op placements across a wide range of IT job, within a diverse range of small, medium and large business across the full range of industry sectors. Most placements are located locally. Students usually return to complete a final year of study after co-op in full or part-time mode.

The study adopted an inductive design and engaged qualitative techniques to guide the capture, interpretation and analysis of individual perspectives of a sample of stakeholders drawn from across academia, industry and the student body. The validity of findings was addressed through the triangulation of the multiple perspectives from the diverse set of stakeholders.

Twenty-six in-depth, one and a half hour, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of stakeholders. A variety of sampling strategies were used to capture the complex dimensions of the co-op program. The composition of the final sample included: five students currently enrolled in the degree (ages 18+), five alumni (ages 25+), five active workplace supervisors, five academics involved in the business information systems program (ages 30+), five managerial/executive level personnel (ages 30+) from both the University and industry and one representative from the Australian Computer Society representing the IT profession. Although the sample size was small the data collected was rich so as to capture the complexity of and uniqueness of each individual’s perspective of co-op placements.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, systematically coded and inductively analysed to evoke multiple and rich meanings. Key criteria essential to creating understanding of co-op were identified together with interesting affirming, contrary and surprising text was also identified. The text was chunked and coded with a word or phrase. The data categories appeared to fall into three main areas:

- what the stakeholder (employer/student/academic) brought to co-op (assumptions, experiences, histories, etc.);
- what the stakeholder got out of co-op (benefits, outcomes etc.); and
- what the stakeholder valued most from co-op.

The next section draws from the wealth of perceptions and insights collected to develop a holistic model for delivering the placement program in this undergraduate degree. “Fuzzy generalisations” (Bassey, 1998) or assertions (Stake, 1995) could potentially be made across other work placement programs.

**Findings and discussion**

The analysis of the data highlighted the diversity of co-op placement settings, the uniqueness and value differentiation of individuals involved, and the breadth of opportunities for learning, professional formation, individual development and industry engagement. Each individual experiences co-op differently and the learnings they take away are subjective. Adult learning charts a philosophy that embraces the diversity of each situation by acknowledging the interrelatedness of learner and educator within a context that is “active and dynamic” (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004, p. 55) and offers a particularistic approach where learning can be tailored to suit the context and the people involved. Also adult learning principles indicate that individuals learn best when they can take responsibility for their own learning.

The findings indicated that the extent of preparation of both the students and of the workplace before the placement has a great impact on the richness of the work place experiences and learnings. There was evidence to suggest that the value organisations place on industry placements is reflected in the supervision and support the student is given and the development of the student. Also the jobs needed to be meaningful and have some benefit to the organisation. Guidance, instruction, direction and support during work placements maximise learning opportunities.
It is proposed that this placement program can be best sustained and improved through a set of interdependent, relational processes that promote and support: (a) rewarding, satisfying relationships between stakeholders, (b) ever-expanding relational webs of practice and (c) continuing practical knowledge construction.

(a) Processes that develop mutually rewarding and satisfying relationships

The diversity of organisations and the uniqueness of individuals involved within each placement call for approaches that promote deep relationship development at a number of levels across university and organisational contexts. At the local level, key stakeholders involved in the industry placement (student, supervisor and university advisor) negotiate the rules of engagement, and together, monitor and review students’ progress and well-being; at the undergraduate program level, partnerships are forged with the professional bodies through accreditation processes, and long-term industry collaborations and research partnerships with major organisations may be negotiated across higher management levels.

(b) Processes that build networks and communities of practice

Industry placement programs have the potential to provide useful feedback to the program team for course renewal and program accreditation and identify emerging industry trends requiring further research. Also, students located within organisations connect universities with organisations and become their ambassadors. Processes are required to promote the development of knowledge sharing and building networks across various cohorts of stakeholders, at different levels, for different purposes. For example the University should provide opportunities for connecting students with students, alumni and industry personnel for more informed industry placement preparation, promoting discussions between workplace supervisors for knowledge sharing and encouraging conversation to construct and reconstructing practice knowledge. These opportunities may develop into further research partnerships and industry collaborations.

