

Curriculum and Pedagogic bases for integrating practice experiences within higher education

Integrating experiences across academic and practice settings

Currently, there is much interest within higher education in utilising and integrating student learning experiences in practice settings with those in academic programs. Commonly, this is referred to as work integrated learning or WIL. The key intended outcomes for the use and integration of these experiences is to assist students develop the robust occupational or professional knowledge required for: (i) smooth transition into practice after graduation and (ii) for the effective enactment of their professional practice. Many arrangements are being made across Australia to provide different kinds of experiences in practice settings, including placements, practicums, work experience programs, professional experiences etc. The majority of Australian universities are providing or seeking to provide these experiences for students.

However, beyond providing these experiences, is the important goal of utilising and integrating the learning that arises from experiences in practice settings into the university program in which the students are enrolled. The integration of these experiences is important because learning arises from experiences in both kinds of settings, albeit probably of different kinds. And, together these contributions likely provide the best basis for learning robust professional knowledge. What we know is that there are both strengths and limitations in the kinds of learning that arise from the experiences in both academic and practice settings. However, there is a high potential for providing complementary and comprehensive outcomes when the learning from both kinds of experiences are brought together and enriched through building further, refining and extending the students' knowledge arising from both settings.

Yet, although experiences are being provided, the processes of integrating those experiences into the students' overall studies are not always practised. Certainly, experiences in practice settings are sometimes a part of courses and coursework requirements. Also, there are often preparatory experiences as well as reflections after the practicum experience to enrich and integrate the learning arising through the practice-based experiences. Yet, to consider how this integration might be enacted effectively and more widely, requires an informed consideration of what constitutes the integration of these experiences.

Three ways of considering integrations between practice and academic settings

There are at least three ways of considering the integration of these experiences: *a*) integrating the distinct contributions of physical and social settings; *b*) integrating the students' personal constructions from these settings; and *c*) a socio-personal conception of integration which encompasses both *a* and *b*.

Integrating the contributions of the physical and social settings

This first kind of integration acknowledges that the experiences in both kind of settings provides particular kinds of learning that arises from the activities and interactions that learners engage in these two settings. To illustrate this idea, albeit erroneously, it is often suggested that theory arises from experiences in academic settings and the capacity to practice arises from experiences in practice settings. More likely, students will learn concepts (i.e. knowledge about), procedures (i.e. know how) and dispositional forms (e.g. values) of knowledge in both settings, yet in different ways because the activities and interactions through which this learning arises will be quite different across these settings. Both kinds of settings afford access to particular kinds of knowledge and together and complementarily the learning that arises equates to the knowledge required to practice effectively.

Consequently, concept of integration here is between the different kinds of learning that arises from two distinct kinds of settings. The curriculum intention here is for these two sets of experiences to be brought together to provide the kinds of activities and interactions that can generate the knowledge required for practice. This is a good starting premise.

However, there are likely to be some limitations here. Firstly, there can be no guarantee that the aggregation of experiences across both settings will actually provide the full range of experiences. Secondly, different practice settings will afford different kinds of experiences, as will academic settings, which will lead to particular kinds of affordances, which may or may not be consistent with the kind of requirements for the particular practice in which the students will work in after graduation. Thirdly, it is often unclear about the extent, duration and range of experiences that will be required for students to generate the kinds of knowledge required for effective practice in a particular workplace setting.

Consequently, curriculum considerations are often directed towards trying to ensure that students have an adequate array of experience in practice settings. When nursing education was still based in hospitals, trainee nurses used to rotate through a range of hospital wards to ensure that they had a comprehensive set of nursing experiences, know about different kinds of nursing. In university-based programs, consideration is given to the kinds of clinical experiences student nurses have and their need for longer rotations in their graduate year, for instance.

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The pedagogic concerns here about providing instruction, group processes or other kinds of experiences, probably in academic settings that encourage students to consider their experiences in both settings, make comparisons and judgements about worth, and sharing them with other students.

However, this view of providing experiences and their integration is primarily based on what each of the two physical and social settings (i.e. practice and university) can afford learners in terms of activities and interactions. Yet, there is the need to consider what students will construct through these experiences.

Integrating students' personal conceptions and constructions

Another way of considering integration is that because individuals are active in construing and constructing knowledge (i.e. learning) arises in personally particular ways. Consequently, a consideration of only the affordances of both kinds of settings and their integration is insufficient. Students will bring particular kinds of understandings to their learning in both academic and practice settings. It is these understandings that shape how and what they will learn in both settings, and then integrate them. For instance, students who are experienced social or healthcare workers may well come to experience both the university experiences in their social work or nursing courses and in social work and health care settings quite differently than school leavers who lack those experiences of practice. Then, there are the range of different conceptions and capacities that particular individuals students bring to each of these settings, such as few nursing students wanting to engage in age care nursing.

Hence, integration here is about a consideration of personal processes of meaning making from what the students experience in the two settings, and all else they encounter. Consequently, the curriculum considerations here are about the students' prior experiences and how these might be best utilised and aligned with learning the kind of knowledge that is required for effective practice, and how their existing knowledge experiences can be best integrated with both the coursework and practicum experience components. Pedagogic considerations might be finding ways for the students to articulate, share and otherwise express and utilise their existing knowledge in the most effective way in order to learn, extend or refine further what they already know, and use of group processes in which students can share their learning with others, for instance.

A socio-personal account of integration

A third option is to acknowledge the contributions of both settings and also that learners will construe and construct their knowledge (i.e. learn) through their personal ways of knowing premised on what they have previously experienced. A socio-personal account of learning, and integration takes into account what is afforded by both kinds of settings, and how individual engage with what is afforded in both settings. That is, it accommodates and reconciles both of the first two set of accounts and recognises that the contributions (i.e. activities and interactions) of both settings are not objective experiences that will yield particular learning outcomes, but are interpreted, engaged with and constructed by learners.

So integration here is about the personally-premised basis for engaging with and reconciling experiences across both kinds of settings. In curriculum terms there is a need to consider, sequence and work to maximise the learning outcomes of both kinds of settings, and also provide experiences for students to share these experiences and try to effect inter-subjectivity or shared understanding. Pedagogically, there is a need to provide experiences for sharing and articulating experiences.

It is this last conception of integration that seems the most informative and explanatory and that most likely offer conceptions around which curriculum and pedagogy will be considered, enacted and evaluated.

References

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