Rethinking Work Integrated Learning Pedagogy: Reflections Post COVID-19

Natasha Janse van Rensburg, University of Johannesburg, South Africa
Charl J Roux, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

The consistent battle to ensure quality outcomes in work integrated learning (WIL) experiences has been an ongoing matter for higher education institutions. For universities that offer WIL modules, it is essential to ensure consistency from one year to the next concerning student experiences, as well as outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities moved to emergency online teaching, with profound implications for WIL. This autoethnographic self-study examines the lecturer's reflections on coordinating WIL pre, during, and post-COVID-19 to determine the challenges, opportunities, and future potential of the practice. Work integrated learning holds diverse benefits to students, and it is believed that the overall approach to organising WIL should be modeled based on good practice. However, the uncertainty of work placements and changing environments have made reflection on how outcomes can be consistently met year after year invaluable. Whilst the reflective practice has been beneficial in increasing the efficiency of WIL practices before COVID-19, post-COVID-19 many adapted strategies provided otherwise not thought-off opportunities for the WIL programme. As predicted, not all reflections on the adaptation to emergency online teaching and its application to WIL were positive. However, the findings of this study confirm the valuable nature of self-reflection, even under the circumstances of emergency teaching.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Work Integrated Learning, Higher Education

Introduction

In Sport Management at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) it has become evident that reflecting on the teaching practice is important. Teaching a work integrated learning (WIL) module has its unique challenges and finding information to assist in the planning and offering of such a module is difficult. This reflection is about identifying aspects of how the module was presented over five years (2018 to 2023), whether it was bad or good, but an attempt to understand and improve the teaching practice of WIL in Sport Management. Schon (1987) explains reflective practices as 'knowing-in-action', 'reflection-on-action', and 'reflection-in-action'. While it is not always possible for a lecturer to revise their actions during teaching, it is the reflection-on-action, such as thinking about what has been done and making changes which this article is focused on.

Additional to reflection after every academic year, the students are requested to complete a module evaluation in which students can comment and rate the course content and lecturer. While many students choose not to participate in module evaluation, for those who do, the feedback is always seen as valuable. The University of Johannesburg (UJ) also includes in the feedback the overall university, faculty, and department rating, in comparison to your own. While this is useful, it could make a lecturer question how appropriate it is to compare a WIL module to theoretical modules, even if the lecturer is the same. It is important to note that the delivery of the WIL module (which is focused on for this reflection) is among many other modules presented by the same lecturer, but the only practical module. While it could be assumed that the amount of planning and effort is not necessarily more than that of a theoretical module, the worry to sustain consistency is a concern unique to our WIL module.

While our fourth-year students have seven additional modules to complete over one year, the WIL module stretches the year (28 weeks) and is allocated six hours a week to conduct the experience needed to meet the course outcomes. The approach to the 'workplace' has been a reoccurring issue and the source of reflection. We seem to return to the same question at the start of every academic year, whether to predetermined placements, for example, organising workplace experience on behalf of the student or whether to allow them (based on set criteria) to choose their own workplace. Another point of deliberation is the placement on- or off-campus. While some students have found the freedom to choose their own workplace as freeing, others have found it frustrating and even thought of it as a lack of planning or care by the course presenter.

Although the lecturer's actions do not always present their intentions accurately (Brookfield, 1995), the placement options are well reflected. To better express the options and ideas regarding this module, the lecturer must allow their voice to be heard. A deeper understanding of how the module has evolved could be gained if time is spent on the overall construction of the module, adaptations, feedback, and success rates, as well as personal reflections. It is our opinion that during the collaboration of all these points, we would find what works well and which aspects we could suggest in the delivery of this WIL module. Therefore, this study was underpinned by the following research questions:

1. What are some of the challenges and successes experienced over the last five years of teaching this module?
2. How to ensure consistency within the pedagogic practice?

