WIL success: truth or dare

Abstract

Work intergraded learning is not just an off campus experience which ads practiced to theory as applied by many HE institutions. WIL is a practical application of the academic theory and application can be performed in class as well. Therefore, WIL should be implemented as an integrated part of the Higher education not only on campus but off campus as well. This is a different approach taken in order to make learning more appropriate in and out of class. This new approach argues that WIL is inclusive of various forms of work learning and is not reflected by industry placements only. Simulated projects, service-learning assignments on and off campus and various other activities are incorporated into this new methodology. This paper challenges the traditional approached to WIL. It will present how the new WIL methodology is assigned within a Design Faculty and examples of the practical implication of the projects will be presented. Design as a discipline is by nature a participative field, which more often than not engage in real time industry and community outreach projects. The argument will demonstrate why the Design faculty is therefore a fitting area to apply the new approach for implementing WIL and will be supported by data collected from student feedback and participation.

Keywords: work learning, reflective learning, WIL, curriculum
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Introduction

South Africa and international higher education are in the process of redefining curriculum and pedagogy. In doing so, higher education faces many challenges which are demanding, and new approaches are needed that will support students from all backgrounds to be able to develop into responsible citizens of the world. Therefore, the South African Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in 2002 set the process in motion, which encompass various projects in order to develop the national quality assurance system to function as a gatekeeper of the quality in higher education. (Hay, 2011) The main focus of these projects was the enhancement of teaching and learning in the context of the restructuring of higher education. One of many publications for improving Teaching and Learning Resource focused on Work Integrated Learning (WIL).

Hay (2011) stated that “this publication, Work-Integrated Learning: A Guide for Higher Education Institutions, intended to assist those involved in program development and in the curriculum development and adaptation required by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework” (CHE, October 2007). Hay pointed out that this paper also aims to stimulate other academics who are involved in teaching to consider the educational purpose and role of work-integrated learning in teaching and learning. The authors of the paper debate the fact that, in order for students to qualify from university programs, and be prepared for the world of work, universities could implement more than one type of methodology to achieve the outcome.
Defining Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Work integrated learning, as implemented by many institutions worldwide (Co-op at a glance, 2007), approaches this activity as a stand-alone module, where student enroll for WIL in addition to their studies. Houshmand & Papadakis, (n.d.) as stated in Coll et al (2009, p14) defined WIL as a methodology in which students undergo conventional learning, mostly at higher educational institutions (HEI) and combine this learning with time spent in the workplace, which is relevant to their program of study and career aims. Higher educational institutions, which use this practice, define this as an integrated learning experience. Although this approach to WIL contributes to better-prepared students and offer them work preparedness for better employment is the future (Dressler & Keeling, 2004), it might pose a restrictive approach in view of the current world economic and social situation. At the WACE conference in Philadelphia, June 2011, numerous presenters indicate the problem of finding enough work placements for the WIL module. This situation poses a restricting approach to equal opportunity to all students and the situation also points to the need for the development of a new design for the implementation of WIL.

The research done by the task group in South Africa has however redefine WIL as “an umbrella term to describe curricular, pedagogic and assessment practices, across a range of academic disciplines that integrate formal learning and workplace concerns”. (CHE, 2011, p. 4) This paper emphasizes the alignment shift between the workplace and education, and presents an approach, which confirms that there is no restriction between education and the workplace. The task team acknowledged that there are many curricular modalities but focused on four main modalities for their argument. These modalities are: work-directed theoretical learning, problem-based/
oriented learning, project based learning and workplace learning and can be defined as follow. (CHE, 2011, p.16-19)

In short these four modalities can be defined in the following ways. Work-directed theoretical learning is when the theoretical knowledge are incorporated into the learning in sequenced way to ensure that it will fit into both the academic offering and that the information is applicable and relevant to the specific career. (CHE, 2011, p. 78) According to Boud and Feletti (1999, p. 15) problem based learning (PBL) is an approach to structuring a curriculum in such a way that it involves challenging students with problems from practice, which provides an incentive for learning. According to the research presented in the Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide, few South African academic programs have used PBL in it actual form. The study shows that problem-oriented learning is more often use because this often involves real world scenarios for problem-based activities.

