How to grasp learning, in between

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Introduction

All societies depended on citizens having a developed capacity for independent, critical thinking. Promotion of critical thinking is therefore the single most important task for the University. If we have a generation growing up without the ability to think critically, then society are in trouble. This is one problem that I want to address, elaborate on and connect to the concept of work integrated learning (WIL), in this paper.

Another theme and important problem to tackle is the tendency in society to listen more to who is talking, than what is being said, this due to the fact that those who have power in society also have power over knowledge. This is why we need critical thinking, not to criticise but to evaluate the source that we are about to trust. A typical example of this and of the problems that is connected to it, is a feature of a morning TV show a while back. It was about the increasing obesity among children, and what to do about the alarming trends. The programme then called in, as a guest on the couch, a doctor and asked him to answer the questions. Until then everything was all right, obesity is an issue that falls under the physician's skills and then it's obvious that he or she is the best person to answer questions. But the questions asked was not about what happens in the body when exposed to fat, or what kind of risks obesity among children may result in. The questions were about what society should do. The doctor's response was to recommend increasing the tax on fat and sugar. It is possible that this same doctor was also versed in economics and social sciences, but it was not as this that he was presented. His expertise was not in use, only his title and reputation of medical science.

As an answer to this I want to promote the phenomenon of “The Wisdom of Crowds” that James Surowiecki (2004) has identified and discussed in a book with the same title. Many wise heads that collaborates in an open and humble spirit (which the anonymity of the Internet promotes) is often more creative and able to capture more knowledge than a few never so knowledgeable experts. The issue then is not which is best. It's about how you relate to and work
with what you have. Knowledge is always a fresh product; it must be continuously reviewed, evaluated and managed. And the more people who partake in the process the better.

Chance and lines of flight

Work-Integrated Learning, in the fashion I work with and promote, is a process that takes place between work life, academia and society. And the success factor of this process is directly dependent on that no party is allowed to take over. Equally important is that everyone understands that the actual outcome out of the process by definition is not possible to determine in advance. WIL is a process that is impossible to lead, and to be successful it requires that the relationship between the people that work together is well balanced. All parties in the process must give up some of their autonomy. To avoid that WIL is becoming yet another educational fad, or a quick fix that consultants are trying to sell, or worse, a coat of varnish on the same old business as usual, it requires that you dare to tread a path that by definition, only to some extent can be mapped out. The risk may at first glance seem high, but a long term and well established WIL may well be the key to a sustainable society, so hopefully it is worth it. The prerequisite to be able to exploit the potential of this concept is that the parties give up some of their autonomy, and that everyone understands the epistemological point of view that the concept is based on.

The most important feature of WIL, in this paper, is its character of non-linear process. To understand this, one must first accept that life largely is controlled by chance. Before this controversial claim is rejected (which is a not uncommon reaction to this type of statements), let me say that I know that chance is dangerously close to fate and metaphysical figures of thought that are unrelated to what I’m here is about to say and do. When I talk about coincidence, I do it in the meaning of the word that the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has launched. Deleuze (see, eg, 2006:209, 2006:253, 1990:164 ff) has in many texts resembled thinking by throwing a dice. He is of the opinion that thinking is not primarily or exclusively something that goes on inside the heads of people, but rather to be understood as something that occurs in encounters between actors, within a context. Deleuze means that the whole context must be considered in order to be able to understand how thinking arise and change. It is important to bear in mind that anything can not happen as a result of chance. But what actually can happen in a moment is inexorably determined by the conditions that arise from what happened just now. Once you have accepted this you can easily pick up chance, and it then illustrates that anything of a limited number of possible scenarios will be realized. The outcome of this kind of processes can never be regulated before hand or in detail. But it is possible to affect the opportunity horizon from
which random outcomes are generated. There is a small, but very important shift in perspective, here.

