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"Workplace' or Workforce: What Are We Preparing Students For?

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Abstract

This Position Paper explores some of the assumptions that underpin the dependence on physical WIL placements. The authors focus on the fundamental question of what exactly we are preparing students for – is it the workplace, or should we think more broadly about preparing students for the workforce? This raises other questions around the necessity of students undertaking placements in a physical workplace to learn what they need, as well as analysing what aspects of work trigger learning. Workplaces in many organisations are quite different to those of a decade ago, requiring different skills of their workers, and for some, there is no single physical workplace at all. Preparing students for this new paradigm requires us to rethink what kind of WIL experience will be most efficacious and potentially opens space for consideration of other options such as virtual WIL, project-based WIL, studio learning, and student designed start-ups. It is hoped that our thoughts and recommendations might challenge how academics and practitioners currently think about and deliver WIL, with a view to advancing new approaches to non-placement WIL.

Keywords

non-placement work-integrated learning, community of practice, design and delivery of WIL, 21st century workplace, COVID-19

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This Position Paper explores some of the assumptions that underpin the dependence on physical WIL placements. The authors focus on the fundamental question of what exactly we are preparing students for – is it the workplace, or should we think more broadly about preparing students for the workforce? This raises other questions around the necessity of students undertaking placements in a physical workplace to learn what they need, as well as analysing what aspects of work trigger learning. Workplaces in many organisations are quite different to those of a decade ago, requiring different skills of their workers, and for some, there is no single physical workplace at all. Preparing students for this new paradigm requires us to rethink what kind of WIL experience will be most efficacious and potentially opens space for consideration of other options such as virtual WIL, project-based WIL, studio learning, and student designed start-ups. It is hoped that our thoughts and recommendations might challenge how academics and practitioners currently think about and deliver WIL, with a view to advancing new approaches to non-placement WIL.

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Introduction

In March 2020, an academic in the Faculty of Engineering at The University of New South Wales, Sydney, was faced with helping students to attain required learning outcomes, including making machine parts, when visits to a physical workplace were banned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lecturer realised that most of the work and, indeed, most of the learning could be accomplished remotely. This is because most engineers do not machine the parts themselves; they make the designs that are used by others in the actual manufacture. By using design software that could be accessed remotely, and livestreaming the manufacture and testing of student designs, this lecturer enabled the students to learn what they needed to know as engineers (Eggler 2020).

The story of this enterprising educator prompted the authors to ask some fundamental questions about how we currently think about and deliver WIL:

- Are there things that can only be learnt in a physical workplace?
- Is the workplace always the only or even best way for students to undertake WIL?
- If not physical placements, what options might there be for WIL?
- What is the workplace in the 21st century, and should we think about preparing graduates for the workforce rather than the workplace?

In 2015, Bev Oliver queried some of the assumptions upon which we have based many of our decisions about WIL. She challenged the view that work only occurs in 'workplaces' and since 2015 the trend away from work being tied to a single physical site has accelerated. She also observed that WIL has become 'code for a placement, an internship, or some sort of experience in a physical workplace' (Oliver 2015, p. 61) and questioned the need for such a connection. In this paper, we explore some of the assumptions that underpin the dependence on placements, and the fundamental question of exactly what we are preparing students for – is it the workplace, or should we think more broadly in terms of preparing students for the workforce?

Are there things that can only be learnt in a physical workplace?

Drilling down into the actual skills needed by graduates allows us to ask important questions about how and where the learning of skills is best carried out. For example, consider a teaching practicum that traditionally used on-site observations of a primary school classroom. In a new approach, students viewed a series of videos taken in local schools that allowed them to examine and reflect on classroom situations in-depth (Whannell et al. 2019). The study found that students who viewed the online school were as well prepared for subsequent placements as those who spent time observing in the physical classroom (Whannell et al. 2019). In this case, the initial stages of learning classroom management were well supported by this off-site approach.

Of course, there are some things that can only be learnt while students are physically present in a workplace, e.g. taking a biopsy, manual health therapies and some aspects of the hospitality industry. However, the list of these supposed situated skills and competencies is currently being tested by the global pandemic. There are also some things that are more easily learnt in the physical workplace such as studio work for musicians and lab work for chemists. Arguably, students like those in the Whannell et al. (2019) study miss out on the full experience of working in the chaotic and noisy atmosphere of the classroom, and thus may not learn all the tricks of the trade. On the other hand, Rosaen et al. (2008) suggest that using videos of live classrooms enables students to move from gaining nebulous impressions of classrooms to a more nuanced analysis. So, for some things, and in

some circumstances, being in the physical workplace may not convey all of the learning benefits we assume.

