Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 18
Issue 7 *Collaboration in higher education: Partnering with students, colleagues and external stakeholders*

Article 10

2021

Knowing me, Knowing you: Humanitas in work-integrated learning during adversity

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Recommended Citation

Lucas, P., Wilkinson, H., Rae, S., Dean, B. A., Eady, M. J., Capocchiano, H., Trede, F., & Yuen, L. (2021). Knowing me, Knowing you: Humanitas in work-integrated learning during adversity. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 18*(7), 159-176. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.7.10

Knowing me, Knowing you: Humanitas in work-integrated learning during adversity

Abstract

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a variety of learning opportunities that can extend beyond the application of theory to practice, to include complex situational, personal, material, and organisational factors. Central to forming successful WIL experiences is the partnership, support, and collaboration extended by all key stakeholders. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted WIL experiences, with many developed partnerships and sustained practices being abruptly impacted. In 2020, a multidisciplinary group of Australasian WIL academics, administrators and students joined in weekly virtual coffee chats to share concerns and experiences during this rapidly changing educational landscape. These conversations led to establishing a Small Significant Online Network Group (SSONG) and became the basis for this article. We explored the lessons learned from WIL practitioners to be better informed of the practice of WIL and, generally, to examine the role of collaborations in higher education. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, this study incorporated written reflections on WIL experiences during COVID-19 lockdowns, followed by Zoom conversations to gain deeper insights. All data was aggregated and analysed thematically, both inductively and deductively, to interpret the practice experiences of individuals in their socio-cultural contexts. This article intends to demonstrate how creative solutions, such as adopting a HUMANE framework, become valuable paradigms. These enhance and nurture relationships between all WIL stakeholders, to enrich and sustain WIL experiences for all.

Practitioner Notes

1. Successful WIL relationships rely on collaboration between all stakeholders to ensure sustainability.
2. Adopting a humanistic approach, in this case, the HUMANE framework, has positive outcomes for WIL stakeholders and higher education.
3. A SSONG is an effective mechanism for supporting collaboration in any educational context facing disruption.
4. Technology enables WIL stakeholders to connect globally, and through these connections, reflect on differing experiences to broaden creative responses to challenges.
5. The power of connecting and collaborating provides opportunities to work together and enhances agency, performance, and outcomes that benefit WIL and higher education.

Keywords

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), humanistic lens, collaborative autoethnography, student-centred, HUMANE framework

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Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic has meant relationships around the world, and with each other, have been abruptly disrupted and shifted towards more uncertainty and doubt. The need to change, adapt, and become resilient has been pushed to the forefront of everything we do (Barnett, 2007). This phase of uncertainty has presented those in Higher Education (HE) with multiple concerns of how to continue teaching, learning, and developing knowledge amid ontological challenges. This article aims to explore creative, humanistic responses to challenges in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities, where students apply discipline knowledge and skills in collaboration with industry partners (Patrick et al., 2009). This article is the outcome of our collaborative investigation of our experiences of Covid-19 disruptions to our WIL practices. We suggest humane WIL practice is essentially collaborative in nature, however this collaboration was fundamentally disrupted by the pandemic. We came together to sustain each other during this disruption, and in doing so, reflected through collaborative autoethnographic approaches. A collective understanding of what had happened provided us the opportunity to discuss creative solutions for nurturing future relationships between WIL partners and enriching collaborative experiences in higher education.

Literature review: WIL pedagogies

The demand for work-ready graduates, capable and adaptable to organisational practices, is pressing the need for institutions to focus on WIL opportunities (Aprile and Knight, 2020; Smith et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2018). With the rise of globalisation, innovations in work, and increasing competition amongst entry-level positions (Herbert et al., 2020), WIL offers a strategic approach to align instructional strategy with preparing learners for work. While HE encompasses several approaches engaging students in deep or lifelong learning, WIL pedagogies are distinguished as they specifically focus on student's application of theory to practice through partnerships with industry or community (Patrick et al., 2009). This external partnership drives contextual relevance for learners as they grapple with complex problems, transition into new workspaces or adapt to work practices. For this article, we frame WIL as integrated into the curriculum and comprising various activities including placements, industry projects, simulations, online activities, and other innovative forms of engagement with industry. WIL is a pedagogy that is fundamentally collaborative (Freeman et al., 2011), driving professional identity development, fostering professional relationship building, and developing professional voice and values to the forefront of student learning (Trede, 2012). WIL typically aligns with notions of employability and is associated with positive outcomes, such as career readiness, developing generic skills – like team building and collaboration, building self-confidence, and employment success (Pham and Jackson, 2020). This more tangible employability agenda often supersedes student-driven notions of WIL, centralising agency, lifelong learning, and other humane pedagogies.