Related to chance is another of Deleuze’s concepts, line of flight. For Deleuze, “It is never the beginning or the end which are interesting; the beginning and the end are points. What is interesting is the middle.” (Deleuze & Parnet 2002:39). For Gilles Deleuze, the real potential of a text (or we can relate his concept to WIL) lies in the process, in its lines of flight. In the middle, between actors there is a becoming of knowledge that I would like to think of in terms of WIL.

Lines of flight can be simply described as a constructive opportunity that arises where / when you least expect it. And what is needed in order to benefit the potential of these lines is the skill to detect and catch them as they appear. Moreover you need a humble openness and a willingness to test also ideas that someone else is the responsible of. It is therefore of vital importance that as many people as possible learn how to recognize and capture lines of flight, for they appear quite often when you least expect it.

In order to liberate the potential of WIL, and to discover and take advantage of the alignments that occur everywhere, it is in everybody’s interest to keep a high ceiling and to ensure that work progresses with an open mind. What is needed in order to discover and test these lines of flight is an open listening and unpretentious spirit of cooperation.

In summary, the concept of WIL that I am working on is based on an entirely new way of thinking about both knowledge production and labour organization. Basically, it's easy, but precisely because it is an innovation, it can be quite tricky to translate the ideas in an authentic work and learning situation. This calls for an epistemology that is easy to understand.

Conversation vs Discussion
One way to think about this epistemology is to regard it as an open ended process. What is needed then to liberate the potential of WIL is a place that is designed for communication, because sustainable knowledge can only grow out of communication between equal and critical actors. If this place/space is physical or virtual, is of no importance, what matter is that it can promote unbiased meetings between interested and open minded participants. This place is a place/space where different ideas and opinions freely can be expressed and tested. To make this happen one can do as Deleuze and think of the knowledge-process in terms of conversations
(See Deleuze & Parnet 2002:1 ff). According to Deleuze, we must engage our self in conversations much more than what we do today. What we, on the other hand do today, but should stop doing, is discuss. There is a fundamental difference between these words!

Discussions always have specific goals and that is to arrive at something that is defined beforehand, something definitive. Therefore discussions often tend to evolve into arenas for exercise of power, even if it is not the intention of any of the parties. It is so to speak, built into the nature of the discussion forum to fuel the trend to power precisely because the goal is to reach a settlement. The concept of conversation can thus function as a thinking tool for understanding what an ideal WIL process can look like and strive for.

Conversations are, by definition, unbiased. In a conversation there is a natural and obvious place even for silence and reflection, which often is what it takes to come up with new ideas (or constructive lines of flight). Conversations are simply a brilliant platform for evolutionary trial and error processes. When a problem is discovered in society it is common to start a discussion or a negotiation to solve the problem. But too often and too quickly these discussions tend to be filled by demands and expectations for quick and tangible results. The problem with many discussions and questions raised in the society as well as the academy is that its configuration is shut and limited. The questioning itself regulates the mere possibility to come up with an answer, which is far from unbiased. In most cases there is no ill will involved from the one who asks the question or the person who calls for a discussion. This tendency should rather be understood as a property which is nestled in the questioning and discussion forum as such. The questioning and conventional discussion forums are simply full of rules and expectations that must be met before what is happening there can be regarded as meaningful.

A pedagogy based on the concept of conversation may not be perceived as a method to solve concrete problems once and for all, so that everybody then can return to their respective business as usual. For conversations to be fruitful processes of education and learning they must be allowed to operate over time. When this is understood, participants in the WIL-process can help each other to control the conversation so that it stays unbiased and not migrates into a discussion in which territory is guarded and where power is exercised. If this happens the process can be paused and the conversation started over. This require that everybody that is involved in the conversation/WIL-process has to give up some of there autonomy and rather consider them self
as representatives of specific skills and not as representatives of a company or a discipline, with all that entails in terms of positioning and monitoring of special interests.

