WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING AND EMPLOYABILITY. A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

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Abstract

The policy of the University west is to apply work integrated learning in its education. That is why, the WIL should be applied, in different courses. In different courses should teachers describe how they are applying the "WIL-element". But what is WIL is not defined clearly. It is left to the teachers to define it. It leads to confusion and uncertainty in what WIL-element actually is. For this reason, it is of great importance to discuss the meaning of WIL.

The purpose of the study is to define what WIL is, to show how it can be applied in education and to contribute, to theoretical development of WIL, which can lead to improvement of its application as well as students employability.

Research questions: What is work-integrated learning? How it can be achieved? Does it affect employability? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

Part one is introduction and background description, purpose and research question. Part two deals with description of concepts and presentation of the theoretical framework for the study. Work-integrated learning has been defined differently and in different ways. But, what is common for all of them is combination of theory and practice or academia and work/work-place i.e. procurement of knowledge acquired and generated in work-place.

In part three, the approach and design of the study is discussed.

In part four, empirical data is presented, including observations, document studies, etc.

Part five is about discussion and conclusions. When discussing WIL, focus and emphases primarily on the workplace and experiential learning. While at University West, focus is on theoretical learning in the first place, i.e. focus is not on the workplace. The focus is on the learning that happens at the university and how it should be linked to practice and workplace. This means that the starting point is from the opposite side. Another aspect is that the perception of WIL is vague and not precise. There is no connection between different WIL-moments in different courses. That makes it impossible to judge and determine whether the goals have been achieved or not. There is another essential question; Does and can WIL contribute to employability? Further advantages and disadvantages of the perception and application of WIL at the University West are discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Learning, Work-integrated learning, learning as process, knowledge generated in work-place, WIL and employability.

1 INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM FORMULATION AND PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

Well-being in the society and improvement of people's life standards are linked to sustainable development in society. Stimulation of the individual's learning, competencies and career development contributes to community development and hence promotion of the sustainable development of our society in the future. Therefore it is of great importance to discuss different learning concepts and developing theories of learning and work integrated learning (WIL).

1.1 From the WIL to WIL-element

University West’s vision is a work-integrated learning (WIL) as approach and method. Discussion and debate about what WIL is and how should it be applied in the education and courses is therefore constantly in progress since the university was founded. In the guidelines for course syllabus’s at undergraduate and graduate level, Reg. 2012/1122 A 21, states that the working integrated key elements (below referred as WIL-element) in the courses should be stated. The guidelines provide examples of what, WIL-element can be, but leave to those who create and plan the course to identify
more precisely what such moments can be. Our view is that as these elements provided to each employee at the university to self-define, there is an uncertainty in what work integrated element really is. Different disciplines define the concept differently. Uncertainty often prevails in between colleges about if what they themselves think and feel about the WIL is "right" or not.

Earlier surveys (Kjellén / Tengborg 2004 and Hedlund/ Smith 2005) have been made to identify the WIL-element used in courses at the department of economics and informatics, but our view is that there is still some uncertainty in what is more accurate is work-integrated learning and how to adapt our courses to a more work-integrated learning in broader terms. The university needs a well-defined view/idea of what WIL-element actually is and which WIL-element are used in our various disciplines. Purpose of the study is to identify what the colleges consider to be WIL-element and how it is applied in practice in courses. The study's purpose is also to contribute to the theoretical development of WIL and theories of learning.

1.2 Purpose and research question

The survey aims to describe the WIL and understand the development process of WIL. The university needs a well-defined view/idea of what WIL-element actually is and which WIL-elements are used in our different disciplines. Purpose of the study is to identify what the colleges consider as WIL-elements and how, it is applied in practice in courses. The study's purpose is also to contribute to the theoretical development of WIL and theories of learning, as well as its application in reality.

Question is; what is work-integrated learning? How can it be achieved? What does work-integrated learning mean in practice?

1.3 The report's outline

Part two deals with description of WIL, theoretical foundations for the study and conceptual discussion. In part three discusses methodology and survey's design very short. Empirical material presented in part Four. Part 5 is about discussion.

1.4 Method/approach

The study is partly based on observations, and partly based on review of the course syllabuses in order to compare with the guidelines.

2 CONCEPT DESCRIPTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning and competence development theory is the reference and theoretical basis for the investigation. In the following describes the concepts of learning, work integrated learning from the different perspectives and then briefly discussed related theories.

2.1 Learning? What does it means?

There are varying definitions of learning. Learning can be practically or theoretically. Learning can affect education.