With graduates' employment success as a key performance indicator within HE, the link between WIL pedagogies and students entering the workforce is an important area of interest. Silva and colleagues (2018) discovered programmes including internships significantly enhanced graduate employment. Recent research by Brown et al. (2021) controversially challenged this finding, stating there is no direct link between the attainment of employability skills and employment. Their research does emphasise the need for career development learning, enabling students to reflect on and imagine future career possibilities. Elsewhere, WIL and career development learning are proposed to be complementary strategies for students' development and preparedness for work (McIlveen et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2014). Studies confirm the impact of all types of WIL, on student work-readiness and employability capabilities (Aprile and Knight, 2020; Jackson and Tomlinson, 2021;

McManus and Rook, 2021; Smith and Worsfold., 2015). Overall, HE is abundant with discourses, strategies and agendas to increase student access to employment-based training, employer partnerships in degree programmes and access to work experiences (Silva et al., 2018). Although the resourcing and operationalisation of WIL can present some challenges to all stakeholders (Rook, 2017), the benefits espoused and evidenced in the literature endorse this practical approach to student learning.

Learning in WIL is complex as it often bestrides spaces between the university and industry/community, where either can be located in physical or virtual settings (Dean and Sykes, 2021). Recognising the complexity of learning in WIL is important for understanding how educators plan and account for, adapt to, and manage student learning as well as acknowledging students' expectations – and what they bring to WIL. Over the last decade, learning in WIL has been demarcated as different to traditional university learning due to the nuances of working and learning for work (Billett, 2009). Eraut and Hirsh (2010) identify learning in the workplace is impacted by many socio-cultural factors, whereby learning is embedded in working with others. Billett (2002) explores the socio-personal elements that impact learning in WIL, stating students utilise situational factors for reconciling and building on prior knowledge. Recently, Dean and Sykes (2021), adopt a socio-material lens to highlight how student transitions into work include orienting, conforming and adapting practices to accomplish work tasks. Furthermore, Trede and Jackson (2021) discuss a critical transformative stance to students' WIL experiences and emphasise how reflexive debriefings are important to foster agency and development. Overall, existing literature affirms deep learning during WIL. There is limited literature focusing away from transactional towards relational and transformational collaboration in WIL, which should be underpinned by a more humane model.

Although the benefits of WIL are largely cited in the literature, another camp of scholars highlight WIL as contributing to an 'anarchist pedagogy' that resists the employability doctrine (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017). Employability refers to a range of processes that progress students towards their ability to achieve employment and career goals (Divan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2018) and has been aligned to WIL pedagogies (Jackson, 2015; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Employability can be viewed as instrumental to producing skilled workers and contributing to economic viability. When championed within an institution there is risk for this approach to be viewed as capitalising on neoliberalism that designates students as consumers (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017). A preoccupation with employability, facilitated through WIL approaches for example, may be seen to uphold the notion that higher education serves to produce students who are "oven-ready and self-basting" workers (Atkins, 1999, p. 267).

An over reliance on the discourse of 'work-ready' or 'career-ready' students may also be contributing to some resistance towards WIL pedagogies in disciplines not aligned with a vocation (Lyons and Hill, 2015). In non-vocational disciplines, academics demonstrate diverse perspectives on their responsibility to be supporting students in their career management (Amiet et al., 2020). To this end, several competing employability narratives emerge across multidisciplinary programmes in universities and impact on the uptake and approach to WIL. This further necessitates the development of transformative pedagogies, built on successful collaborations. Given the complexity of learning in, and for, work, WIL pedagogies faced significant disruption during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to WIL's practical nature and the necessary collaborations with external partners, moves to online delivery were significantly interrupted and affected many stakeholder's abilities to provide physical placements. WIL innovations are constantly evolving, for example the special edition of the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* on non-placement WIL practice (Dean et al., 2020). There was evidence that before Covid-19 academic institutions were exploring novel and flexible ways of engaging students with industry including uptake in non-placement WIL

models (Dean and Campbell, 2020). However, the pandemic instilled a turn to "panic-gogy" for many educators facilitating programmes (Dean and Campbell, 2020). Remote, online or virtual WIL models were deemed as "the fortuitous survivors" (Dean et al., 2020, p. 1).

Employability and WIL should be seen as learning opportunities situated in professional, cultural and social agendas. Osborne and Grant-Smith (2017) highlight there is scope for institutions to create:

> *new ways of relating to and learning with each other, and where we understand the work of education, and the work education does, differently – not in terms of services to capital or to future employers, but in terms of services to society, to the planet, to ourselves and to each other.* (p. 67)

Here, the scope and practice of humanistic education shows promise. As Russo (2018) comments:

> *being humanist is never just an intellectual activity, an ordinary job, but a choice of life, a reflective way of using knowledge to improve oneself and human cohabitation. It is a way to learn, to teach, and show tangibly what humanity means.* (p. 35)

To date there is a paucity of WIL literature exploring the impact of a humanistic collaborative discourse.