Literature

The term WIL has received global recognition amongst HEI educators (Ferns, Campbell & Zegwaard, 2014). The pressure to produce students who will contribute to a competitive workforce has become even more evident in curriculum planning (Jackson, 2016). Enabling students with skills to transition into the workspace is not only beneficial to the student but provides the university with differentiation within the higher education sector (Jackson, Fleming & Rowe, 2018). An important understanding of WIL and its composition is its uniqueness based on discipline, industry involvement as well as the availability of resources (Rook & Sloan, 2021). Examining WIL in certain disciplines is limiting since many disciplines have not included WIL in their curriculums. While this might be the case, research has identified a range of WIL pedagogical approaches or models used in certain disciplines (Rook, 2015, 2017).

Activities included in WIL could range from visiting experts (guest lectures), simulations, and virtual reality to industry placements, with the pedagogies of the institutions becoming more inclusive (Ferns, Campbell & Zegwaard, 2014). The pedagogies used in WIL should be deliberate and aimed to provide students with an experience *in class* with how that experience would be in the workplace. Ferns and colleagues (2014) prescribe WIL to be made up of activities with a range from low to high levels of accuracy to workplace experiences as well as some level of engagement. While WIL is highly dependent on the discipline and context, it is still an education process with foundational pedagogy and theory (Moreland, 2005). The diversity of the term (WIL), and its understanding may seem to be compromising its consistency as a teaching module, yet it is based on the variation of activities used within the curriculum and flexibility which promotes opportunities and more possibilities to the course.

Ultimately researchers agree that WIL should be designed to blend a discipline's theories with practice-based learning (Ferns, Campbell & Zegwaard, 2014). WIL should promote innovation and skill application of its graduates, yet research on the topic is largely focused on stakeholder benefits. It cannot be argued that stakeholders receive numerous benefits from work-ready graduates, however, Dressler and Keeling (2011) include career, academic and personal benefits as additional categories. Based on the research of Zegwaard and Coll (2011), WIL students, especially students who had work placements showed the ability to make better-informed decisions about their career direction and choices and reported higher starting salaries. Flemming and Eames (2005) stated that WIL students, who were placed in industry, showed an increase in their research ability, and critical thinking, as well as being able to manage their time more efficiently during their return to campus. Ferns and colleagues (2014) agree and state that students who return after placements tend to appreciate the content of their studies more and find the work more relevant. Among being able to be more innovative, WIL students obtain personal benefits such as the ability to work in teams, work on common goals and increase their organisational skills (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004).

Types of WIL can be framed using Rowe, Mackaway, and Winchester-Seeto's (2012) suggested terms of locality and level of engagement. Rowe and colleagues (2012) explain that locality could include on-campus or off-campus activities, for example working with industry partners or campus departments, while the level of engagement would refer to the depth of involvement for example day visits versus internships. Chowdhury (2020) concluded that for WIL courses to be designed and delivered successfully, industry

participation is important. An understanding of common needs will include those of students, lecturers, managers, and professional bodies for a mutual agreement to form regarding WIL courses. The mix of needs and agreements highlights the complexity of providing a standardised program or course outline for WIL. Jackson and colleagues (2018) support this statement and express that by viewing WIL as a range of pedagogical activities, nonlinear based on superiority, the appropriateness of activities can be focused on. The question then arises regarding how to deem pedagogical activities as appropriate for a specific WIL course.

Background

Sports Practice Management is a postgraduate module within the Honours Degree in Sport Management. The module carries 18 credits and students are registered for an entire academic year (28 weeks). The module is designed based on WIL concepts and students focus on specific areas of sport and management. The focus areas include sports structures, sports marketing, sports events, business ethics, sports facilities, and personal development. The module is examined using an oral examination and a final mark of 50% is required to pass the module. Based on COVID-19 the university moved to emergency online teaching in 2020, consequently applying continuous assessment to all modules which is still the case for Sport Management Practice in 2023. Additional to the curriculum change, the sports industry in South Africa was largely affected by the lockdown periods and restrictions.