Learning is continuous and going on throughout life. It is a process, or different processes where one learn different things and develops. During these processes one perceive different experiences and norms and values socializes and internalizes. Learning can also be called processes of institutionalization of different norms and values, in addition to the learning of facts and knowledge. Learning in higher education and higher levels depends on different actors, teachers, students, teaching methods and prevailing institutions of society. But first, what is learning? What does it mean by learning? How do we define learning?

Learning is perceived differently and also defined differently. Learning is about "how people learn and in what circumstances they develop different competencies and skills, intellectual as well as manual. These are questions that are processed in scientific specialties such as learning and developmental psychology, but also in many other areas. Questions ties additionally to the theories and philosophical reasoning about upbringing of children, education, teaching and knowledge transfer that goes far back in time (Säljö2000)." The view of learning varies and by learning means different people and groups different things. The view of (lifelong) learning can be divided into general approaches according to Ellström: "From the beginning by the concept of lifelong learning, meant, individual process of
formation, a self-directed learning, focused on individual liberation, self-realization or self-education. Lifelong learning represented an educational ideals of humanistic overtones. ... In the long run, there was the vision of lifelong learning as a pathway to greater equity (Ellström 1996)." But according to him, the meaning of life-long learning changed: "From the late 1980s regarded the idea of lifelong learning, rather as a part in a strategy of economic and technological development. ... Not least, in recent years, education and learning as an integrated part of the work has come to the foreground. This changing in the meaning of the concept of lifelong learning is so profound that Rubenson (1996) chooses to speak about a first- and a second-generation thinking about lifelong learning. The first generation of utopian and idealistic traits, the other with strong economic traits (see also Gustavsson 1996)" (Ellström1996).

Learning is an ongoing and continuous process. We believe that learning is a process, which in turn consists of several smaller sub-processes. "The idea of lifelong learning rests on at least two principles. First, the individual's learning is not completed in adolescence, but continues and should continue throughout life. Second, that learning does not occur alone or perhaps even primarily, in the context of different types of formal education, but also in the workplace and in everyday life." (Ellström 1996). In this connection, means Säljö, by learning; "Knowledge re-creates and constantly renewed in the society, and such processes have been important developments parts of social development, long before we got formalized training and education. In a more fundamental sense is learning about what individuals and communities take with them from social situations and use in the future (Säljö 2000) ".

The discussion above can be summarized and formulated as: Learning is about acquiring new knowledge, which leads to new abilities and skills. These can be intellectual or practical or combination of the two, such as research and teaching. Learning new skills and competence development takes place during different processes and in different ways, theoretical reasoning, practical application or combination of the two depending on the type and objectives of learning.

One of the concepts that debated lively today is WIL, work integrated learning. It is ongoing specially, in the University West. It is an important profile for the University, but there is lack of a clear and uniform definition of WIL. I am trying in this discussion, contribute to development and clarification of the concept, but also contribute to the discussion and description, and problematizing and deepening of the concept of WIL.

2.2 Work integrated learning? What is that?

One of the concepts of considerable debate today is work-integrated learning (WIL). WIL is an ongoing discussion, particularly at University West. There are different interpretations and definitions of the WIL. WIL is an important profile of University West, but there is no clear and uniform definition of WIL. We try to contribute to the development and clarification of the concept, but also contribute to the discussion and description, and problematizing of the concept. What is meant by work-integrated learning? Below, we try to discuss, describe and clarify the concept;

Even during literature review, we discovered that there were different and varying definitions and perceptions of the concept. Some of these are presented below.

Flinders University defines WIL as; "Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is the term normally used to describe directed or supported educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace. Flinders University places an emphasis on integration as a key element of WIL, and recognizes the importance of student-centered learning as a focus for its delivery." (Flinders Universities website, In Ahmadi 2012). In this perception is WIL equal to integration and combination of educational activities as application of theoretical knowledge in practice on the workplace. This perception of WIL is quite similar the former one (Engel-Hills), although there are nuances in the use of the concepts.

Engel-Hills et.al, discusses and defines WIL as; "... WIL could thus be described as an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces. WIL is based on the principle that learning should be demonstrated to be appropriate for a qualification and should be assessed wherever it takes place or is provided."(Engel-Hills & al 2007). Furthermore, in a conference paper they discuss the concept; "Work-integrated learning (WIL) describes an approach to career-focused education that includes theoretical forms of learning that are appropriate for technical/professional qualifications, problem-based learning (PBL), project based learning (PJBL), and WPL. What distinguishes WIL is the emphasis on the integrative aspects of such learning. WIL could thus be described as an educational approach that aligns academic and
workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces.” (Engel-Hills et. al, 2010, In Ahmadi 2012)

According to this view is focus on combination and integration of academic and workplace learning.