(c) Processes that construct and reconstruct practical knowledge construction

Universities should implement processes that engage all stakeholders in practice knowledge construction and reconstruction before, during and after co-op placements. Universities can design and deliver programs and courses that intentionally inform and prepare their students and processes and resources that can guide organisations in planning for co-op. The curriculum design should be such that students are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning and development. Active learning environments have been found to be conducive to the development of proactive, agentive students. However, the design and delivery of such courses and conditions requires informed, capable and engaged teaching academics that have the relevant training and experience for designing curricula that incorporate work-related knowledge and delivery techniques that promote active learning environments. Processes should be in place during industry placements that intentionally guide learning and promote reflective conversations between the various stakeholders. Planned, regular interactions between various cohorts during the placement can ensure that continuing learning and development stay at the forefront of placement agendas.

Current models of work placement appear to focus on individual learning and transformation without acknowledging the social and contextual dimensions of learning, engagement and influence present at a number of levels. At micro levels there was evidence of students developing a number of identities in relation to the work-related knowledge and skills gained, the relationships developed and through their membership in various workgroups, organisation and the profession. At macro levels affordances offered by both university and organisations to the student, supervisor and academic were found to have an impact on the nature of the work placement experience and tied to responsible strategic decisions, appropriate learning cultures, suitable implementation structures, processes and management.

A holistic, relational, model of for work placements is proposed that encompasses the individual, social and professional dimensions of work-based learning, to encourage individual and social agency to engage in mutually satisfying and rewarding workplace relationships and promotes work-related knowledge construction and re-construction through nurturing and growing communities and practice. The model is contextualised within the university program, yet draws on resources (human and non-human) from various levels within the university, host organisations and a number of communities of practice.

The proposed model is designed around three inter-related, interdependent activities: Work-based Learning (WBL), Workplace Engagement (WPE) and Work-related Knowledge Construction (WRKCC) sustainable
through connecting these activities: (1) developing mutually satisfying and rewarding relationships between stakeholders (relationship development), (2) growing communities of learning and practice (network development) and (3) constructing and re-constructing work-related knowledge bases (knowledge development). The term Professional Engaged Learning (PEL) has been selected as a name for this model to draw together the three interdependent activities of professional practice knowledge construction (P), workplace engagement (E) and work-based learning (L). Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic view of the proposed Model of Professional Engaged Learning (PEL) for industry placements.

![Figure 1 Model of Professional Engaged Learning (PEL) for industry placements](image-url)
The successful implementation of these processes requires the involvement of individuals that cover various knowledge bases (such as information technology, professional formation, adult learning, teaching, workplace learning and organisational behaviour), working and teaching experiences and the necessary expertise to plan, design and implement and manage the above processes. The scope of knowledge and skills required may best be accommodated by a multi-functional, multidisciplinary team. In addition, the individuals (and the Team) need to be motivated. Recognition through promotion and reward structures offered by the University and by the respective organisations plays a major part in the extent to which both teaching academics and workplace supervisors become engaged in work placement programs.

**Conclusion**

The proposed Model of Profession Engaged Learning (PEL) for industry placements supports an educational goal of developing ‘authentic’ human beings (Barnett, 2006) who have the capacity for engagement with the world, are empowered to negotiate risk, reflexively construct their identities, make choices (Furlong in Wyn, 2009) and grow to become valued, respected members of their communities of practice. A learning-directed approach is proposed that seeks to maximise the learning opportunities of placements through making available the necessary arrangements and resources that empower, enable and grow relationships between individuals within groups and communities. It is proposed that processes and support structures need to be promoted across both university and host organisations that engage stakeholders in mutually satisfying relationships before, during and after industry placements and subsequently lay the foundations for relational webs of communities of practices. These communities in turn create bodies of new practice knowledge that sustain and grow university programs, strengthen the professional bodies and thereby enrich Society.

**References**


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