Methodology

As a reflective study, Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper's (2001) reflective model which focused on three questions, namely what, so what, and now what, was adapted to the following three points:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- Where does it leave me?

Resources used to answer these adapted questions include personal reflections, course material (learner guides, assessments, moderators' reports), and module success rates.

What Happened?

In 2018, 26 students were registered for the module. The module consisted of only on-campus placements with pre-arraigned partners working at service departments at the universities. These include the sports bureau, facility, and operations, and student gymnasiums. Students would be allocated to groups and would rotate between these placements. Rotations range between six to seven weeks per rotation. At the end of the year, students had to complete all the rotations. During the rotation students would have to compile a log sheet (worksheet), have it signed, and return it to our offices. The log sheet included a small section for activity description and space for the number of hours spent on the mentioned activity. Because the placements were arranged by the previous lecturer responsible for the module before the academic year with the stakeholders, predetermined outcomes (activity examples) were already agreed upon. During the rotations, the rotation manager would orientate the group of students, and assign them the necessary tasks to ensure they all receive the outcomes specified by the end of the rotation. Three rotation managers were involved, unfortunately at the last moment, one withdrew, and their department was no

longer willing to assist with student placement. Luckily, one of the other rotation managers provided students with the necessary experience within their domain and took on more rotations. Very few class discussions were scheduled, students would meet with their lecturer once or twice during the semester. Monitoring and administration of students was done by the rotation managers. For a semester mark to be calculated, students had to return their log sheet so that the hours spent, and activities done could be checked. Marks per student were given by rotation managers for assigned tasks and added by the lecturer. During the oral examination, both rotation managers were present, as the course lecturer, one colleague from our department (who also was appointed as the internal moderator), and the external moderator (from another institution). The pass rate for the oral examinations was 100%, yet the success rate was 96% due to two module cancelations.

In 2019, 24 students registered for the module. The arrangement with the original two rotation managers stayed in place, with one new stakeholder (for marketing) asking to become involved. It was decided that the students should look for off-campus placement for their facility rotation. Students were given clear instructions regarding their facility rotation, with task examples and a letter to the placement with the contact details of the lecturer. The panel for the oral examinations stayed the same with the addition of the new rotation manager. The oral examination had a 100% pass rate, as well as the module, received 100% success rate.

In 2020, 28 students registered for the module. The plan at the start of 2020 was to keep the arraignments like the year before. Yet, the rotation manager for marketing's contract was not renewed and her position became vacant. In March 2020, the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions meant that the campus closed, and all activities had to move online. Subsequently, the sports industry also did not allow any student's work on their premises. The format for assessment also changed from examination to continuous assessment. Many of the activities meant for each rotation were not made into assignments with some practical applications. Rotation managers assisted with the creation of assignments related to the tasks they would give during their rotations. Students were asked to attend online classes to explain the changes, assignments, and how the final marks will be determined. More sessions with individual students to engage directly with each of them and track their progress were arranged. The success rate for the module was 96%. Two students canceled the module at the start of the academic year before COVID-19.

Thirty-two (32) students registered for the module in 2021. Since students were not allowed to return to campus, the continuous assessment plan and activities stayed the same as in 2020. The same arraignment with sessions and feedback was implemented, yet student engagement was problematic. A new external moderator was appointed and assisted with the quality insurance and a tutor who only helped with this group. The success rate for the module was 81%, and not satisfactory to report. Notably, the module success rate was not low due to failures, but purely module cancelations.

Twenty-eight students registered for the module in 2022. Since we could return to campus but had to continue using continuous assessments, it was decided that the tasks used in the previous year be used again, but to add a class project (to be done for our department) as the practical aspect. Because students had access to campus, we were able to meet with the students (and they with each other) on a face-to-face basis. More class sessions were scheduled during the academic year. The external moderator was consulted more frequently on the practical assignments and visited the class on two occasions as a consultant as well as

an examiner. While the tutor was appointed to assist the group with their theoretical modules, she also assisted the group with their project. The success for the module was 88%.