Camosun Colleges definition of WIL is; “WIL is undertaken with the purpose of integrating theory and practice and with the understanding that the main focus of such experience is learning through working. Students are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between theory and field experience in order to identify and understand how each informs the other. Students may use these insights to set goals for the remainder of their education.” Camosun College Homepage, 2013. But how practically one can apply this? According to them, it can be applied as following:

“Suggestion for integrating learning before, during and after the WIL opportunity may include one or more of the following range of practices: goals, learning outcomes, portfolios, field experience reports, reflective journals, self-evaluation and assessments class discussions, small group peer discussions led by the instructor, chat rooms or blogs monitored by the instructor, class assignment based on the field experience, and case studies.” ibid.

In this perception similar to those two previously discussed views, is WIL seen as integrating theory and practice, but underlines the importance of learning through working. The big deviation of this conception is focus on the learning through working.

How applying WIL practically? Griffith University describes WIL-activities as following; “Will activities come in various forms, and may include, for example:

• Professional practice/work placements,
• Industry projects performed at the university or in a workplace,
• Industry experience where students engage as employees in a work environment to meet practical experience requirement specified by professional or industry bodies,”
• Volunteer work for organizations such as not-for-profit organizations.
• Learning activities within virtual and simulated work environments allowing the development and application of work-related skills and knowledge.” (Griffith University home page, 2013)

Even in this view discusses WIL as combination of theoretical knowledge with the workplace experience, but here underlines more the importance of knowledge generated on the workplace. This perception is more profession oriented or directed. They use words as professional practice, workplace, industry project, and so on.

In an article describes Ellström (2005), workplace learning (arbetsplatslärande) and point out its duality; “The view of workplace learning is characterized by duality. … On the one hand there has long been the perception of workplace learning as an essentially instrumental and production-oriented process with little development opportunities for employees. … In contract to this view, we can discern a more development-oriented approach to workplace learning. Effective work means in this perspective not only to produce a result in the form of goods and services that meet certain requirements on quantity and quality. It also means learning and the development of knowledge, skills and other human resources that promote individual as well as business development. This view is reflected in the concepts as learning organization and sustainable work systems (Shani & Docherty 2003). In line in contract the focus is on the future orientation and development. From this starting point and position is today also a considerable consensus that learning in a great extent is integrated with daily work, like the work in many activities presupposes a “built-in learning” (Barnett 1999, Hutchins 1999, Zuboff 1998)” (Ellström 2005). In this perspective, meaningful work means learning by doing, i.e. work which results in creation and production of knowledge. Externalizing in the learning process.

This discussion can be summarized as follows; Work-integrated learning has been defined differently and in varying ways. What is common is the combination of theory and practice or academia and work/workplace. In this discussion, I see WIL as the combination of theory and practice, academia and workplace learning.

There are deviations between the different perceptions. The most essential deviations are focus on knowledge generated in the and by the academia or workplace. Another issue that we note is emphasis is on the workplace, and thereby learning is linked to the practical work and workplace, not university. Which in turn makes work experience crucial.
3 EMPIRICAL PRESENTATION - SUMMARY REVIEW OF THE SYLLABUSES AND STUDENTS VALUATION OF THE COURSES

Below presents the summary of the empirical basis. There are 41 Syllabus of Business Administration in 2014. The syllabuses included in the review are courses offered in business administration, leadership, and personnel economics. In the majority of syllabuses is a special section (headed: work integrated learning), which defines/describes how the course works with WIL. In some of the syllabuses it is even expressed.

3.1 Summary of the description and application of WIL in different courses, according to the syllabuses.

In some of the syllabuses is it expressed (even in the section of Examination that some form of practical task is included) that some form of practical assignment are included. Below are some headings for different course levels, Basic level, intermediate level and advanced level.