Context: The impact of Covid-19 on WIL delivery

During 2020, educators, together with industry and community partners, experimented and invented new ways of facilitating learning in WIL. For example, scientific labs and fieldwork were delivered through synchronous platforms. These alternative WIL models are not substitutions for in-person placements, instead, they became opportunities to engage students in the changing nature of work and learning (Dean and Campbell, 2020). The effects of these changes may be felt for years to come, including possible long-term alternatives for placements and re-worked activities within restrictive institutional budgets (Zegwaard et al., 2020). During the ongoing recovery period, intentional steps can be taken to re-imagine WIL beyond place-based learning and instead consider more emergent and less panic-driven, innovative ways of integrating collaborative models of work and learning in HE.

Online or virtual approaches to WIL are not new, however, the urgency for the provision of alternative formats has risen. The transition to exclusive online WIL pedagogies during lockdowns has prompted the need for more inclusive and systematic frameworks of WIL supporting the purposeful design of remote delivery options (Dean and Campbell, 2020; Gamage, 2021). This presents an opportunity to seize new spaces to grow WIL, such as small to medium enterprises (Bieler, 2020) and to collaborate with providers, and potentially students, to rethink and develop WIL. Online delivery modes highlight the need to explore innovative forms of WIL and reduce the heavy reliance on in-person work placements (Zegwaard et al., 2020). This technological adoption necessitates potential differences in how WIL is operationalised and relationships supported, beyond professional WIL placements. With online operations in many workspaces, it becomes important to consider how WIL can align with this digitalised workforce while ensuring quality of delivery (Dean and Campbell, 2020). This study investigates experiences of WIL during Covid-19, and how through this disruption humane collaborations emerged.

Methodology

In 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdowns, a multidisciplinary group of Australasian WIL academics, administrators and students from HE environments joined in weekly virtual coffee chats. This group developed organically from an initial call made by an Australian WIL association providing the opportunity for WIL practitioners and interested participants to come together. The discipline areas encompassed: business, education, engineering, professional practice education, sport and recreation, and university teaching and learning. These conversations incorporated sharing concerns and complexities of *in situ* WIL learning experiences for students, workplaces and academic staff. The isolation, dislocation and disconnectedness arising from Covid-19 disrupted normal WIL practices leading to group members' desire for connection and collaboration. The group was initially advertised and accessed via a meeting link located on a WIL website. Zoom became the platform for these conversations and took place on Friday afternoons at 2 pm Australia and 4 pm New Zealand time and the group became sustained by a core of regular attendees. Such collaborations can become enduring when there is a genuine personal appeal and intellectual attraction among the participants (Morrish, 2015). Based on the work of Green et al. (2020), these conversations led to establishing a Small Significant Online Network Group (SSONG) for sharing, reflecting, and ultimately writing, and became closed to new participants at that time. The support offered through the SSONG provided a collaborative healing space for shared experiences. The conversations were private, trusting, and respectful. Through these conversations we generated the goal to write an academic journal article and share our valuable insights.

Autoethnography is on the rise in academia as it allows for exploring and making sense of "first-hand human experiences and their relation to the social" (Chang, 2013, p. 120). Both align well with the socio-cultural underpinnings of WIL. Collective autoethnography, the chosen research approach, allows for a personal and social process to explore our experiences and make conscious what we learned together. Autoethnographic research may be written or presented in various forms: imaginative-creative, confessional-emotive, descriptive-realist and analytical-interpretive. We reflected on and examined our interactions with people within WIL, and the socio-cultural context (Chang, 2013). According to Chang (2013, p. 107), autoethnography is "inherently experimental" thus enabling us to explore and reflect on our lived experiences collaboratively. A collective autoethnography supported the inclusion of non-academics into the research journey, bringing richness to our shared understandings (Chang, 2013). The inclusive and situated approach, from all stakeholder perspectives, distributed power and aligned with the innovative spirit of ethnography. Our collective autoethnography was actioned in full collaboration, with all SSONG members being involved in some capacity with the data collection, interpretation, analysis and writing.

In this study, we preferred a social science lens, therefore this writing is more typical of the academic discourse commonly seen in theoretical and conceptual literature (Chang, 2013). As the SSONG members are the researchers, we engaged in a living, relational ethics process adhering to ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and respect (Hernandez and Ngunjiri, 2013). Each SSONG member was invited by the lead author to write their recollections of WIL experiences during Covid-19 lockdowns using a small number of prompts. These reflective writings were collaboratively explored further in subsequent Zoom conversations to gain deeper insights (Arnold and Norton, 2020). Together the group listened to each Zoom recording, made additional notes and transcribed the discussions. These reflective writings and the conversation transcriptions were aggregated and jointly analysed thematically, both inductively and deductively (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The initial analysis was conducted by one group member using NVivo and capabilities within Word to establish the core themes. The preliminary findings from this analysis were then reviewed

iteratively and collaboratively by the group. This joint process drew on narrative approaches to interpret the socio-cultural practice experiences of individuals in their social world (Holland and Lave, 2009).