Many of the important skills students need to learn and practice, such as communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and dealing with feedback depend on interactions between people. Can these interactions be experienced without being physically located in a workplace? Many such interactions in professional life already happen online, including formal situations such as meetings with clients for consultations or project development, health care consultations, team meetings for geographically dispersed team members, mentoring and providing feedback. Although there are differences between in-person consultations and meetings, and those conducted online, they draw on and develop many of the same skills. There are, however, some intangible benefits of placement sites such as the informal coffee chat with colleagues where students find things out about the politics of the workplace, how the profession actually works, and informal networking opportunities. These may be difficult to replicate outside of the work site.

Ultimately, while there are certainly some things that can only be learnt in a 'workplace', they are fewer than one imagines, and with creative approaches, we may be able to design parallel experiences and opportunities off-site, or with fewer on-site visits. We might also need to reconsider whether there is really a false dichotomy, physical workplace or classroom - as the only two places that students might learn. Jackson (2015) refers to the 'professional work environment' and this may prove to be a better way to conceptualise where students learn and practice important professional skills.

Is the workplace always the only or even best way for students to undertake WIL?

When discussing WIL, the term 'workplace' is often used in two different ways. It can refer solely to the physical place where work is carried out, but it is more frequently used to describe the totality of work experience, including: physical site, work itself, the organisation and its culture, interactions between workers and clients, patients, students, etc. and interactions between colleagues (both formal and informal). For some kinds of work, the physical workplace is intimately tied to the work done, e.g. where there is machinery or specialist equipment, or where people congregate to access services e.g. schools, clinics, hospitals etc. The best place for students to learn about being a professional for this kind of work is, of course, at the physical site. For many other professions and types of work, this link may not be required as work can occur in different places and in different ways.

Students situated in traditional WIL placements learn in many different ways, these include *inter alia*: experiential learning (Kolb 1984); observation and shadowing (Burford et al. 2020); direct instruction, modelling, guided practice (Goodyear 2014); work or practice followed by feedback and debriefing (Winchester-Seeto et al, forthcoming), immersion in a work context (Burford et al. 2020); and being part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). Burford et al. (2020) refer to learning 'that is situated and acquired in workplace complexity and activity' (p. 164) and suggest that 'learning is provoked during the activity of workplace practice' (p. 173). In these examples, it is not the physical workplace so much as the work activity or practice itself, and actual interactions between students and others that elicit learning.

The 'workplace' supervisor and the relationship with the supervisee is integral to student learning (Winchester-Seeto et al. in press). Much rich learning occurs when working 'alongside expert

practitioners [where] students learn the heuristics of practice. Many of the tips and techniques of practice are rarely known or discussed in the academic classroom' (Burford et al. 2020 p. 170). These experts include the supervisor/s and other colleagues in the workplace who can influence student confidence and the development of professional identity.

Work colleagues constitute one 'Community of Practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991) and students can enter such a community as a participant on the periphery of practice. Over time, the novice more fully engages with the community and the work and becomes a full participant (Lave & Wenger 1991). Through this process, the student gains much that is unlikely to be learnt in other ways, including: adjusting to specific workplace cultures, learning the right way to dress, interact and converse (Higgs, 2014), developing confidence and resilience, resolving conflict and workplace tensions, practicing discourse, and working in multidisciplinary teams (Burford et al. 2020). One of the most significant changes for students is the development of their professional identity. This process is very complex and is still being researched, but the concept of the community of practice seems to explain a great deal about how this happens (Jackson 2016).

From what we know about how student learning is enhanced by WIL, we can start to see what may and may not be able to be accomplished outside the physical workplace. Where the physical workplace is not integral to the actual work undertaken, virtual WIL enables most of the interactions between students and clients, and students and supervisors. Learning activities such as observation, shadowing, modelling, guided practice, providing feedback etc., can still occur, though both the supervisor and student may need to learn how to operate effectively in an online environment.

Some aspects are difficult to reproduce when students do not attend a physical workplace. It is difficult to replicate the kind of repetition and immersion that much learning requires; it can be challenging to reproduce the workplace community of practice where students learn about navigating workplace culture (both the good and bad), and the sense of belonging so important for the development of professional identity. To capture these aspects means we need to think beyond a single virtual feedback session once per day or week, and include students in virtual team meetings and similar opportunities. Jackson (2016) contends that students can develop a Pre-Professional Identity by engaging with communities within a 'landscape of practice' such as 'professional associations, student societies, careers services and employers' (p. 1). Finding ways to foster student learning and development in these areas will mean that we need to fully appreciate the learning that can occur in a traditional WIL placement and seek ways to enable this to happen in alternative approaches.

