EDUCATION FOR PRACTICE TOPICS:

The Role of Workplace Learning in the First Year of Undergraduate Studies

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We would like to thank all CSU students who participated in this study.
The role of workplace learning (WPL) in the first year is largely an overlooked area of research (Leduq et al., 2012). Traditionally, WPL is offered in the form of placements towards the end of courses as a strategy to prepare students for work, boost their employability and portray universities as worldly and engaged with community (Allen & van der Velden, 2011). This occasional paper presents findings from a study that explored early placement experiences and their impact on keeping CSU students enrolled and persisting with their studies.

The study showed that WPL in the first year enables students to affirm and persist with their course and career choice. It also highlighted that early placement experiences are significant to students as they provide a richer pedagogical repertoire, a more balanced approach between academic learning and hands on practice, early exposure to ethical, cultural and political issues in professional practice, and a stronger focus on practice and inquiry-based education that nurtures deliberate, lifelong learners.

This study was motivated by two global concerns in university education: 1) increased student attrition rates in the first year of enrolment in a university course, and 2) the practice-theory gap or lack of work-readiness for most graduates entering the workforce. These concerns can be addressed through the use of WPL as a vehicle to successful transition into university and employment.

Our interest in the impact of early placement experiences was further sparked by anecdotal reports and some empirical data suggesting graduates regard WPL as one of the most rewarding and relevant experiences of their studies, because of its engaged and practice-based nature (Scott, 2006).

**Participants’ profiles**

To seek undergraduates’ perception of their early WPL experiences, only students who had completed WPL components in their first year were recruited for this study. Of the 98 bachelor courses offered at CSU, 81 have WPL components (of which 69 courses have mandatory WPL components) but only 38 courses offered WPL in the first year (Seddon et al., 2013).

Students’ perceptions were collected through an online survey and semi-structured phone interviews. The survey was completed by 47 CSU undergraduates from the faculties of Business (44%) (enrolled in business and accounting courses) and Science (56%) (enrolled in veterinary science and nursing courses). Interview participants (10) were from the faculties of Business (50%), Science (40%) and Arts (10%). Participants were a combination of high school leavers transitioning into universities and mature-aged students with employment experience, seeking professional development and promotion.

It is interesting to note that this study attracted responses from under-represented student groups, especially students who were first-in-family, of low socio-economic status and from rural backgrounds as defined by James, Krause and Jennings (2010).

**Range of first WPL models and experiences**

As the study confirmed, there is a wide range of models of WPL applied across CSU. The duration of WPL placements varied radically between courses. For 44%, placements lasted between 2 to 5 days (with the majority being 5 days). For 25% of respondents, placements lasted between 1 and 3 weeks (with a majority attending for 2 weeks), while 31% of participants attended placements that were between 1 to 2.5 months (with the majority being 1.5 months). All of these placements were full-time and uninterrupted.

Participants described a variety of ways that they prepared for their WPL placements including both psychological and logistical preparation. More specifically, 41% of survey respondents prepared by conducting some prior research, including reading up on the work area they were about to enter, researching the organisation they were being placed in and/or contacting their workplace supervisor. For 20%, preparation consisted of logistically organising themselves for their placement (accommodation, finance, etc.). For 12% who conducted their placement at their current workplace it consisted in negotiating their learning goals with their existing employer. The preparation of a surprisingly high percentage of respondents (9%) simply consisted of completing course required forms. Six percent (6%) of respondents prepared by talking to peers, while 3% prepared by arranging the placement themselves (including finding a placement opportunity and negotiating with workplace managers).

The range of WPL activities undertaken varied between carrying out basic roles of their (future) profession (50%), shadowing practitioners (30.5%), and working on independent projects (16.5%).

The most common activity undertaken by respondents post-placement consisted of completing reflective journals to appraise their experience (41.5%). The next most typical activity was a combination of group discussion and report writing (39%).