The third of the modalities is project-based learning (PBL). This module points to projects set in collaboration with a ‘real world’ client or it could relate to the ‘real world’ situation. These projects could typically be service learning projects or industry-university collaborative research projects. Turner, Keegan & Crawford (2000) define project-base learning as a strategy that appreciates both the inherent drive of students to learn and the need to feel that they are busy with worthwhile work. The last modality is referred to as work place learning. This module was previously known as co-operative education and points to placing students into a work related situation. Through the explanation of the four modalities above it is clear that the new structure opens the possibilities of incorporating the work integrate experience in the educational syllabus in a broader scale.
Implication of the new structure

The expansion of the various interaction with industry is particular relevant in the Design faculty. Reason is that the creative industries, served by the Design faculty, are often companies that function on assignments, projects and flexible hours. None of which is easy to fit into an academic framework. In general, companies, to participate with industry projects, competitions, exhibits and other similar interactions, often approach Design faculties for engaging in these projects. Design faculties are seen as a pool of new, fresh and out of the box thinking, young and innovative minds. Therefore, industries often reach out to Design Faculties to participate in various forms of interaction. In the previous WIL structure these various forms of participation were not accounted for under the umbrella of structured WIL programs and students often participate in these activities with out relating it back to the principles of learning. Participation was merely judge by output and not learning.

The new WIL structure creates the perfect situation whereby these industry interactions can be incorporated into the syllabus and academic principles such as reflection on the learning process can be applied. Moving the workplace into the classroom create similar conditions to the industry placements. The combination of the direct input from the industry role players and the involvement from the academic staff generate working conditions where by students can have a simulated workplace experience but be able to related it back to the learning environment. The benefits of this approach are the fact that each learning experience can be adjusted to the level of studies. The CHE Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide gives clear indications of how the various levels of study could interact with the four modalities of the newly developed WIL approach.

The new WIL policy provides a new lens through which learning can be
viewed. Muller (2009) and Gamble (2009) distinguish between two types of knowledge namely conceptual knowledge and contextual knowledge. Although both types of knowledge presented should be in education, it is the contextual knowledge that builds the horizontally and the knowledge that is mostly associated with vocational type of curricula. Contextual knowledge relates to ties with the “real world” and it is the knowledge that is developed in and through human interaction. Implementing these new modalities and offering different types of industry can increase interaction the “real world” experience. However it is important to note that academic curricula do not represent itself in jobs or industry projects in a straightforward manner, but through a process of re-contextualization (Bernstein, 2000) or transformation (Barnett, 2006, p. 145).

Barnett (2006, p.145) explains that vocational curricula must face both ways to disciplinary knowledge and to the field of practice. The new WIL structure makes this possible. Weaving the different modalities of WIL into the curricula create the scenario where by students are able to connect theory with practice. During implementation of these modalities it is possible to transport the sector specific generic knowledge and skills into the classroom. It also allow for disciplinary knowledge to be re-organized for vocational application.

Another benefit of bringing the “real world” into the classroom is the possibility of applying reflective learning while learning is taking place. Atkins and Murphy (1994) suggest that for real reflection to take place, and make a difference it should be followed with commitment to action. Having the students in class offers a window of opportunity to apply this approach. Boyd & Fales (1983) and Greenwood (1993) confirms this by expressing that this approach allows students to redesign or
rethink about what they are busy with while they are doing it.

**Truth or dare**

With the implementation of this new WIL approach it remains to be seen if the early successes will endure. From the early feedback the new modality structure seems to be better suited for both employees in the Design field and for the academic programs offered in Design faculties. Initial surveys amongst students who participated in industry collaborative project show positive results. Students reported a sense of awareness of “real life” expectations such as working in a time frame, adhere to project parameters, upkeep of quality and professionalism in presentation skill to mention only a few. Interviews with academic staff showed high fervor for working with industry, one lecturer stated, “students seems to make the connection” after an industry project. Lastly the feedback from industry deemed positive as well. Having the possibility to tap into creative energies without disruption at the work place was rated high on the feedback report. Industry partners said that they benefitted from these new WIL modalities and they do feel that they can contribute in a positive manner.

**Conclusion**

The inclusion of WIL is written into the Higher Educational framework of South Africa. It is therefore encouraging to find positive reaction from all relevant role players with in the implementation of WIL. The suggested structure is well planned and still allow for the traditional work placement but has now open the doors towards new and stimulating ventures.
References


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