

University-Industry Partnership for Pedagogy: Some Principles for Practice

Abstract

Industries demand a closer alignment of university learning curriculum to real work tasks to better meet the needs of organisations and learners. Both industries and learners prefer the learning challenges to be based on the exigencies of work to precisely reflect real work circumstances that overtly add to business outcomes. However, such alignment is often complicated and challenging for academics and workplace managers alike. It demands partnerships between universities and industries, similar to arrangements forged for the vocational education and training sector. Such partnerships should allow active participation by learners, academics, workplaces and university administrators to move beyond a teaching orientation to a demonstrably effective learning arrangement through work integrated learning.

This paper draws on a case study that negotiated a partnership between a non-government organisation and an Australian university to design and facilitate a boutique curriculum that met the needs of learners and their workplace. It is based on feedback from a cohort of learners sponsored by their organisation, managers from the organisation, university staff involved in the course delivery and experiences, and reflective notes of the authors. The paper presents a set of principles for universities and industries for partnership to enhance the alignment of academic curriculum to meet organisational and individual learning needs through work integrated learning.

Introduction

Sweeping changes in national education policies effecting decline in student numbers and university funding, and demands from individuals and industry for closer alignment of courses

through work integrated learning (WIL) coerces Australian universities to extend current practices and approaches to teaching and learning beyond the traditional learning environments. To maintain a competitive advantage universities have to extend pragmatic outlooks and champion closer relationships with industry. There is now wide acknowledgment that the success of WIL at universities hinges on a close partnership with industry (Harris & Simons, 2006; Watters, 2005; Wright, 2008).

The authors of this paper were granted a small grant to forge a partnership with an organisation to pilot a boutique curriculum based on the theories of workplace learning (Billett, 1992, 2001). This partnership led to the design and implementation of a boutique curriculum that was centred around the strategic objectives of the organisation. A cohort of twelve workers from this organisation was sponsored to complete a Graduate Certificate course and develop leadership capacity that would allow them to manage recent reforms in the health and community services industry. One of the outcomes of this project was to develop a set of principles around partnerships with industry to enhance the alignment of academic curriculum to meet organisational and individual learning needs through WIL.

These principles are formulated to assist university staff in developing learning partnerships with industry to facilitate WIL for cohorts, and to guide industry to actively engage with the university and support cohorts they sponsor. The paper draws on feedback from a cohort of learners sponsored by their organisation, managers from the organization, university staff involved in the course delivery and experiences and reflective notes of the authors. It is therefore practice-based. The paper begins with the theoretical rationale for WIL and cohort delivery and then goes on to describe the process used to develop and deliver a boutique curriculum that met the needs of the learners and their workplace. This is followed with a brief discussion of four imperatives for

success. It is from these four imperatives that the principles for universities and for industry form guidelines when engaging in WIL.

Work integrated learning

The benefits of WIL can only be realized if the curriculum, learning tasks and facilitation approaches are *embedded* and *embodied* in the cultural context of the workplace. Only then, can the learning be made more meaningful for individuals and their organisations. Such learning (embedded and embodied in the contexts of the learners and their work environment) is called *work integrated learning*. Work integrated learning is therefore a socio-cultural experience which shapes interpretations, meaning schemes and knowledge formation. Experiences in this type of contextualization are difficult to teach or learn in other environments because the workplace provides unique pedagogies that form useful epistemological tools for facilitation (Symes & McIntyre, 2000).

With increasing demands from industry and individuals for closer alignment of university learning curriculum to real work tasks, academics are challenged with new teaching and learning approaches to WIL. Both industries and learners prefer the learning challenges to be based on the exigencies of work to precisely reflect real work circumstances that overtly add to business outcomes. Such alignment is often complicated and challenging because it involves a shift from the traditional academic environments to a shared ecosystem of industry, work sites and worker-learners. For universities, then, the challenge is to move beyond the traditional, paternalistic offerings to a more proactive and complex approach to the management of learning so that the knowledge is indeed integrated into the workplace. Partnerships need to be founded on active participation of learners, academics, workplaces and university administrators to facilitate a

transition beyond a teaching orientation to a demonstrably effective learning arrangement through WIL. This requires a re-distribution of ‘powers’ between the partners.

Methodology

The paper is based on a case study in which a cohort of twelve workers was sponsored by their employer. The cohort completed a Graduate Certificate in Education (Executive Leadership) course and developed leadership capacity that would enable them to manage recent reforms in the health and community services industry in the state of Queensland, Australia. The Queensland University of Technology provided a small grant to forge a partnership with the sponsoring organization (the Queensland Community Services and Health Workforce Council – referred to as the Workforce Council in this paper). The Workforce Council is a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) with about 45 staff distributed across the state of Queensland in Australia. Its clients are volunteer groups who had access to government funding and who needed advice and support for workforce development.

The rationale for the project was to develop a framework and appropriate learning processes that would have real cogency and potency, and lead to meaningful outcomes for the individuals as well as the sponsor. The designers were aware that the success of work integrated learning in this instance hinged on interactions between the disciplinary area, professional practice, and the workplace goals, leading to an ‘experienced curriculum’ as opposed to an ‘intended curriculum’. An organisation centred curriculum was developed.

To understand the needs and issues of the organisation and the individuals it was necessary to examine the sponsor’s strategic plan and organisational culture. In the interest of effective adult learning it was also necessary to clarify the organisational as well as individual assumptions and address any concerns prior to commencement of the course.

The project was evaluated and data was collected from interviews with ten learners. The findings were discussed with a focus of six interviewees. This data was supplemented with feedback from managers of the Workforce Council, and university staff involved in the course delivery; and experiences and reflective notes of the authors.