Findings: Our shared experiences

What was traditionally a highly collaborative educational experience became more challenging to manage, and in some cases impossible to implement. The findings represent our SSONG's collaborative narrative with individual quotes encapsulating key aspects to reinforce our collective voice. We discovered similarities and differences in our approaches according to whether we were academics, administrators or students. Robust discussions gave us a deeper understanding of self and others' experiences, and illuminated new or creative responses. The following key themes were identified from our collaborative analysis: disruptions to practice, assumptions, concerns, realities, responses and challenges, in evolving a humanistic lens in WIL.

Disruptions to practice

Teaching and learning in 2020 was undoubtedly one of the most challenging times of our educational experiences. Whether our role was as administrators managing programmes, academics crafting content, or students seeking ways to learn, everything we knew about WIL was disrupted. One administrator shared the following:

> *During Covid-19 pandemic, companies are finding ways to deal with urgent matters, such as looking after their employees and business, safety, and policies and strategies. Hiring interns is not their priority. Finding internship placement became a bigger challenge.* (Administrator)

We sought ways to manage the myriad of challenges, equipping us and our WIL connections with the means and ability to *survive educationally*. The disruptions we faced included: cancellation or reconfiguring many work placements, restricted access to communications, technology and support, and balancing our own and others' emotional and physical needs. Our daily in-person WIL connections shifted to remote and virtual channels. This meant we were often using new, unfamiliar technologies as well as reorienting our WIL content. Reconfiguring how and what was taught added complexity to our teaching and learning and required additional preparation time. Our focal point was assisting the survival of all WIL stakeholders and maintaining collaborative learning opportunities. While we all shared the same circumstance i.e. lockdowns, university and work closures, we responded uniquely. The disruptions challenged not only our educational practices and systems but our personal wellbeing and more. Through these times, we discovered systems do not look after people – people look after people.

Many of us did not fully understand the monumental toll Covid-19 was having on us. In our efforts to help students, as academics and administrators, we needed to be almost superhuman to support others while juggling our own dislocation and exhaustion. Everyone missed being in the classroom where we felt more comfortable, confident, and immersed in the learning journey.

Our students, too, faced changing and atypical WIL experiences. We noticed students' sense of loss and difficulties they faced re-envisaging WIL activities to meet the nuances of *in situ* placements. This quote describes changes associated with a pre-service teacher placement:

> *Responses from other students varied, the consensus of my peers was that they missed being on campus, and they missed being in a classroom, being able to feel, learn, and immerse themselves in the experience. This became quite significant when discussing behavioural management, as some students had no interaction with school children previously so trying to write assignments on how they would manage behavioural issues was more difficult during the pandemic.* (Student)

In some instances, *in situ* placements were not available, meaning for some programmes students might not be able to complete their studies and would not gain accreditation in their respective degrees. For qualifications where WIL was a requirement, it meant additional pressures on WIL stakeholder relationships. We found some organisations were ill-equipped to manage the new challenges facing the workplace. As explained by an administrator: "*Some companies suffered and struggled in keeping their employees. They are running out of resources to pay and/or supervise interns."* Some organisations permanently ceased operating, while entire WIL programmes were halted i.e. pre-service teaching placements. We were challenged; we needed to react and respond creatively to devise new responses to satisfy the unforeseen, unique and varied constraints.

Assumptions

We realised different assumptions underpinned our Covid-19 approaches to WIL depending on our roles. Sharing our insights into how we, and our organisations, responded gave us a common understanding of this changing WIL environment. The areas where we made assumptions included: technology, assessment practices, ability to cope, and university responses.

Technology assumptions included:

1. We were able to pivot towards effective remote teaching and learning, irrespective of previous experience in online education.
2. Technology was critical in supporting remote teaching, and it would not let us down.
3. We would *all* be competent in using technology – students, academics, administrators and placement organisations.
4. Technicians would be available to help navigate new systems and processes.
5. We would all have access to suitable internet services and technology when and where we needed it.

Some academics assumed assessments needed to change, and new tasks were necessary to ensure students' progress in the work placements. As described in the following quote:

> *Covid forced me to creatively restructure this assessment task. This particular group of students were so excited to go out on their first WIL experience and unfortunately, Covid had other ideas. I wanted to find an interesting WIL activity that involved real-life scenarios with real-life issues and opportunities for engaging discussions and feedback with others.* (Academic)

We assumed our students would want to feel connected to us, especially given their inability to socialise during professional WIL placements. We believed our role was to find ways to support students' progress in learning. We assumed they were able to cope with the changes as they occurred and alert us if not. However, we found this was not always possible as one academic commented: *"When you cannot connect you cannot help. This is really frustrating … Not knowing why students were not participating online made it hard to plan in effective ways."*

We assumed university administration would respond to managing the crisis with evidence-based approaches that were applied appropriately and consistently. Initially, many of us assumed our jobs in HE were safe, and not immediately at risk. One academic explained their situation:

> *Knowing that I was financially secure and that losing my job through Covid would not be a problem from my perspective, unemployment was not a big threat…I was able to support others because of this.* (Academic)

Reflecting on this highlighted the importance of helping those at risk.