For 69% of respondents who found the WPL component of their course a rewarding experience, 39% enjoyed the ‘real world’ experience the placement gave them. 19% found developing a better understanding of their profession the most rewarding aspect of their placement, followed by 14% who appreciated the learning experience the most. The remaining 20% listed being part of a community of practice, contributing to a project, being valued for their contribution (recognition or approval) and being paid for their work as the most rewarding aspects of WPL experience.

**Supporting early placements**

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (92%) would recommend exposure to WPL in the first year, although 12% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their experiences compared with 69% of respondents who were overall satisfied or very satisfied. This great
support for WPL in the first year was reinforced in the interviews, as exemplified by this quote: “WPL is probably the best part of our first year, because it does give you that motivation that you need, because in first year there is a lot of the basics taught such as biology and chemistry and that can get tedious and when it’s not quite so applied it gets quite boring at times. So I think the motivation was very well needed.”

Participants’ recommendation of WPL was often based on an appreciation of the kind of learning it fostered: practical, authentic, holistic, and contextualised. This was typified by one interviewee’s description of WPL as a way of “seeing the real world and what we will be doing once we’ve finished uni”. More specifically, participants who were able to negotiate placement activities with their supervisors found WPL provided them with an enriched learning experience that also helped them develop their professional portfolio and clarify their career goals. For those with prior experience, WPL helped them to contextualise practice, integrate theory and boost study motivation.

Even for participants with negative experiences, WPL was seen as a valuable and authentic introduction to the workplace culture of their chosen future profession. Negative WPL experiences included incidents that raised professional and ethical issues for participants (31% of respondents). Half of these students dealt with the situation by discussing it with university staff and/or peers and half simply reflected on the situation. As one interviewee stated, “I only have to make sure that when I get my chance, I do it better than the current lot”.

**WPL and students’ retention**

Our study showed that retention is linked to students’ personal interest and professional goals. WPL, combined with academic or social support, can help students persist with their studies. What makes them unable or reluctant to stay enrolled is a complex combination of external (related to family or financial factors) and course issues (such as heavy workload, mismatch of expectations), (for further reference see Crowther et al., 2010).

This study found that reasons for students considering dropping out fell under six categories: family or lifestyle-related (31%); heavy course load (24%); pedagogical (17%); mismatched expectations (14%); financial (5%); and to seize a better offer (2%).

Reasons given for persisting with the course fell under three broad categories of reasons: professional, educational and other. Some of the more specific reasons included: commitment to chosen profession (26%); commitment to completing their degree (26%); commitment to learning (18%); personal challenge (18%); academic or social support (7%); and future financial reward (5%).

**Clarifying career choices**

WPL has the potential and demonstrated success to help students become professionals and develop their professional identity. It also has the potential to help students clarify their career choices (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). For our participants being exposed to a range of workplaces in the first year helped them ground their experiences in reality and clarify their professional aspirations and intentions, as evidenced by the following quote: “To have exposure to a wide variety of clinics in different areas is extremely beneficial [in my course]”.

When WPL is implemented early in the course, it can be used as a strategy to clarify both course choice and career direction. As was the case with some of the participants, WPL was seen as a way of starting the professional socialisation process early and, hence, help them clarify their career choice, as one interviewee commented “Getting that real world practitioner opinion on some of those things is quite valuable”.

**Challenges**

It is assumed that first year cohorts as new university students do not have as many profession-specific skills and work preparation, and thus, cannot participate as much as senior students in workplace practice. Students who are newcomers to the university environment and/or the workplace require additional engagement and encouragement by academics and workplace supervisors to retain them and foster participation in the WPL activities. To address this challenge, early placements are often designed around observation and shadowing employees. This, however, risks employers questioning the value of taking students into their workplaces and academics questioning the learning value for first year WPL. For employers, this might lead to seeing students as a burden in the workplace, especially when staff shortage and retention is an issue (Robinson et al., 2007). For academics, this might lead to increased selectiveness as to where and when to integrate WPL in order to deal with the already limited number of workplaces where they place students.

