Workplace Learning (WPL) Placements in Curricula: Strengths and Challenges

By Edwina Adams

Reference for this occasional paper:

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Workplace Learning (WPL) Placements in Curricula: Strengths and Challenges

This occasional paper presents an overview of the term workplace learning (WPL) as used at CSU and similar terms that are used elsewhere. It discusses the value of including WPL placements in actual workplaces in curricula and some of the associated challenges. The purpose of the paper is to provide a resource for CSU staff, particularly new staff, involved in the teaching and management of WPL placements in curriculum. The paper is not exhaustive; it is a starting point presenting some key issues surrounding placements. A series of EFPI produced WPL focused occasional papers will be available for CSU staff.

WHAT is WPL at CSU?

The term ‘workplace learning’ was accepted by CSU Academic Senate (AS 10/43 2010) as an inclusive term that covered the range of structured workplace learning experiences used in curricula at CSU. The term was proposed by The Education For Practice Institute (EFPI) and replaces the previous term fieldwork education.

Workplace learning, also known as work-integrated learning, practicums and professional practice, professional experience, internships, intra-mural and extra-mural placements, fieldwork and clinical placements, allows students to learn through direct experience in real workplace settings. Workplaces may encompass on-campus and off-campus facilities. Commonly such learning involves supervision to provide safeguards and ensure duty of care towards clients and students.

Workplace educator, also known as clinical educator, clinical facilitator, teacher mentor, supervisor, preceptor, refers to educators who teach and supervise students learning and practice in the workplace. They may be CSU academics or members of staff employed in the workplace by industry partners.

TERMS similar to WPL

Learning that is structured primarily around experiences in the workplace have a range of terminologies, each term having its own nuance. A few key terms are presented to demonstrate the similarity yet distinctiveness of each term. Considering the range of definitions helps to clarify the intent and focus an educator has for their course or subject.

Work-integrated learning is a broad term related to workplace learning. It can be described as:

- the intentional integration of theory and practice knowledge... a WIL program provides the means to enable this integration and may, or may not, include a placement in a workplace, or a community or civic arena (Orrell 2011, p.1)

A number of models for work-integrated learning are described by Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010, pp.43-54). These are:

1. Professional work-integrated learning -- learning related to the professional body and the university with the aim to graduate students with the required professional attributes and professional skills. The professional body regulates the student learning outcomes, type of experiences, length of placements and supervisory requirements.
2. Cooperative learning -- a structured learning experience for students that may or may not be compulsory. This term refers to a reciprocal relationship created between employers and the university to provide an opportunity for students to experience the workplace in a block of time and explore career goals, and for the workplace to review student capabilities.
3. Service learning – students engage in service experiences (civic) along with their academic learning to participate in authentic learning tasks, social interaction and critical debate around social issues.

Cooperative education emphasises the partnership in learning between the education provider and the workplace and can involve paid or unpaid work. This is education where there is cooperation between the educational institute and the occupation to provide a joint program of alternate school and work attendance (Groenewald et al. 2011).

WHAT are the strengths of programs that use WPL placements in curricula?

A few points are presented that highlight the value of incorporating placements in curricula.

- **Value to learning** – learning by doing or learning in the workplace, is an established and effective form of education that has been in use long before the move to mass higher education and the recent increase of vocationally-oriented courses at universities. Learning in the workplace provides an environment where tasks can be repeated until mastered, and expertise and capabilities (often transferrable to other situations) can be developed. Billet (2001) points out that learning and working are “interdependent”, by engaging with work activities “we think and act, and learn”. A problem arises when university learning is fragmented and decontextualised and can't readily be applied to the workplace.

- **Development of professional identity** – during the last two decades of Australian higher education there has been greater scrutiny on teaching and learning to ensure graduates are work ready (Chalmers 2008). Work readiness includes having the knowledge, competence and professional attributes or personal qualities required by the discipline the graduate is entering. The development of professional attributes is a key component of gaining a professional identity. Professional identity shapes the philosophy that underpins the individual’s practice. This identity development occurs most fully when strong connections between theory and practice are made (Carrington, Kervin & Ferry 2011). Learning in the workplace creates meaningful connections between theory and practice. Well structured supervisory relationships, useful feedback, reflection and being part of the workplace, enhances development of professional identity.

- **Assistance in reducing attrition** – a pedagogy that is inclusive and engaging for all students is important in this era of mass higher education with an economic imperative to have high retention rates. Incorporating WPL placements in curricula provides a learning environment where practice can be experienced in some form and theory is contextualised thereby creating links for students to consolidate their learning. Wilkoxsena, Cotterb and Joyce (2011) from their large study across six Australian universities suggest that first year students should be exposed to more work-based projects, case studies, demonstrations by industry and career inventories to help increase retention. Students are often unclear about the employment their course of study leads to. A clear understanding of the industry and the relationship to the subject areas in the course is important to improving first year retention. Final year students on the other hand are focused on gaining the best employment outcomes. The authors conclude that final year students may be more committed to stay in their course when they understand the range of career paths open to them and that the reputation of the university they are studying in is good for gaining employment. Incorporating placements in the final year provides an opportunity for students to experience a range of workplaces thereby gaining insight into
different career paths and the opportunity to work with potential employers. In many cases this opportunity to be on placement leads to job opportunities after graduation.

WHAT is needed for the success of WPL placements?

Billet (2001, p. 21) argues that the quality of learning that takes place in the workplace is dependent upon:
- the kinds of activities individuals engage in
- access to situational factors, including support and guidance
- how individuals engage, interact and interpretively construct knowledge from these situations.

Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010, p. 53) describe the criteria for success of cooperative education as one where:
- learning in the workplace is recognised in the curriculum
- students are assisted in finding placements
- orientation to the workplace is provided
- planning the students' learning and contracts is implemented
- the workplace provides a mentor
- monitoring of student learning/progress is done by the academy
- formative and summative assessment are conducted
- reflection is included as part of the learning
- academic credit is given for the learning.

WHAT are some CSU resources to support success in WPL placements?

The workplace learning network (WPLN) is a communication network and community of practice for all CSU workplace learning staff. WPLN commenced in 2009 as a revised form of the longstanding Professional Education Network (PEN) which acted as a voluntary network of CSU staff working in professional experience and clinical education roles. Details of WPLN can be found on the EFPI website http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/efp/education/education.html

In 2010 EFPI led the development of a comprehensive set of professional and practice-based education standards (P&PBE standards). In September 2010, Academic Senate approved the P&PBE Standards as "descriptors by which we understand excellence in workplace learning" (AS10/125). A copy of the P&PBE Standards can be found at the following web address: http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/efp/education/education.html. Tables 2 and 3 include specific standards for WPL placements in curriculum and infrastructure. These standards provide a framework for good placement design and management, an excerpt from Table 3 is provided as an example.

PLACEMENTS OR WORK TO PROVIDE WPL

44. Venues available that provide for:
- developing practice skills and knowledge of the profession/occupation
- developing professional identity
- learning to work on practice communities
- developing relevant interaction and social capabilities
- developing professional decision making and self-appraisal skills.

45. Resources create an up-to-date practice-relevant setting that enables students to experience their practice world including:
- real clients
- practice workloads
- real interactions with practice communities, clients and local communities.

46. WPL site-based staff (in adequate numbers) provide sound role models and supervision as practitioners of the occupation/profession.

47. Site-based WPL staff are well informed about the relevant university curriculum and student learning/preparation prior to placements.

48. Staff development programs are available for site-based WPL staff.

WHAT are some of the challenges with WPL placements?

Implementing quality placements in curricula takes a substantial effort and a high degree of planning as indicated in the previous section 'what is needed for success'. A failure to adequately plan or support aspects of WPL may result in a less than desirable learning environment. Some challenges are presented below.

International students - Over the last decade there has been a substantial increase in the number of international students completing their higher education in Australia. Often the courses studied contain compulsory work placements; this can become a challenge to international students in successfully attaining the qualification. Patrick et al. (2008) in a national scoping study identified the workplace learning network (WPLN) as a revised form of the longstanding Professional Education Network (PEN) which acted as a voluntary network of CSU staff working in professional experience and clinical education roles. Details of WPLN can be found on the EFPI website http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/efp/education/education.html. Tables 2 and 3 include specific standards for WPL placements in curriculum and infrastructure. These standards provide a framework for good placement design and management, an excerpt from Table 3 is provided as an example.

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same opportunity for learning nor will they necessarily be provided with timely feedback or enter a supportive learning environment. This issue presents a risk and requires WPL university staff to work more intensely in finding suitable learning placements, creating strong partnerships with workplaces and ensuring all parties understand the educational requirements for the learning experience. An effective quality assurance program is required that includes evaluation of feedback obtained from students and employers.

Assessment equity – feedback and the learning associated with assessment tasks are a key factor in the students’ development and eventual attainment of educational outcomes. A lack of alignment between the desired learning outcomes, the assessment tasks or the understanding by the assessors, will have an adverse effect on the attainment of the educational objectives. In addition, the workplace objectives must be considered and met during the students’ learning, for example, adequate services for the client. WPL placement assessment is therefore complex and compliance with university assessment standards is challenging. Levin, Pocknee and Pretto (2010, p. 7) note that the following issues must be dealt with to bring greater assessment equity: all parties must have a clear understanding of what is being assessed. Is it academic skills, technical skills, generic skills or a combination of all these? Does grading focus on the student’s ability to communicate their workplace learning experience or is it simply based on the success of their project? Who does the assessment? Do employers have the skills required and if so what quality assurance and moderation processes apply and how can this process be made equitable for all participating students?

Cost of operationalisation – given the challenges presented in this section when implementing WPL placements, it is not surprising that the cost of operationalisation of WPL (academic and administrative) is an issue and therefore a risk to quality. Levin, Pocknee, and Pretto (2010) state that work-integrated learning organisation and management is “extremely time consuming”. The authors also point out that often under resourcing makes implementing new initiatives difficult and that academic workload models reward research and don’t fully acknowledge the associated mentoring and administrative tasks required for WPL.

HOW is WPL a mutual benefit – student learning and industry?

WPL is not a one way street for the students’ benefit only; there is evidence that workplaces benefit by having students on placements. A study by the author of this paper (Adams & Kilburn-Watt 2000) found that as a result of taking students, 64 per cent of supervisors felt an increase in work satisfaction, 68 per cent agreed their level of performance was improved and 61 per cent agreed that it deepened their understanding of practice. Levin, Pocknee and Pretto (2010) note that a number of employers considered that students benefit the workplace by bringing “fresh ideas” and that international students added “diversity and richness”. These findings are echoed by Henschke (2012) where employers identified that by taking students it positively influenced staff by their enthusiasm and had a motivating effect, in addition their up-to-date knowledge contributed to changes in work practice.

Reference List

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