Our concerns

Our primary concern was managing or limiting WIL related risks. These risks included: placement losses, emotional distress, suitable spaces for learning, and ongoing viability of WIL as an authentic and collaborative pedagogy. The risks in some circumstances impacted the intended learning outcomes and how, as academics, we managed to align WIL requirements with atypical workplace experiences. We anticipated a greater need for WIL support and resources. One academic who recognised students as a valuable source for informing and driving change expressed: "*Students needed to be able to share their concerns about working in a disruptive world."*

Academically, we felt the shift to emergency remote teaching brought concerns centred around discomfort and uncertainty in how well we were educating and connecting with our students. As one academic stated, *"I feel that some students don't believe in the availability of assistance for them and that they tend to continue their journey of study without connecting with academics."* We wondered how well our students were managing their WIL experiences as we were unable to physically supervise them *in situ*, so it was difficult to tell. We also queried how their placements were evolving, as organisations responded to their challenges.

Common student experiences during Covid-19 included battling for resources such as spaces for learning, issues with connectivity, maintaining routines, and effective communications. Beyond these, we knew WIL students had more challenging concerns in being able to draw on practical experiences to meet their academic requirements. As academics and administrators, we were acutely aware of maintaining our organisation relationships for the continuation of placements, irrespective of format.

Navigating our Covid-19 WIL journeys, we were in constant threat of additional lockdowns and organisational closures. Our need to resolve WIL related issues meant knowing and understanding more, or exploring new options. Through sharing our experiences in our chats we discovered ways to reflect on our practice for a more workable and sustainable WIL. Through our discussions, we shared our stories and as a result, these realities have shaped our understanding of self, our 'knowing' and our WIL practices.

Our realities (our knowing)

We found the WIL journey during Covid-19 impacted us both positively and negatively. For one WIL academic, not being on campus and distracted by spontaneous workplace conversations meant more time for other areas, such as writing. However, our interactions and conversations were valuable to help us navigate and reflect on new opportunities and the development of WIL as a pedagogy. In sharing our experiences, we realised the importance of our collaborative community

in advancing WIL. Knowing we had this community meant that we could, according to one academic: "*all share our WIL experiences – trials and tribulations...Knowing I was NOT ALONE.*"

We recognised the way we worked had changed, but our interactions with others had changed even more. There was an abrupt transition to remote education, workplace research projects were impacted, purpose-built buildings were left empty, and WIL practices evolved. Many of us had taken for granted the in-person non-verbal communication subtleties such as body language, attention and engagement, and reading the facial expressions of others. Some academics wondered how it was even possible to make WIL education interactive and engaging in an online environment. In contrast, one participant valued the opportunity to use online platforms to get closer to her students:

> *I felt closer to some students because during our face-to-face meetings I was right there with them – no distractions. Often one-on-one chats were long and on Zoom or other platforms the students could take me into the kitchen where they were cooking, or into the lounge where Diwali decorations were on display. I got to experience the student in their home environment and the same with me*. (Academic)

Some WIL students turned to counselling services to help them deal with their feelings and the impact of the pandemic on their learning. It was interesting how the students' feelings of concern were extended to other WIL stakeholders, including lecturers, administrators, employers and fellow students. In one case, an academic worked closely with a placement organisation to provide greater support to their student: *"On a few occasions, the workplace supervisor and I discussed the mental health of their co-op student. This was when the workplace supervisors and I already had a well-developed relationship."* Having strong bonds with employers meant being able to share challenging student placement situations and consider realistic solutions openly and honestly. Collectively, we were united in this experience, with a genuine appreciation for efforts to maintain and support educational practices.

We found some inequities were inadvertently equalised, while others became more apparent. Geography was no longer a barrier to participation as most WIL parties were now working with remote systems. Yet the same accessibility resulted in an emergence of digital divides. Workplaces responded differently in how they shared workloads and tasks amongst placement students as one academic commented:

> *One of my students ended up working remotely for a lot of his placement. During this time, communication from his employer was quite erratic. The student was often left to 'be available' for an entire day in case he was needed, but had little tasks assigned to do. Working remotely challenged his employer functionally, but the student, mentally and emotionally.* (Academic)

In workplaces, remote access to intranets was sometimes limited to full-time employees, impacting the quality of tasks assigned to WIL students. Academics and administrators also applied wide-ranging practices according to their digital competencies, and students were challenged in adapting to new pedagogies without proximity to peers for guidance. We were using various digital platforms irrespective of our role, requiring us to become cognisant of the different modes of communication.