These challenges are further compounded when students are exposed to WPL experiences without appropriate support and preparation. Poor preparation for WPL runs the risk of preparing uncritical future workers as well as reinforcing the social gap between students from ‘traditional’ and under-represented groups (Clegg, 2011; Klein & Weiss, 2011). It also has the potential to create negative WPL experiences for students which can lead to future problems in WPL placements.

**Teaching implications**

While WPL is important in bridging the gap between university enrolment and employment, WPL can serve as a *transitional pedagogy* bridging the two. It not only introduces students to the workplace but is an integrated educational tool in its own right. Early WPL experiences may help to break down the dichotomies of education and work so that work becomes more reflective and education produces more work-ready graduates.

Through WPL students can improve the connection between their courses and their future professional goals, as well as develop or strengthen their individual interest. However, WPL does need to be integrated into the rest of the course. This point is well highlighted by this quote:
“(WPL helps in) gaining a better understanding of the profession and being able to discuss why and how things happen in veterinary clinics with lecturers in debrief sessions”.

Having made this argument, we also need to pay attention to the risks that a strong focus on promoting the pursuit of employability and its associated vocationalisation of universities might have on the general value of higher education. This could result in universities becoming overly focused on attaining competencies required by workplaces and less on critical engagement and other broader goals such as citizenship. With planning and vision, professional education in general and WPL in particular, can address all of these outcomes.

Making the most of these identified possibilities for WPL requires providing students with more focused preparation, monitoring and debriefing as well as an integrated ‘pedagogy of deliberateness’ (Trede & McEwen, 2013) than what is often the case in the current WPL models. Preparation for WPL would include:
- sensitising students to cultural, economic, political and material workplace environments
- encouraging strategic questioning during placements
- exploring broader social and sustainability issues during WPL as well as professional-specific professional development, and
- creating communicative spaces to discuss WPL experiences after placements.

A pedagogy of deliberateness in WPL requires academics to work with WPL educators to provide students with opportunities to critically engage with their WPL experiences. Such engagement can provide students with a means to question and reflect on professional communities and practices they are not yet socialised into. For example, a deliberate approach to WPL raises awareness of choices that can be made between becoming an accidental professional, who lets things happen, and a purposeful professional, who makes things happen. In this way, WPL not only introduces students to their future professions but can also be used to promote attitudes of criticality and reflexivity towards practice and theory and develop professional identity. As a pedagogy of deliberateness, WPL can enhance learning and prepare students for the workplace, critically, as well as practically.

**Concluding remarks**

Findings from this study suggest that participating in WPL has a positive impact on first year students, their retention rates and preparing them for work because it can:
- offer a richer pedagogical repertoire;
- disrupt and provide balance to more abstract academic teaching;
- strengthen inquiry and practice-based education;
- encourage self-directed autonomous learning;
- open up discussion early in the course about cultural, political, ethical and political issues in the direct context of practice; and
- develop deliberate learners.

Furthermore, introducing WPL in the first year provides an opportunity to truly embed WPL in the course and its curriculum, rather than as an add-on in final years. It also provides the opportunity to start students on a life-long journey to learn from and question practice.

Participants in this research who had different levels of work experience found their early WPL placements invaluable in introducing them to and further exploring their profession. Many students cited WPL as the highlight of their first year.

Although our study shows that there is value in including WPL components in university curricula in the first year, it is important to note that these components need to be well integrated and that students need to be prepared for, monitored during and debriefed after, their WPL experiences. This follow through is essential in order to address the risks associated with WPL in the early years raised above and ensure that WPL is a meaningful professional practice-based learning experience.

As this study suggests, WPL is well received by first year students. As Orrell (2011) argues, WPL has potential as a means for students, especially from under-represented groups, to transition into university and to help universities address equity issues. Though there is a need to further our understanding of how to effectively make use of WPL as a transition pedagogy, we argue that a focus on practice through WPL in the first year offers first year students alternative ways of learning to the more traditional academic approaches.

**References**