Why Did it Happen?

In 2018 a large amount of time was spent on orientation (the feeling of finding one's feet), the lecturer was new to the university and module. Due to a limited knowledge of the institution's staff and structures, it was the rotation managers who chose to step in to assist and keep with the arrangement which added value to the continuation of the module for 2018. As a lecturer, losing stakeholders at the start of an academic year would leave them feeling vulnerable, especially in how to ensure curriculum consistency. The assumption that 'they will help again' because the stakeholder assisted the year before and was willing to work with the students, was incorrect to make. The 2019 year was planned better, by the end of 2018 an understanding existed with the rotation managers, and leading up to 2019 frequent emails and calls meant that the lecturer became more visible to the managers. The arraignment worked well enough that another rotation opened for students. While it was not in our control that contracted staff leave, more thought should have been given to a rotation not being attached to one specific person, again. The facility rotation becoming an off-campus rotation was difficult to manage. Many students did not know or were not willing to look for their placement. As a lecturer, you become anxious and frustrated when students delay their facility rotation due to the excuse that they could not find anything. Those students who had more confidence found placements quickly and even enjoyed working off-campus. Yet, it was decided that 50% of the rotations for 2020 would be on-campus and 50% off-campus, thus covering facility and marketing.

At the start of 2020, the class seemed eager for this arraignment. When the new module outline was explained to students, they did not seem too hesitant, and the feedback session went well. There were a few issues or concerns regarding the online consultations, very rarely students would not show up, and if they did, they always ensured that they reschedule. Together with the external moderator and rotation managers, we tried to keep tasks as close to practical work as possible, being conscious of the restrictions. Although it was a difficult year, it seemed that the students did their best to adapt to the new module outline. The two cancelations the module had were before the COVID-19 lockdown and which we take as a positive and students were able to finish their academic year with all the changes and challenges. The year 2021 was difficult since we did not return to campus, and we did not have the opportunity to meet in person. Although we were able to show our faces in online classes, large classes and being cautious of data usage meant that some lecturers did not know how their students looked at all. Many students did not attend sessions and did not respond to emails or calls. Feedback and monitoring students that did not respond to emails or calls were frustrating. Although the work was presented before, it was difficult to keep students motivated to participate, and sometimes it was noticed that the 'value' of an assignment meant to be practical work was lost on them.

Things looked up when we were notified that students will return to campus for 2022's academic year. Although the rotation managers were all still unsure if their departments will be able to accommodate students, it was decided that the module will be presented on a hybrid approach. Students had to complete the assignments online (like in previous years), but as a class, they were given a project to complete within our academic department on campus. Some challenges regarding the project were expected, but the complaints, student issues, and the fighting among class members were overwhelming. It got to a point where the

student representatives and the Head of Department had to get involved. The project was completed, and a final presentation was held with the class, department staff, and external moderator. The reasons for the module cancelations varied, yet it was not for the module specifically but cancelation of the qualification. Few students wanted to complete the module evaluation survey issued by the university, however, the frustration students experienced working in a team was a recurring topic. In hindside, allowing students to do part of their work on their own, but other work they relied on students they also have not seen for two years (some they do not know at all), could have contributed to the arguments. Many students did not return to residences close to campus; therefore, they were absent for group work sessions on days when classes were not mandatory.

Where Does it Leave Me?

In preparation for 2023, assistance from colleagues in the department who had students do practical work regulated by their governing body was sought. They shared how they would arrange the outcomes based on specific tasks (not only hours) as well as 360-degree feedback. It was decided to keep some of the individual assignments (still based on the historic rotations) but included an off-campus or on-campus placement requirement for students to return to industry. The class project was also kept, yet the approach is different. More time will be given on the group work timetable and an extra day (6 hours) for this module.

A large focus of the class orientation will be a meet and greet. As leisure scholars, we understand the purpose and value of including a full-value contract, getting students to talk about expectations and general rules for the class. We also value icebreakers (activities) and know the importance of students getting to know each other. The class representatives play a significant role and will be nominated at the first session. Setting up a communication structure with them is needed. They will also be asked to develop a class list with pictures and some background of the class members.