We were not surprised when some students chose to keep their video cameras off during online sessions, yet we were surprised. In WIL, we normally have close one-to-one supervisory or administrative relationships. Many of us raised our disappointment with some students' lack of

willingness to show themselves on camera, as we believed this important to developing professional relationships. We felt disconnected when we could not tell how well we were being understood. For some of us, we were thrown off balance – as experienced academics we believed in our competencies as WIL educators. Still, all of a sudden the dynamics and interactivity of our educational environments were completely altered. This was challenging as one academic stated; "*when you see students walk in the door – their stance tells you where their head is at. There is a lot we subtly read without necessarily knowing it … I don't do the non-camera bit well."*

We unveiled ways of coping to understand and work with this 'new normal' and recognised Covid-19 and the pandemic's aftermath was not likely to be short-term. We believed future-proofing was needed to ensure WIL remains sustainable and this required reflection on types of placements, assessments and management. We have realised some placement organisations are unlikely to sustain future WIL needs. However, we felt that we could foresee probable areas of change through our efforts to understand the challenges facing organisations and their inclusion of WIL students.

Our WIL students and our supervisory relationships with them are important to our work and their success. Fostering students' wellbeing meant we had to find ways to keep up their spirits and momentum for learning. Some of our responses centered on keeping attendance high, and resolving distractions as students reacted to unfamiliar conditions in learning, significantly, isolation. We shared a collective belief that remote WIL was likely to have an enduring impact on placements and practice. We responded both tactically and strategically, with our heads, but more importantly with our hearts. As one academic stated, "*Removing tangible aspects of education leads to greater concentration on hearts and minds."*

Immediate responses

Our first responses centered on immediate easy-to-implement solutions and those where student safety was paramount. These were often applied in the moment, spontaneously navigating us towards coping. At the heart of our response was to care for our students, and for the student to feel cared for. In support of this was an emphasis on the mode of response i.e. Zoom, virtual, online, and via the telephone was how we provided that care. We valued communication and the sharing of experiences amongst all stakeholders, as WIL was evolving. We enacted stronger systems for collaborating, gaining perspectives and developing flexibility in support of, and for, one another.

Many of our actions in response to the pandemic are not WIL specific, and apply to other educational experiences. We mention them here because the situations we faced necessitated immediate responses. However, the evidence of an emerging theme of humanity and care in their orientation and their influence on the WIL experience was important in these actions. As noticed by one academic; "*A lot more time is spent in talking with students and checking more regularly."*

Our creative response

Our ability to develop creative responses, and identify areas for improvement aligned with our experiences, open-heartedness, and focus on stakeholder relationships. Some of these responses may not be entirely new nor innovative to some, but they reflected an evolution in our WIL practice, and how we navigated this time of change. Our collective values in humanity, collaboration and education were steadfast in our discovery and application of enduring humanistic responses for WIL. We considered alternatives, experiences, relevancy, flexibility, contact, support, and conversations in how we approached WIL education under these circumstances. Humanistic traits relating to listening, empathising, trusting and knowing, together with the consideration of emotions

and personalisation connected us in our search for, and use of, different responses. We found creative collaborative humanistic responses were important for managing effective WIL relationships. As one academic reflected:

> *As I write this reflection, I feel it is very much about me. Is it that these practises I used or I developed are totally dependent on who I am as a person? What is my academic identity? How am I perceived by my students and colleagues? This has changed over time as I have seen more and more students and colleagues struggle this year in all manner of ways. As a mother, this has had a huge influence on how I treat my students. I would hope that my children will be treated kindly and with compassion if they need help. Especially when things are beyond their control.* (Academic)

We de-robed our title, position, expectations, and status and individualised ourselves enabling us to connect more emotionally and empathetically. We openly shared our difficulties and came to realise the WIL relationship had changed. We needed to place more emphasis on supporting one another. In becoming more personable and less role-focused, i.e. less academic or student or administrator, we became personally more knowable, and in being known – we came to know. We shared birthday celebrations; virtual morning teas; cultural celebrations; cooking while learning; differing living environments; and families – most of which typically remain unknown in the WIL experience. In opening up and sharing, we listened, cried, and told stories, gaining a better understanding of ourselves, our journeys and our contributions to WIL. An administrator explained:

> *We do this (work) out of our empathic understanding of the difficulties of the partners and students. We focus on what we can do, rather than what we can't. If people felt understood and supported, they have less pressure/stress, have a better sense of being together, which would create more energy and motivation to find alternative ways to do things. We create hope and resilience and make things work.* (Administrator)

We used non-traditional communication channels, e.g., Twitter to explore educational commentary to help inspire and shape our WIL educational practices. In doing so, we removed some of the isolation we experienced as WIL academics, administrators and students.