If not physical placements, what options might there be for WIL?

Lave and Wegner's (1991) situated learning theory perceives learning situations to be constructs of a student's experience in a social environment. When considering WIL from this viewpoint, there are alternative WIL models that provide students with the opportunity to engage in a 'professional work environment' (Jackson 2015) that is not dependent on a traditional physical workplace. These include non-placement WIL models such as project-based WIL, studio learning, and student designed and developed start-ups. These are among the WIL models identified by Kay et al. (2019) as examples of innovative WIL that enable universities to scale opportunities by overcoming the constraints to engagement often faced by small and medium size enterprises and community organisations. Brewer et al. (2018) provide a guide to facilitating studio learning that involves interdisciplinary teams from health sciences and architecture students, while examples of project-based WIL and student start-ups are showcased as part of ACEN's WIL Innovation project (ACEN

2019). A more detailed case study of project-based WIL is provided in the Piggott and Winchester-Seeto article entitled 'Projects of Consequence: Interdisciplinary WIL projects designed to meet the needs of partners and students' published in this current edition.

Another alternative to physical placements is virtual WIL which has been used for some years as an alternative to traditional work placements (Cornelius et al. 2008; Shirley et al. 2011; Vriens et al. 2010). Virtual project-based WIL is also increasingly viewed as an effective model for preparing students for work in organisations that operate in part or fully in a virtual manner in which teamwork, negotiation and collaboration are key to success. Virtual WIL also enables students who are not able to travel overseas to still benefit from a global WIL experience. Students can participate in work that might involve a supervisor located in an overseas organisation and/or working in a virtual team made up of students from around the world. Another advantage of virtual WIL is that it has opened up opportunities for students locally who, for various reasons, have not easily been able to access traditional workplaces due to a physical disability, or restrictions due to cultural or other differences. However, whilst virtual WIL might provide a more inclusive work learning opportunity for some students, it is not the panacea for all. Working virtually can be challenging for those who do not have access to efficient and reliable technology, or who feel socially isolated, causing anxiety and depression.

What is the workplace in the 21st century, and should we think about preparing graduates for the workforce rather than the workplace?

Myriads of reports and academic articles have catalogued the skills and capabilities required of graduates in the twenty-first century workplace with the expected increase in non-routine and interactive tasks (OECD 2017; Tytler et al. 2019; WEF 2018). Employment patterns have also changed with the impact of the gig-economy, project teams working virtually across multiple time zones, and flexible hours and locations, all of which have disrupted the economy and with it, the physical workplace.

How, then, might the notion of the 'workplace' translate in the future? It will certainly be multi-spatial with activities most suited to a physical location operating as such, but with activities that have proven effective using virtual technologies continuing in this new mode. Some examples include tele-consults and tele-counselling that provide options for healthcare access to those who are home-bound or live in geographically remote areas, and online teaching across all education sectors.

This aligns with Oliver's (2015) proposition that within this twenty-first century disrupted economy, the notion of 'employability' needs to be untied from the traditional concept of a physical workplace, which:

> '*might not necessarily mirror the student's likely destination in the evolving world of work', where employability means that 'graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work*' (p. 61).

To succeed, graduates will need to be adept in communication skills, critical thinking and complex problem-solving, but will also require interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, flexibility, adaptability and resilience. These are the skills of life-long learning that can help individuals prosper

and cope more easily with change. They require a 'higher order of mental complexity', involving an 'active and reflective approach to life' (ACG 2006). As Mezirow puts it, this learning enables the 'process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action' (Mezirow 1994, pp. 222-3).

Conclusion

Our paper began with a story about the changes that were required in a workplace used for WIL placements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequent implications that are likely to have an impact well into the future. Indeed, the pandemic has sharpened our thinking about the nature of work in the twenty-first century and the impact of changing technology and employment patterns. Our discussion has focused on responding to four questions that were designed to challenge how academics and practitioners currently think about and deliver WIL. We conclude that, if WIL is to remain instrumental in facilitating job-readiness, the design and delivery of WIL models will need to accommodate preparing our graduates for the workforce more broadly, and not only for the 'workplace'.

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