Time was allocated to construct the module's Blackboard (our Learning Management System) and prepare it for students to help themselves with what will be expected of them during the year. This includes the learner guide, assessment plan, and work schedule (due dates for assessments). Students will also be provided with documentation regarding the placements, these include tasks, evaluation forms, example emails, an agreement contract, etc. This is referred to as a starter kit. The arraignment should be that students must complete a pre-set number of tasks at their placements, under the supervision of an assigned mentor who will also provide them with feedback. The number of hours needed to complete these tasks I set at 100 for the 28 weeks (about 6 and a half months). Identifying a mentor at the placement is important, this person or persons will need to mentor the students throughout the year. Some industries might have more than one person who can assist, therefore students might have a different mentor based on the task. Feedback from the mentor to the student on the task is important and part of the feedback indicates if the discussion has taken place between mentor and students. At the end of each month, students will need to submit their progress and attend a one-on-one session, during this session challenges should be discussed with the students, and being able to read the submitted feedback, assist them in improving their skills. This will also allow time to engage with the stakeholders regarding issues and monitor the progress of the students.

The first practical tasks (which are done individually) will include email construction, developing their email signature, and updating CVs. This could assist students with their search for placements and the formal communication that will go with it.

Conclusion

Although South Africa is enthusiastic about sports, little is documented regarding the use of WIL in qualifications related to the sustainability and development of the sports industry in South Africa. Education, and more specifically, the curriculum is key in preparing students to enter the workplace with the skills needed to meet requirements set out by each industry. WIL plays a vital role in these skills, which go beyond that theoretical knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, WIL could include various forms of activities, yet context alters the effectiveness of these activities. Chowdhury (2020) who advised on the use of WIL in Bangladesh's education system, mentions that long- and short-term plans to integrate WIL into qualifications are needed. Being involved with other modules and being aware of module outcomes, is needed to see the full *readiness and usefulness* of the activities included in the WIL program. While it might be difficult to balance curriculum consistency with student-centered learning, there can be a balance. The importance of design and delivery with close consultations with stakeholders and experts is a critical component. It is not about reinventing the wheel but making the wheel turn smoothly and purposefully.

Networking with the industry provides a sense of stability with WIL's content and context. Stakeholders have been valuable assets on and off campus. The diverse groups students surround themselves with during WIL add value not only to the program but to students' skills. By WIL providing students the opportunity to develop important graduate attributes such as communication, time management, and other interpersonal skills they might transition easier into the workplace. Students who become invaluable to workplaces, who transition easier, and who can start adding value to the workforce provide the institution with a competitive advantage, being seen as a contributor to workplace-ready graduates. On the other hand, if students find this transition easy, or have more opportunities to apply for jobs based on practical skills and experience their time spent at the institution is also validated.

This leads me to conclude, firstly, that in reflection on the pedagogy with regard to WIL, we found that it took some time and networking before an understanding of the module and its outcomes related to certain activities was achieved. Learning and adapting from one year to the next is key to how WIL is designed. Secondly, the assumption that a WIL module is self-study or self-managed is not true. The lecturer is and should be involved, as much as they would be with a theoretical module, if not more. Students need a constant presence, not to micro-manage them, but to support them. Lastly, students should be more aware of their voice in bettering the WIL module, when they graduate, they can also support future students not only by suggestions on content but by being part of context. Students who enter the workplace and extend the same courteously to students by offering their place of work for placements. Building such a network of support and broadening the stakeholders' reach is beneficial to the curriculum, qualifications as well as industry.

It is recommended that establishing and maintaining a partnership with industry, institutions can deliver an authentic WIL experience for their students. In establishing this mutually beneficial partnership between industry and institutions consistency to a WIL curriculum can be planned both in context and content.

Acknowledgments

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Contact email: natashajvr@uj.ac.za