Collectively, we expanded the traditional ways of WIL education to include: observation, listening, shadowing, meaningful conversations, hands-on experiential, experimental, face-to-face, online, simulation, virtual, international, project work, one-on-one, group work and many combinations of these different forms. As one academic affirmed: "*We tried to demonstrate an increase in flexibility of doing and being.*" We empathetically tried to understand what was happening with industry stakeholders to find new ways to support their engagement for the benefit of all. We connected with new workplace organisations, locally and globally. These offered different ways to deliver and participate in WIL. We developed new collaborations, fresh ways for establishing placements as we drew on networks with relevant expertise.

We endeavoured to be more flexible with WIL placements from academic and administrative viewpoints. This included the WIL duration, timing, assessments, and offering micro-credentials or flexi-points to enable students to continue in their programme. Customisation was central to how some academics managed to facilitate WIL students' completion. One academic explained their accommodating WIL approach:

> *We tried reaching out to students in a way to cater for individual needs as they arose particularly around placement time. We became and had to be very flexible with completion of hours placement opportunities.* (Academic)

As academics, we felt the need to meet with our students more regularly. We did this via 'virtual cafes', sharing experiences and removing the isolation from working in a new WIL organisation or working remotely from bedrooms or living rooms, and sometimes even cars. We recognised successful WIL experiences can be enhanced with more personal connections between students and academics, and between learners directly i.e. via virtual breakout rooms.

We felt alternative ways of providing personalised feedback became more important for our student's wellbeing. We used annotated assessment documents to scaffold students through WIL content that reinforced their reflexivity in learning. Written directions and feedback became more conversational in our efforts to manage how students received and coped with critique.

We drew on learning opportunities by engaging former WIL students to share their placement experiences. This provided current students with real-life problem-solving scenarios, reducing the onus on academics to source or construct learning activities from scratch. Consequently, we gained time to focus on additional WIL related needs.

Reducing some student's WIL workload was an important strategy to enable them to cope with emotional challenges. Without compromising teaching or learning, we prioritised certain WIL content and coordinated student workloads to help them, and ourselves, find time for self-care. The complex nature of WIL meant the need to manage workload became more prevalent, for everyone. We started our virtual classes, and most student communication, with 'everyday' conversation before we progressed to academic content. These icebreaker chats began with personal wellbeing and how each of us was fairing and then morphed into placement experiences and challenges, allowing everyone the opportunity to reflect on their situation.

Discussion

Our collaborative experiences and the collaborative reflection have led to a greater understanding of how a collaborative humanistic approach to WIL education, where experiences and voices are valued, can contribute to the overall learning experience. As stated at the onset of our article, despite negative connotations around transactional employability, WIL can motivate anarchic and relational pedagogies.

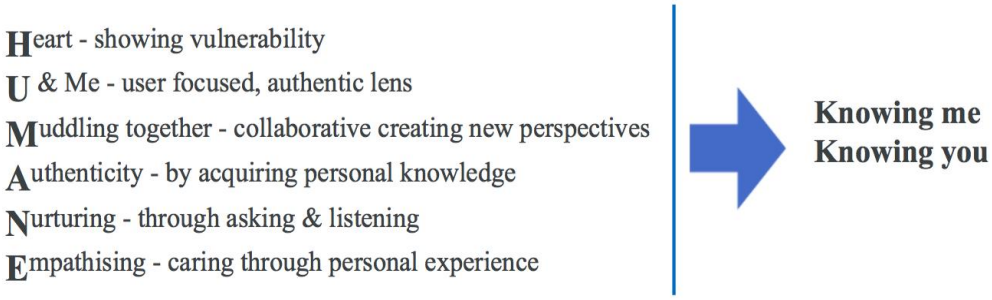
Our SSONG provided the initial platform for a collaborative exchange about the difficulties – and also the pleasures – we were experiencing in WIL during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic and how we were managing them. In some ways, our SSONG was our 'security blanket.' It was a safe place for us to talk, share ideas, and learn from one another. Although we had differing roles, our conversations gave us perspective on how others within WIL managed and responded, which enabled us to reconsider our own WIL practices and those undertaken in the sector more generally. These collaborative insights gave us the confidence to imagine innovative responses, some of which found their ways into our practice.

Importantly, our involvement in this SSONG has stimulated extended conversations within our WIL communities and stakeholders. The insights we have gained from this collaboration have prompted us to consider new ways of communicating, interacting and participating in WIL. Therefore, moving

WIL away from a transactional focus to one that is more relational. We have begun conversations within our networks e.g. colleagues and organisations, to help realise some enduring improvements to WIL practices. By involving our partners we can build an improved understanding of how best to ensure the sustainability of WIL, particularly during times of uncertainty. We have made changes to the regularity and mode of communication with external organisations. Technology provides flexibility to engage with our WIL stakeholders, irrespective of locality and time constraints (Trede, et al., 2019). This technology is also supporting us to connect students more readily and conveniently with one another. Although communication technology has been available for some time, the pandemic has forced us to investigate new ways to connect with each other and in doing so nurture different choices in building relational communities. Pastoral care of students has been strengthened and enhanced through our increased use of communication technology, and also through additional dialogues amongst WIL partners in sharing our experiences. Enhancing these relational perspectives in WIL provides us more opportunities to keep connected, strengthen relationships, find meaningfulness, and understand WIL stakeholders' issues and points of view. This facilitates the enactment of a more HUMANE approach.

