Speaking the Same Language:
Relevance for a Global Ontology of Work-Integrated Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at differing perceptions of aspects of work-integrated learning (WIL) in the global context, and discusses the relevancy for establishing an ontology for not only a common 'language', but a common 'culture' and 'identity' in WIL as well. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) note that people mark their identity through language: This paper will demonstrate, as a linguistic case example, the use of 'Ocker Strine' (Australian Colloquial English) in Australia and how specific cultural usage of terminology can co-exist with a standardized global format, with the issue of a WIL 'identity' being emphasized. As a point of review, the findings of an audit of WIL practice within a single Australian university Faculty of business – the Griffith Business School – will be presented as a case example.

Although higher education has become an industry and industry sector in its own right (Bennett, 2008), it has been posited that universities are going through a period of re-invention and should regard themselves as not exclusively as 'institutions', but as 'communities of higher education' (Lee, 1999). Linking directly all stakeholders in this 'community', work-integrated learning (WIL) has emerged over the last two decades as an effective complementary teaching and learning methodology (Mintzberg, 2005; Orrell, 2005) and, has expanded beyond its historic academic areas of concentration to include, essentially, every field in higher education (Dewar, 2006).

With this global increase in interest in WIL in higher education, so has increased inconsistency in definition and interpretation in practice, structure and especially typology (McGill, 2009). What is one institution's 'internship' can be another's 'co-op', 'practicum' or 'field experience', with practices, procedures, desired outcomes and perception of the experience differing from one part of the world to another, from one higher education institution to another and, even within individual institutions themselves (Schembri & Bennett, 2009).

Acknowledged as being a national leader in the development of WIL in Australia (Universities Australia, 2008), Griffith University's academic unit having the most diverse offering of WIL activities is its Business School, which has over 50 different academically-based activities in the curricula (Bennett, 2006). In 2008 a comprehensive desk review and audit of existing WIL was conducted. This audit concentrated on workplace-intensive 'Higher Order' forms of WIL practice such as industry or external stakeholder intensive/immersive Internships, Field Studies, and Project-based courses (subjects/units). The primary purpose of the audit was to address the question of "How can the Griffith Business School advance an effective WIL program in a consistent, effective, and sustainable manner?" (Schembri & Bennett, 2009).

A key initial finding of the audit was that despite a significant period of concerted effort and education of stakeholders – staff, students and industry – the perception of what constituted 'WIL' within the Business School was subjective and, had both subtle and major differences in interpretation for the identically-named activities, such as an 'internship'. Further analysis, including interviews with a representative selection of stakeholders, strongly indicated that the non-existence a specific typology and definite categorization of WIL type across the Griffith Business School contributed to this lack of coordination and a more universal understanding.

A significant contributing factor identified in the audit was that stakeholders tended to interact over time with multiple elements of the School, differing elements with the University itself, as well as with other institution's WIL programs and activities

(Schembri & Bennettt, 2009). The result was a lack of unified perception of the various WIL activities within the School itself and that the addressing of any introduction of a 'WIL Lexicon' or ontology would have to involve external as well as internal parties to be effective.

Australia is not alone in this situation. As part of preliminary investigation, a qualitative review of conference proceedings from two consecutive Word Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) world conference and one Asia Pacific conference, (WACE 2005; WACE 2007; WACE 2008,) further indicated that while there is a convergence of meaning and accepted use of terminology, there was a broad representation of differing contexts for use of the same terminology. As an example, the use of the term 'internship' could be used to described in Japan a two-week group placement in an organisation where the student participants engaged primarily in one (reflective observation) of the four stages of a Kolbian "Experiential Learning Cycle" model (Neill, 2004), to a comprehensive full-year industry placement in the United States where the students engaged in all stages (concrete experience, reflective observation, active experimentation, abstract conceptualisation) as well as demonstrating contextual relativistic reasoning.

The literature of the field largely accepts that WIL models and structures, like workplaces themselves, do not have the tendency towards 'neat compartmentalization' (Hawke, Mawer, Connole & Solomon, 1998). As a result, there is a lack of a common interpretation or perception of what constitutes a specific type of WIL, and this, in turn, creates difficulties not only internal comparison of similar activities within a single geographical jurisdiction, but in international comparison as well.

Speaking The Same Language

In the English-speaking world, academia and higher education, as any industry or industry sector, has a language to itself. While the language of academia, and education in particular, has a largely universal understanding among participants, when the various stakeholders engaged in WIL are included, significant differences in perception and subsequent understanding can often occur. A prime example is the use of the term 'discipline' in Australian higher education.