The investigated syllabuses, can be divided into two groups;

First group has not done anything. Group two have specified some activities which can be seen as work integrated learning. These activities in turn can be divided into two types; A) Activities that can fulfill the formal requirements, and B) Activities that can support WIL, what is called for WIL - element. Some of these activities are as following:

- **Basic level or undergraduate level:**
  
  Following are some of description for WIL in some of the courses in basic level/undergraduate level:
  
  Some of the teachers regard “Case i accounting program, guest speakers”, as application of the WIL. In another course is seen, “working with the different parts of the course, using case or a company.” as WIL. Another one regards; “implementing a study and connecting practice to literature.” Another teacher regards WIL-application in the respective course as; “Implementing a study and connect practice to course literature in a seminar.” While other teachers see working with projects or report writing as WIL; “Implementation of project work. Seminar.”
  
  In another case is WIL-element described as; “Study and analyze leadership in practice.” While another colleague regards it as; “Space for discussion where the application in the workplace is compared to theory. Writing a business plan.” Another one describes WIL-element as; “Work with course’s different parts, using case studies or a company.”
  
  As we note, none of the activities take place in the workplace. It is more or less about “application of theories in practice”, which actually means theoretical investigation and sometimes empirical investigation.

- **Advanced level:**
  
  Here below are some of the descriptions of WIL-element in advanced-level courses, which are in the syllabuses:
  
  One of the teacher’s regards the WIL-element as; “Implementing a study and connecting practice to literature.” Next one describes quite similarly, although the word choice deffers slightly. “Implementing a study and discussing in a seminar.”
  
  The third one regards and describes WIL-element as; “Assignments? To integrate the theoretical knowledge with practical insights into company’s practical work.” Another one regard project-works, where they combine theory and practice; “Project that integrate practical activities with theory.” The other colleague goes one step further and regards WIL-element as; “Conducting a study and discussing in the seminar.”, which is a pure conventional theoretical activity in common learning at the university.
  
  These are some of the examples of description of WIL-element in some of course syllabuses. As we observe the focus is (of activities above) often on the theoretical learning and applying them in practice. The do not concern at all the acquisition of knowledge which has been created at the workplace.
3.1.1 Student evaluation and observation

Students’ comments do not show clearly that they see these “embedded” activities as work integrated learning. It is not self-evident and obvious for them. Often teachers are reminded to tell students and explain how it has been thought, and these activities are embedded as work integrated learning. And they should be seen as WIL. It should be pointed out and students should be reminded, because it is not self-evident and obvious.

You can see such statements often on University Wests homepage: “University west has been commissioned by the Government to develop work-integrated learning, WIL. Today we are the leading university in terms of WIL in our educations. ….” (University West homepage.) or “84% of our students get job within a year of their studies.”. It is up to each of the teachers to define what does it mean by work-integrated learning! There is no clear and common view and definition of WIL. It is the policy which University West applies in practice and is the official policy, it is not secret. Even my own observations and discussion with colleagues, indicates that, most of them, do not have a clear idea of what WIL is. It is more about a general and common sense views if any is there, than a thoughtful and well-defined understanding of WIL.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 What is WIL?

There are several different definitions of WIL. Some of them focus on the different type of application of theories (focus on knowledge generation in academia) in practice, while other focus on the working-life and knowledge generated in the working-place and externalizing of such experiences, as new theories/knowledge. There are other perspectives, which can be placed between these two perspectives, a combination of both of them, in different proportions.

Flinders University defines WIL as; Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is the term normally used to describe directed or supported educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace. Their emphasis is on integration and recognizes the importance of student-centered learning as a focus for its delivery. (Flinders Universities website, In Ahmadi 2012). According to this definition should theoretical learning be supported by application on work-place. The most important here is focus on the learning in the academia and university. There is a desire to increase awareness of students for application of theories in practice.

Engel-Hills et.al, discusses and defines WIL as; “... WIL could thus be described as an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces. WIL is based on the principle that learning should be demonstrated to be appropriate for a qualification and should be assessed wherever it takes place or is provided.”(Engel-Hills & al 2007). According to this view is WIL about integration/combination of academic and workplace for the purpose of raising qualification, which is associated with employability. Here is focus on usefulness and utility of education for increasing employability. It is more employability oriented. Similar desires can we find in University West. But there are no any concrete steps to achieve that.

There is another perception of WIL, i.e. learning by working. Camoun Colleges definition of WIL is such one; “WIL is undertaken with the purpose of integrating theory and practice and with the understanding that the main focus of such experience is learning through working.” In this perception is focus on the learning through working, one-step more than earlier definitions. Here emphasis is on and underlines the importance of applying of theories in working-life. It is not a full step, but a further step forward toward completion of the concept WIL and raising employability.