To achieve these ambitions it is essential to work carefully with the design of the process, and to really think through the parties respectively responsibilities. Deleuze presents various suggestions on how one might think when designing such a process, or his thoughts can at least serve as inspiration when the rules for such a conversation climate are formulated. (Deleuze & Parnet 2002:2)

Deleuze’s thoughts should not be seen as clear definitions but rather as attempts to provoke the reader to think for themselves, and that is crucial for achieving the goal here. Deleuze says that, “all mistranslations are good – always provided that they do not consist in interpretations, but relate to the use of the book, that they multiply its use, that they create yet another language inside its language” (ibid:5). The important thing here is to stay open for, and to devise strategies to discover and hang on to, the lines of flight that show up everywhere but that can be difficult to detect if you are concentrating too much on achieving a specific, pre-defined objective.

Knowledge grows out of the middle, between the competencies that is brought in to the process. A new and different, sustainable, research policy and WIL can not be something that arises in the mind of one or a few experts, since these are only small parts of larger systems. By making many people actively aware of this state of affairs, it is possible to understand how to work out successful strategies to maintain constructive learning processes. But to be successful in this work it is crucial to understand that it can’t be steered towards pre-formulated goals.

WIL has to be free to emerge on its own. The only value this work or this process might have is entirely dependent upon the actual result that it gives rise to and what this result can be used for. The concept of best practice is problematic, even if one clearly can and should learn from others' best practices and benefit from experiences done by others. It is important that both science and the corporate world is critically reviewed, not only by scholars, because science is just as much as any other human activity impregnated with power and power structures. Transparency is the key word here, and it is important to promote the ability to critically assess the result of the work that is done. The insights gained in and through conversations between academia and work life can be used collectively and democratically in the process of building a more equitable and sustainable
The becoming of the world (and of learning) is the result of many actions from many actors.

The key to success is something really simple, yet something incredibly hard to achieve: A place for conversations where prestige and exercise of power is banned. Only in such a climate can lines of flight be nurtured and tested.

In Deleuze’s and Guattari’s (2003a & 2003b) joint production, it is what is happening in the gaps between actors that are emphasised and important. It is in the middle that the unexpected is to be found, but only if the context where the conversation is taking place is sufficiently open. Help to understand this we get from a quotation from Deleuze when he is talking about his longstanding collaboration with his colleague Felix Guattari.

We were only two, but what was important for us was less our working together than this strange fact of working between the two of us. We stopped being ‘author’. And these ‘between-the-twos’ referred back to other people, who were different on the side from one other. The dessert expanded, but in so doing became more populous. This had nothing to with a school, with processes of recognition, but much to do with encounters. And all these stories of becomings, of nuptials against nature, of a-parallel evolution, of bilingualism, of theft of thoughts, were what I had with Felix. I stole Felix, and I hope he did the same for me. (Deleuze & Parnet 2002:17)

For those who might think that Deleuze is wrong, it is important to point out the fact that if the thoughts are found not to be the constructive tools that I perceive them to be, if not enough actors is engaged in the work with the WIL-process that I bear in mind, then the process will inevitably die. The only way to form an adequate idea of the usefulness and potential of a concept is to investigate the actual consequences that it may cause. The value of a concept can not be calculated in advance, it can only be measured with empirical observation of the outcome of the process.

A small but important step

Society today is characterized by a firm opinion on and understanding of what knowledge is. It is aptly described by the French sociologist Bruno Latour (2008) in the following terms: Matters of
Fact. A science that works with that objective only deals with facts that can be measured and works only with the question of what has actually happened. This definition of knowledge is both accepted and widespread in universities all over the world, and therefore it needs to be challenged. If a new and constructive WIL is going to emerge we have to dare to think in new ways.