The etymology of the word 'discipline' indicates its strong relationship to education, with its linguistic roots from the latin word *disciplina*, meaning teaching, learning (Merriam-Webster, 2009). The American Heritage College Dictionary (2007) defines the word discipline as "Training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral mental improvement".   While this would be a desirable outcome of a WIL – or any learning – activity, the socio-linguistic context can differ when dealing with the various stakeholders of a WIL activity and, this simple term can have a different meaning with different stakeholder populations.

Student = punish
Industry = maintain order
Certain Communities = erotic
Academia = specific field of study

Different Languages, Different Standards

Ogilvie (2004) states that "Benchmarking is the search for best practices" and, that benchmarking is a key element of quality control in higher education. This is confirmed by Harvey (2004), who notes that "Benchmarks may be (1) defined for an institution (or sub-institution unit) as targets, possibly on continuous basis (2) the basis of comparison between two or more institutions (or sub-institutional units) (3) specifications of processes that can be compared as a basis for identifying, for example, optimum effectiveness, efficiency or transparency." As such, "the specification or codification of comparable processes" in regards to WIL in the global context must be based upon criteria or comparisons that are readily and universally understood.

An ontology conveys a certain specification (e.g. of some data) based on a given classification system (Hitzler, Krotzsch, Ehrig. & Sure, 2005), as well as identifying interrelations and accompanying specifications. Specifications are the core of initiating a rigorous benchmarking process. Without a standard of the terminology used in WIL with globally agreed specifications, the use of the terms 'benchmark' and 'best practice' are moot in the field. This is not, specifically an academic argument or a case of simple semantics: The lack of a specific ontology for WIL can lead to the problematic international – or even single institutional – benchmarking of 'best practice' WIL activities and the ability to effectively transfer this practice from one program or institution to another as, a benchmark is a "reference point or criterion by which to measure something." (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002, p. 131)

English has been spoken in Australia for a bit more than 200 years and has developed a distinctive dialect formed by the mingling of the Irish and cockney accents of the early colonies and convict settlements (Mitchell, 1995). Today the Australian common usage of the English language – working-class 'ocker speech', a.k.a. 'strine' ('Australian') – is the *lingua franca* of a nation that spans an entire continent (Fickling, 2003).

Despite the large geographical size of Australia, and the vast distances between major population centers, in essence almost every Australian can understand one another, including common local slang usages. As a practice example, ask any Australian what 'togs', 'cozzies', 'bathers', 'boardies' or 'swimmers are, and you will be rewarded with the statement "Swimwear" ('Mate'). And, of course, every Australian knows what a 'budgie smuggler' is……Speedos. And, a 'thong' is not, as in the North American parlance, something you wear on your feet……it is a 'g-string' and far too small to fit a budgie into.

Of course, there are subtle – and not so subtle – differences in the perception of all these types of 'swimwear' in the general population, but the overall category (swimwear) is understood within the single cultural/linguistic context across an entire nation, and the specifics of the primary types – typology – is generally recognizable. Furthermore, among the specific population engaged in the specific field (swimming) there is almost universal understanding of the differences in type, usage and relevant and respective contexts, despite any linguistic similarity: It is a cultural anathema for a surfer to wear a 'Speedo' and, conversely, a springboard diver's social identity does

not extend to the wearing of board shorts ('boardies') due to the high probability of a 'wardrobe malfunction' occurring.

Conclusion

Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) note that people mark their identity through language. Language, common language, expresses a social identity and allows a community – such as that of higher education – to express a network of idealized social values. If WIL is to reach its academic equality in higher education, the language of WIL must now be global, not national or in the least, single institutional, in order for the field to express and establish its identity and social values. Lacking this, in determining international comparisons the nonexistence of an accepted typology and ontology can result in flawed assumptions and, subsequent flawed benchmarking practices.

Speaking the same language, although often different dialects and intonations may exist, facilitates better global understanding. In order to reinforce the language of WIL – an 'identity' if you will – a common 'language' representing the common 'culture' is required in order to broaden understanding beyond what exists today. Similar practice and underlying principles of WIL can co-exist in the field under their own exclusive terminology and interpretation as part of the community's greater 'culture'. However, much like primitive hunting, common practice and identical outcomes does not mean identical methodologies that can be either substituted or entirely compared to one another using the same terminology – an Australian boomerang does not resemble in function, skills or construct in any way a North American bow and arrow – although done correctly (usage, application) both hunters and their respective clans will eat well in the evening (outcomes) – one roast kangaroo, the other grilled elk.

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