

That's not really WIL! – building a typology of WIL and related activities

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Increasing interest in experience based learning (EBL), and work-integrated learning (WIL) in particular, by the higher education sector has generated much debate over what constitutes WIL and the types of activities that characterise it. Placement activities undertaken off-campus are the most widely reported and accepted form of work/community related learning. However, in response to broadening conceptualisations of WIL and various forms of EBL, increasing competition for places and other drivers, universities are considering the use of a wider range of activities than before. This paper considers the following questions: What is an acceptable WIL activity? What are the boundaries? Do activities such as virtual projects, simulations and job readiness programs have advantages over placements for some situations and outcomes? Through a review of the literature of 255 sources including academic papers and vignettes, the authors develop a typology of WIL activities. The typology is discussed within the context of benefits and drawbacks of placements versus other types of participation activities.

Keywords: Placements, Typology of WIL activities, Work-integrated learning

Introduction

An increasing interest in WIL by the higher education sector in Australia and globally has generated much debate over what constitutes WIL and the types of activities that characterise it. Despite its long history, notions of WIL are 'evolving' (Groenewald, Drysdale, Chiupka, & Johnston, 2011), due in part to the lack of attention this area has received from educational researchers. This paper addresses some of these issues by offering a typology of activities that fall under the broad umbrella of WIL and other types of experiential learning.

Terminology

The terms WIL, work-related learning, workplace learning, project learning, industry-based learning, and some versions of EBL are used interchangeably in the literature, and there is a lack of consensus over their meaning. Nevertheless, there is agreement that WIL programs do not lean towards 'neat compartmentalisation' (Hawke, Mawer, Connole & Solomon, 1998, p. i), and this has contributed to diverse perceptions of what constitutes specific types of WIL, both within and between institutions and globally (Bennett, 2009; Patrick et al., 2008). WIL has been conceptualised as:

An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum (Patrick et al., 2008, p. iv).

The process whereby students come to learn from experiences in educational and practice settings and integrate the contributions of those experiences in developing the understandings, procedures and dispositions required for effective professional practice, including criticality (Billett, 2009, p. v).

An intentional aspect of a university curriculum whereby the learning is situated within the act of working, whether that work occurs within a recognizable workplace or a community (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010, p. 1).

These definitions promote WIL as the integration of theory and its application to the workplace, situated within a purposefully designed curriculum. While there is no stipulation that WIL needs to take place within the

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workplace, often the term implies a narrow focus - specifically, that the activity relates only to (and is located within) the workplace, thereby excluding other forms of EBL such as Service Learning. In this paper the term WIL is used in its broadest sense, that is, to accommodate the diverse range of activities that fall under the umbrella of both WIL and other forms of EBL including Service Learning. Our objective is to promote a conceptualisation of activities that include WIL, but also activities such as case studies, community programs, fieldwork, role plays and virtual projects, which may or may not be situated within the workplace.

Literature review

Placement type activities undertaken off-campus are the most widely reported and accepted form of WIL. Examples include internships, teaching practicum, clinical placements, volunteering and internships. In response to broadening conceptualisations of WIL, increasing competition for places (particularly in disciplines such as nursing and teaching where they are a compulsory part of the curriculum) and other drivers (e.g., varying aims and purposes of WIL programs), universities are considering the use of a wider range of activities than before. It is our intention to promote active choice in the selection of activities for WIL, rather than just following the traditional path of placements, which may or may not be the most effective type of activity to support the achievement of learning outcomes in some courses.

Recent attempts to define WIL and develop taxonomies have tended to focus on different models of practice (e.g., community, professional, industry), rather than on the activities themselves (e.g., Groenewald et al., 2011). More recently, universities have begun incorporating classifications of activities into their WIL policies, which has led to the development of typologies for different types of WIL activities. These classifications are based on varied approaches (most draw on several approaches), including: continuum of experiences, i.e., from classroom to the workplace (Jones et al., 2009); specific types of programs and models (e.g., cooperative, service learning) (Calway & Murphy, 2007; Cooper et al., 2010; Freestone, Thompson & Williams, 2006; Keating, 2006; Sattler, Wiggers & Arnold, 2011); types of activities (e.g., fieldwork, simulations) (Lawson, Fallshaw, Papadopoulos, Taylor & Zanko, 2011), pedagogical foundations (Guile & Griffiths, 2001); and purposes of the activity/course (CHE, 2011; Groenewald et al., 2001; Trigwell & Reid, 1998). They are also based on diverse types of evidence, including: case studies (CHE, 2011); interviews (Sattler et al., 2011); theory (Guile & Griffiths, 2001); reviews of literature (Sattler et al., 2011; Trigwell & Reid, 1998) and experiential pedagogies (Drysdale et al., 2011 cited in Groenewald et al., 2011).

There are a number of variables that can be used to classify WIL activities. These include the location of the activity (i.e., on or off-campus), length and purpose of the activity, whether academic credit is awarded, degree of community engagement, the type of industry/historical context and so on. The multitude of variables that influence WIL activities make the development of typologies a difficult task - there are many variations of activities reported in the literature, with some involving multiple components (e.g., on-campus activities can include fieldwork, industry/community projects and placements, which are often considered off-campus activities). Fewer classifications based on types of WIL activities appear in the literature - rather they are incorporated into typologies based on WIL models and programs.