The reflection and analysis of our conversations led us to develop our HUMANE framework (Figure 1). This framework helps us capture the essence of sustainability in how we might continue to work together within WIL. Our framework emphasises an embodiment of a humanistic approach to WIL, valuing the importance of the teacher's sensitivity and skill in helping learners to achieve success. In WIL, this focuses on supporting learners to make connections between their workplace experience, and reflect meaningfully on the collaborations that enable their personal and professional development. We believe our framework illustrates valuable components underpinning effective WIL practice. In showing vulnerability, being user-focused and working collaboratively this allows us to pay respect to each other and acknowledge the challenges. Responding authentically in our WIL relationships, empathising and nurturing, leads us to collaborative knowing. In knowing, we can reflect, act, and succeed.

Figure 1: HUMANE framework



Our SSONG discussions brought to the fore, a 'knowing me/knowing you' ontology, where we tailored our WIL approaches and responded to individual's needs and problems collaboratively. By reflecting on how others approached their concerns, we began reconsidering our own. Having timely and regular access to multiple perspectives was essential for developing our WIL practices. We are not suggesting the need to 'reinvent the wheel' of a humanistic approach in HE. However, we are suggesting the pandemic has challenged us to rethink the importance of relationships, wellbeing and collaboration in WIL. We were encouraged to move forward, to be led from the heart, not only the head. These values, attitudes and creative processes should be a priority in our way forward in post-pandemic HE.

We conclude that the relational, collaborative and humanistic processes of WIL go beyond content to include elements of feelings. Sensing the unfamiliar circumstances facing our WIL stakeholders, we began to adopt an 'authentic', human approach to develop and improve our practices. For example, we emphasised social interaction in our enforced online environment (Redmond et al., 2018) to support students' learning and welfare, and each other. This human-to-human connection, albeit mainly in a virtual environment, was deemed to be of significant value by all of us. Therefore, a humanistic empathetic response to WIL can contribute towards an overall increased sense of belonging and wellbeing (Dev et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Philosophically, WIL is about nurturing the preparation of students as they transition into their working lives and careers. We need to challenge the situations where transactional accreditation is valued more highly than the learning journey, and encourage stakeholders to adopt a more collaborative approach. WIL is a pedagogy highly dependent on the strength of relationships between stakeholders. The value extends far beyond the transaction of the placement itself. We contend that finding alternative ways and levels on which to connect, relate and collaborate in WIL is essential. These changes towards a more humanistic framing result in a stronger identity, greater relational agency, and a sense of community, contributing to WIL's long-term sustainability. In these challenging times – it is essential for WIL partners to come together, to speak with each other and to collaboratively imagine the future – a more humanistic one.

The Covid-19 disruption amplified the need for new ways of working together. These new ways emphasised the importance of being open, collaborative, and creating new practices to suit each unique WIL situation. Our collaborative experience, our SSONG, has provided the vehicle and the opportunity for us to realise the value of being human, and acting humanely. Our SSONG meant we were not alone. We shared our experiences, reflected on our habitus and contexts, and came to understand that WIL, and indeed education per se, has much to gain from a "knowing me, knowing you" (ABBA, Arrival, 1976) ontology. When we care, we show vulnerability (Russo, 2018), and in doing so we can acquire personal knowledge, become more empathetic, and know more about our students, our colleagues and ourselves. An outcome being more holistic and viable responses.

The HUMANE framework emerged from our unique collaboration and as a guide to new ways of collaborating as WIL practitioners. The six themes, Heart, U&Me, Muddling together, Authenticity, Nurturing and Empathising, together situate WIL practices as human, social and relational. Drawing on how we worked together in times of disruption, the HUMANE framework is proposed as a foundational stance to enhance WIL relationships in the new normal. Our framework nurtures creative approaches in WIL. If we underpin all aspects of our WIL relationships with a HUMANE framework, it will be more sustainable and impactful in HE and industry environments.

The Covid-19 pandemic seriously affected our customary practices in WIL education in all dimensions. Yet, through this, together we re-discovered creative and more humane WIL practices. Importantly, we acknowledged and shared our challenges. While our responses may have worked for us, in our WIL contexts, and with varying degrees of success, the overriding theme was our collective attempt to introduce a humanistic approach to work collaboratively in the broader HE sector now, and into the future.

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