Results and Discussion

Principles for university

The principles for university are derived from what the authors learned from the project and in hindsight consider these to be useful guide to enhancing WIL. The principles fall under three areas: Relationship building; curriculum design and facilitation; and management.

Relationship building

- Ensure academic staff have sufficient knowledge to initiate discussions with senior management of the organisation sponsoring learning cohorts. They need to understand how the awards and course content will serve organisational needs. The staff need to appreciate, understand and commit to a WIL approach to course delivery.
- Determine the exact nature of outcomes expected by the organisation, its level of commitment to resources, and the cost (in quantitative and qualitative terms if possible) to the organisation of its staff not engaging in the learning.
- Introduce the organisation to the culture, procedures, systems and language commonly used in the academic disciplines. Nurture a trusting relationship by sharing the constraints and parameters that universities operate in and potential risks.

Curriculum design and facilitation

- Ensure the university obtains sufficient understanding of the organisation's strategic plan and culture. This is important in terms of what is acceptable and not acceptable and may influence the content to be covered (or not covered), learning strategies that are likely to be acceptable or not acceptable, important policies in the organisation (especially on health, safety and discrimination) and any other contentious areas. Aspects of the culture (for example, colloquial words, important historical stories or commonly used jargon) may need to be incorporated into the curriculum design. It may be useful to appoint a contact person representing the university and act as a 'cultural virus' to understand the culture that is continuously evolving.
- Ensure that the design of the curriculum is fully applicable to the needs of the organisation. Assessment needs to meet at least three intentions: the strategic change targets of the organisation; the individual learners, and at the same time be integrated and embedded in the workplace. Overall, the content covered, the learning strategies used and the assessment must meet the stringent academic standards.

Management

- Ensure the university's ability to allocate realistic time and resources to WIL for delivery of a quality product to industry. Its ability to establish, maintain and sustain a trusting relationship with industry and genuine commitment will ensure mutual benefits.
- Obtain a realistic cost of additional work for customisation and inform the partnering industry. They too need to understand the business of packaging and delivery to meet particular needs.
- Establish procedures for capturing academic staff experiences as part of the continuous improvement process.

These principles allude to the fact that the process of building relationships with industry and engaging with them to design and facilitate WIL that will meet the needs of organisations and individuals *take time*.

Principles for Industry

The principles for industry fall under three areas: Getting the organisation ready for WIL; contributing to the curriculum design and facilitation; and supporting staff for WIL.

Getting the organisation ready for WIL

- Appoint a liaison person to forge discussions with the university and prepare draft proposals/papers for internal discussions and approval.
- Learn how to navigate between the service provisions of the university and become familiar with the language of the university. Agree on flexibility in the sequence of the unit delivery as well as replacement of units/modules if priorities change. Provide assurance and commitment for learning to the academics. Seek a case management approach to manage all administration requirements for the whole cohort.
- Inform staff about time commitments for learning and assessment. Make staff aware of work-life-learning balance and help them schedule learning spaces and times to obtain a balance. Ensure that staff are aware of their responsibilities as self directed learners. Make allocations of time and resources explicit.

Contributing to the curriculum design and facilitation

- Establish a consistent interpretation of the strategic and emergent plans. Determine the accepted and unaccepted practices for learning. Discuss the learning needs with a wide range

of staff and agree on the learning program with explicit outputs and outcomes that align with the strategic goals. Initiate conversations for a learning program through an informal arrangement, then formalise, once all aspects are confirmed. Managers and learners should have input in the design of learning and assessment.

- Articulate the organisational culture to the academics so that learning and assessment can be designed in this context. Finalise a structure and scaffolding arrangements to optimise outcomes for the workplace.

Supporting staff for WIL

- Inform staff about the workplace pedagogies and affordances that **are** available to them and encourage them to play an agentic role in learning. Help identify champions to extend capacity building. Release and engage supervisors to validate alignment and review the learning objectives, performance measures and indicators. Release senior staff for evaluation and validation.
- Link learning to other capacity building activities. Seek individual worker-learner's progress report if this is needed for internal reporting or accountability purposes.

Conclusions

Work integrated learning requires a considerable investment in resources by both the university and the organisation. Accordingly, WIL should be used where learning is expected to be complex, and where the benefits of the learning will be reflected in the achievement of defined strategic objectives for the organisation.

From the university's point of view, experienced staff would need to be allocated to the project. Such staff would need to have knowledge of the strategic planning process and organisational

culture and the ability to facilitate adult learning, especially self-directed learning. They need skills in brokering and connecting a curriculum that is co-designed through the partnership. The university's procedures – especially those involving enrolment and curriculum design – would need to be flexible enough to allow for the demands of the organization. These demands are likely to revolve on the type of content and the timing of this content and assessment. The workload of the academic staff involved also needs to be realistically determined. Through out the entire project, though, the university will need to ensure that all academic standards are maintained.

For the organisation, a rational and accurate understanding of both the intended and emergent strategic plans is critical. This understanding must be shared by all who will be involved in the WIL project. The organisation will need to be prepared for the WIL project and this will include appointing a liaison person, learning about the university processes and language, and informing staff about expected outcomes and time commitments for learning. The organisation also needs to ensure that the learning is appropriate to the organisational culture and that sufficient workplace affordances and learning spaces are available to staff.

While WIL can be complex and time consuming, the benefits of deep learning and the direct application of this learning to organisational imperatives can ensure a positive return on investment, provided the planning principles, outlined in this paper are followed.

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