WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING
IN SUPPORT OF
DIGITAL FUTURES

BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DENISE JACKSON

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is all about helping to prepare students for the world of work. It involves students collaborating with industry and community partners as part of their degree program. It can be an 'immersed' experience, where students are physically based in the workplace – such as internships, practicums or placements – or a virtual or on-campus experience where students are engaged in consulting, projects or simulations in collaboration with their partners.

The overarching aim of WIL is to help make students more employable, but what exactly does that mean? Well, it is about empowering them to achieve career success. For some, that may mean obtaining a certain type of full-time job, whereas for others it could mean building a successful business or balancing a number of fulfilling contracting roles which give them the flexibility for their other commitments.

WIL is now a well-recognised vehicle for students to practise their skills and try out what it is like to operate in a particular profession. This is nothing new for certain disciplines, such as education and nursing, where WIL has been interwoven into the curriculum for many years. For others, such as IT, media and business, it is becoming increasingly popular among students who realise they need to try to make themselves stand out from the growing pool of graduate recruits.

It is important that WIL gives students authentic insight into the world of work in the particular industry, sector or role they are interested in. Whatever drives individuals and whatever their career aspirations may be, they need to embrace automation and the rapid changes in technology which permeate work, social and family lives. If the goal of WIL is to prepare students and make them career ready, the WIL experiences must therefore expose students to at least a snapshot of the digital future.

So, how can industry and universities partner to deliver on this authentic experience? Technology has greatly assisted WIL for many years in capturing data on which students are based where during their experience and for establishing efficient administration processes. What follows is more a series of recommendations to align the design and delivery of WIL for digital futures.

Embed Technology in WIL Learning Design

The three pillars of a quality WIL program are preparation, reflection and feedback. Technology, particularly given the introduction of the National Broadband Network (NBN), can be intertwined into each of these to make WIL more accessible for students and to create an enhanced learning experience.

Preparation

Students need to be ready for their WIL experience, particularly those where their industry partner expects them to start completing tasks or working on a project as they commence. This may be overwhelming for some, particularly for international students who may not be familiar with Australian workplace culture and could lack the confidence and communication skills to speak up if they are not sure. A good way to prepare students is through online learning modules, which may be purchased off-the-shelf, streamlined into the university's learning management system and contextualised to that particular campus, region and/or discipline. Content may include risk management processes, critical incident management, occupational health and safety, professional conduct and cultural understanding. Enriching material with video clips and introducing quizzes for assurance of understanding can be helpful.

Reflection

WIL is not about sending students out to complete a certain number of hours in the workplace – how is that different from a part-time job? It is about giving them the opportunity to apply classroom theory and reflect on their workplace performance – what are they doing well, where are they struggling and what does this mean for their future development and career pathway? Online reflection tools, such as blogs, journals and diaries, can help students consider and record their experiences in a structured way. Here, they are connecting their classroom learning with professional practice in the real world. They are developing self-awareness and learning to understand who their 'professional self' may actually be. Reflection should not be a solitary experience. Facilitating peer reflection through tools such as wikis and discussion boards provides a rich source of learning and, cognisant of 'a problem shared is a problem halved', can help students feel less isolated.

Feedback

Feedback from industry partners is fundamental to student learning during WIL. This should be ongoing and combined with an evaluation at the end. Gathering feedback from partners via online surveys allows for easier completion and aggregation of results for reporting back to accrediting bodies. Using tools such as Zoom and Skype is a great way to connect WIL facilitators with both students and industry partners to keep track of student progress and any arising issues. Such tools are viable alternatives to site visits when large numbers of students are dispersed individually across many partners.

Shifting WIL academic offerings to external or blended mode (a combination of face-to-face and online) can help students who are unable to travel to a campus due to their location, work or caring commitments. Recording bite-size video clips of important information, such as assessment instructions, and conducting webinars and virtual meetings may be as effective as on-campus meet-ups. Training for staff, and support for students, on web-based technology should be available for seamless delivery.

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Give Students Exposure to Sustainable Areas

There has been much discussion about professions and roles which are extremely vulnerable to high levels of automation. Developing student awareness of these potential 'areas of demise' in Australia's digital future is important. Organising talks from economists in local chambers of commerce can be a great way of helping students to understand where job growth (and contraction) is predicted and where to focus on gaining experience. For an accounting student, for example, the WIL experience should perhaps not focus on payroll or accounts payable, but rather developing skills in budgeting, forecasting and risk analysis for aspects of entrepreneurial projects.

Teach Students to Transfer

Transportability of skills across different contexts is critical where globalisation and automation mean boundaries for work and collaboration are increasingly disappearing. Graduates should no longer expect to secure a place on a structured graduate program, leading to their job for life. Instead, they may work in a number of fixed-term contracts across a range of different sectors and industries. Being able to draw on prior knowledge and skills and apply them in new environments and create new knowledge is more important than ever. WIL provides a unique opportunity for practising (and therefore learning) transfer, particularly through immersed models. WIL coordinators can incorporate some key principles into program design to help develop students' capacity for transfer. One example is encouraging students to reflect on challenges they faced in applying their knowledge and skills in new settings and identifying strategies going forward. Another is ensuring the professional learning environment incorporates feedback and collaboration to foster the creation of new knowledge.

Embrace WIL that is Aligned to Digital Futures

Despite what many still think, WIL is not all about placements, practicums and internships. There are many innovative models of WIL where students can get a real taste of digital futures. Virtual WIL, for example, may require students to solve problems and manage crises in a virtual learning environment which simulates the real world. This can develop critical-thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills beyond more traditional models of WIL. State-of-the-art facilities on university campuses enable authentic simulations and role-plays, such as nursing wards and birthing suites for health science students and moot courts for those studying law.

Technology can help fine tune skills particular to a profession, such as the use of blogging to help aspiring journalists develop certain types of communication skills as media shifts to the digital world. There are many examples and these can be accessed via the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) – the national peak body for WIL – website which showcases types of innovative WIL. In addition to developing skills of the future, innovative models can be more inclusive. They provide a means of accessing WIL for those who are unable to complete a required number of hours in the workplace due to difficulties with travel and clothing or childcare costs.

Introduce Students to the New Ways of Working

WIL is a useful platform for introducing students to contemporary working practices. Home-based offices, while practical for many businesses, can create risk management concerns for those coordinating WIL. While an on-site risk assessment may assist, there may still not be assurance that students are getting the interaction with professionals and networking exposure they need. Also applicable to small businesses operating from commercial offices, combining hours in small and medium-sized enterprises with some in a larger business can work well. If locating a sizeable business is difficult, universities can step in themselves as an industry partner.

WIL may involve students working autonomously from their own homes. This, anecdotally, creates a rich learning experience as they become familiar with web-based technology and learn to communicate through carefully worded emails, as they are often unable to see and interpret body language. Again, careful monitoring of networking exposure is needed.

From the examples given, it is obvious that both educators and industry partners can collaborate to provide a rich source of learning for students to help prepare them for digital futures. Ongoing attention to the design and delivery of WIL, however, is needed so it can adapt and improve in line with changes in the increasingly digital working world. ■

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