Scholars in Cultural Studies are sometimes accused of being goofy when they argue that culture is something very complex and contradictory. But if that is the case, if that is a matter of fact about culture, how can this be a problem? If culture is best described by the word goofy, is it not better to accept this and try to understand the principles and processes leading to this outcome? The same goes for knowledge, and WIL. We can learn a lot from Bruno Latour (2008) and his alternative to the rigid Matters of Fact. A more appropriate and constructive ideal for scientific work can be to think about it in terms of, Matters of concern. The difference between the two ideals is very small, but crucial.

A scientific work that has matters of concern as its leading star recognizes, first, in contrast to Matters of Fact, no absolute distinction between subject and object. All knowledge is mediated and therefore the truth can never be clean. In brief, Latur points out that we have to raise awareness of the fact that science is conducted by people and for people and that this is good enough. This is a slightly more humble approach to the result of scientific work. One just has to recognise that knowledge can not be distinguished from the scientists that present it. This does not mean that people that are engaged in science should not continue the activities they successfully have carried out. It only means that it is important to tune down the truth claims of the work and to raise awareness of the fact that scientists, like all other people, also have other needs than to seek truth and that it is difficult to be completely clear about what is what. Science is a human activity with all that this implies. A sustainable knowledge production needs not only experts; it also needs a society with the ability to think critical about the result that comes out of the academy. WIL understood in this way is a scattered and open ended place, in between, built up of many different kinds of actors and it is the end result of interaction between the participants that is what counts. This leads over to the second specification.

Latour emphasises that Matters of concern must be appreciated to be valid. By its very nature, one has to take on Matters of Fact whether one like it or not. This is problematic because it leaves the society wide open for exercise of power. Those who consider themselves to be in
possession of the truth are completely closed to further talks. Examples of what consequences this may have we see in the far less than constructive debate on the climate that all too often has come to be about who has the truth, and too little on what we can do to avoid a serious threat. The important thing is not how concepts are defined, but what they can be used for. Knowledge imposed from above, and for other reasons than the participating actors interest and willingness to try to find and to release the potential of the concept is doomed to failure. The objective for WIL is to promote a sustainable society and to handle the challenges that we all stand in front of.

Specification number three is about how one should define and understand the context that everything and everybody is a part of. Above all, it is about giving attention to the fact that technologies, thoughts and materiality should be included in the assessment and assigned the same meaning as people. Anything that can make a difference, and therefore also thoughts, texts and material/technology can and should be considered more in society. The world is simply populated by much more than human beings, which is obvious, but a fact far too little recognised. This statement should be seen primarily as an aid in the efforts to open our eyes to the fact that there is far more in the world that we have to take in consideration than we usually come to think about. A WIL-process can be understood as a context that is built of smaller parts (and not just humans) which all can and should be regarded as actors with the ability to make difference. Both social and material aspects of the world, people, thoughts, words and things can make a difference. Therefore the most appropriate thing is to only use one term, actor, for everything. Knowledge, defined with the help of this approach, is something that occurs in and through a process which includes a wide range of actors, issues and artefacts, all with their specific problems on the merits.

The fourth and final specification is about permanence and endurance, and the importance of understanding that science, society and WIL is best understood as processes. The starting point for understanding this is that no actor who is getting in relationship with other actors is unaffected. All meetings/relations between actors do something with the parties and affects both them and the process of becoming which they are involved in (see also Latour 2000:126). If this can be regarded as a fact about the state of the world today, such insights can hopefully be used to raise the consciousness of how or why one should embrace the way of thinking about knowledge production that I want to promote.
To be successful one has to love the indefinite, everything that has not yet been taken shape. In this paper I have tried to show how WIL could be dissolved and understood in new ways, without throwing out the baby with the dirty bathwater. This WIL is yet no more than one possible story among many others. What I have done here is to strike a tone, and now it is my hope that this tone will give rise to resonances among others and that it will grow and spread around the world and give rise to various work integrated processes.
References


Latour, Bruno, 2008. “What is the Style of Matters of Concern?” Amsterdam: The Department of Philosophy of the University of Amsterdam.