Aims

This paper considers the following questions: What is an acceptable WIL activity? What are the boundaries? Do activities such as virtual projects, simulations and job readiness programs have advantages over placements for some situations, students and learning outcomes?

Method

A literature review was undertaken to identify various types of WIL activities. The purpose was to overview the range of WIL activities reported in the literature, not to carry out an exhaustive search. Knowing the literature was vast, sources were sought that covered a broad range of disciplines, and included non-placement activities. Sixty vignettes from the Australian Collaborative Education Network website (ACEN, 2011), and academic papers published in the *International handbook for cooperative education* (Coll & Eames, 2004) were consulted as a first step. A more targeted search of educational databases (e.g., ERIC) was then undertaken using discipline specific search terms (e.g., 'placement', 'practicum'), as the term 'WIL' often failed to locate non-placement options. In all 255 sources were reviewed. They were distributed amongst the team, who read and reviewed each source, recording information on a supplied template. The template was designed to capture the

extensive range of activities and information about a number of aspects including: type of activity, on or off-campus, degree of community engagement, degree of contact with host, degree of contact with academic support, length of placement, mode and structure of activity, group or individual activity, assessment etc. Templates were collated and analysed. Sixteen common variables were identified.

Findings – Typology

WIL activities as reported in the literature were classified as off-campus and on-campus activities. There are many examples in the literature of activities which combine both on-campus and off-campus components. For this reason the information was presented as a Venn diagram to show the relationship between the activities with examples of each (see Figure 1)². Because the terms used to describe various participation activities (e.g., placement, practicum, WIL, internships, community projects) are not always clear and have been used interchangeably in the literature, they do not always indicate the main features of a WIL activity. For example fieldwork is not necessarily undertaken off-campus – it could be completed on-campus or a combination of both. For simplification purposes participation activities have been separated into two types: those that occur predominately off-campus, and those undertaken predominately on-campus. There are many variations of activities reported in the literature, with some involving both on and off-campus components. Further there are varying degrees of community engagement each activity entails. Generally off-campus activities have a higher degree of obvious community engagement, but that does not mean that on-campus activities do not. There are many activities on-campus that can, and do involve a high degree of community engagement. For example, moot courts or other types of role play where students receive direct feedback from industry representatives. The typology and findings from the literature review were initially published as a discussion paper (Rowe, Kelliher & Winchester-Seeto, 2012).

Discussion

Literature to date has tended to focus on defining and classifying WIL. While WIL is an important part of EBL, the term is not often inclusive of all types of EBL experiences. The majority of typologies developed so far have been based on specific types of models or programs, an approach which can be problematic because terms such as WIL, co-op, internship often hold different meanings or are used interchangeably. Further, they imply set boundaries or end points. It is our view that the boundaries in WIL are often unclear because of the complex relationships that exist between many of the variables which affect the suitability of activities.

As noted by Sattler et al. (2011, p. 6) there is no 'ideal' type of activity or experience - each offers different benefits, and best supports different learning outcomes (Billett, 2009). Within the literature there is a widely held assumption that placements are often the most effective or appropriate activity for WIL experiences. This is likely because placements have a long history in the literature, particularly in disciplines such as teaching, social work, nursing, engineering and business. While placements provide a valuable opportunity for applying theory to practice, enhancing graduate employability and allowing students to 'try' out their chosen profession prior to graduation, they also have a number of drawbacks and are not necessarily the most suitable activity for supporting all learning outcomes. Table 1 presents a comparison of benefits and drawbacks for placement and non-placement activities. Note that these are examples, and there may well be others. It is intended only as a starting point for discussion drawing on the authors' knowledge of the area, rather than an in-depth analysis based on empirical evidence. Placement in this context is defined as an activity which takes place outside of the classroom in a workplace or community organisation.

² Figure 1 is located in Appendix A (after the reference list).

Table 1. Examples of benefits and drawbacks for placement versus other WIL activities

Criteria	Placement	Other WIL activities
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application of theory to practice Development of transferrable skills Work readiness Improved prospects for employment Career exploration and development Professional socialisation Networking opportunities increase students contacts and potential references Possibility of paid employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Application of theory to practice Development of transferrable skills Preparation for graduate employability More controlled and scaffolded learning environment More options for students who are ‘difficult to place’ Flexibility where practical/ logistical reasons make ‘real world’ experiences difficult to offer, e.g. OHS issues, simulations provide students in high risk areas with an opportunity to practice skills in a low risk setting Some activities better able to support learning, e.g. introductory activities Greater choice of activities in fields where there is high competition for placements Less reliant on community/industry support Cost effective
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heavily reliant on community/industry support Competition for placements means delays to student progress if placements cannot be secured May not suit all types of learning objectives Potential high risks in some areas, e.g. student, client safety Variability in host supervisor availability/competence High administrative costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less direct contact with the workplace means fewer opportunities for networking, professional socialisation, potential employment, career exploration etc. Less opportunity to develop tacit knowledge May not capture ambiguity/complexity of workplace or organisation

This paper has identified the broad range of activities reported in the literature that potentially fall under the umbrella of WIL. The development of a typology based on WIL activities provides a unique contribution to current scholarship focused on classifying such experiences. As this is an emerging area of scholarship, there are many promising areas for future research including clarifying the boundaries of WIL activities, assessment of the educational effectiveness of certain types of activities for specific learning outcomes, and exploring the influence of different models over time.

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