Griffith University describes WIL-activities as, professional practice/work placements, Industry projects performed at the university or in a workplace, Industry experience where students engage as employees in a work environment to meet practical experience requirement specified by professional or industry bodies, Volunteer work for organizations such as not-for-profit organizations. Learning activities within virtual and simulated work environments allowing the development and application of work-related skills and knowledge.” (Griffith University home page, 2013). According to this view is WIL associated literally with workplace, practice/work placement. As we note in almost all of these definitions, is workplace learning central for work-integrated learning.

Ellströms definition is close to Griffith Universities perception of WIL. In an article describes Ellström (2005), workplace learning and point out its duality; In this perspective, meaningful work means
learning by doing, i.e. work which results in creation and production of knowledge. Externalizing in the learning process.

There is no clear definition of WIL in University West, according to my knowledge, but perception is partly close to Camosun College and even Engel-Hills et al. definition, i.e. application of theory into practice or raising awareness of students on that. It is left to the concerned teachers to define and apply WIL in different courses. According to this view, WIL is related to integration/combination of theory and practice, but the focus is on learning through working.

4.2 WIL-element during education and strategy for integration of different elements

WIL-Element: WIL-element is what done in university west, which has nothing to do with knowledge collected and provided on the workplace, neither is concerned with knowledge accumulated on the workplace. WIL-element is quite different from WIL, in different ways. The first deviation is concerning knowledge generated by working and in-the-work-place. It may have to do with reflection on connection between theories and practice, i.e. how can the theories be applied in practice. Which can be useful and it can be useful step forward. Work-integrated parts are spreading over several different courses, and thus its various elements need to be integrated and coordinated in order to achieve better and more effective results. According to this definition are two things essential in WIL, a) integration of theoretical learning with its application in the workplace and b) student centered learning.

Engel-Hills et.al. discuss and define WIL as: “… Thus could WIL be described as; an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces. WIL is based on the principle that learning should be demonstrated to be appropriate for a qualification and should be assessed wherever it takes place or is provided.” (Engel-Hills & al 2007). Emphasis is on combination of academic and workplace, which should be appropriate for qualification! In this view is WIL about applicability of theory’s in practice, that is learning should be appropriate for qualification.

Camoun Colleges definition of WIL is: “WIL is undertaken with the purpose of integrating theory and practice and with the understanding that the main focus of such experience is learning through working.”

Griffith University describes WIL-activities as, professional practice/work placements, Industry projects performed at the university or in a workplace, Industry experience where students engage as employees in a work environment to meet practical experience requirement specified by professional or industry bodies, Volunteer work for organizations such as not-for-profit organizations. Learning activities within virtual and simulated work environments allowing the development and application of work-related skills and knowledge.” (Griffith University home page, 2013). WIL-elements can be expressed as unconscious and spontaneous arrangement and execution of some non-coordinated activities that are done, without being able to evaluate its consequences and progress, maturity, success or failure. There is no structure for effectively connecting and integrating the different elements of work-integrated learning to each other and thereby create a clear connection between the various parts of these activities so called elements. How do you reach the goals? To achieve the goals, you should have defined goals. Without knowing goals, no one can claim that the goal is reached or not?

4.3 WIL and Employability

WIL according to most of definitions as we noted can contribute to employability of students. Either by encouragement of students to reflect on relation between theory and practice/experience as; “Students are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between theory and field experience in order to identify and understand how each informs the other.” Encouragement of students to reflection on relation between theory and practice is close to UW, understanding of and application of WIL: These are some examples; “To integrate the theoretical knowledge with practical insights into company’s practical work.” Another one regard project-works, where they combine theory and practice; “Project that integrate practical activities with theory.” It is only so far close to employability as UW can come. While according to definition followed is WIL more closed to employability; “… activities that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace.” This is far from how University West perceives and applies the WIL. In some of other definitions is WIL purely about qualification and competence development. One of these is expressed below; “WIL is based on the principle that
learning should be demonstrated to be appropriate for a qualification”. This is also far from University West’s perception of WIL. WL-element is more or less concerned with encouragement of students to reflect on relation between theory and practice, not more.

4.4 Strengths and weaknesses of WIL-element

While on University West, is focus on theoretical learning in the first place, not on the workplace. According to the studied Syllabuses WIL is often seen as application of the theoretical knowledge in practice. The focus is on the learning that happens at the university and how it should be linked to practice and work-place? Strengths and weaknesses of WIL-application in U.W., are summarized as following;

Strengths are: The positive result of introducing WIL has been, as I find it, led to increased discussions about the subject and thereby increasing awareness.

Weaknesses are: There is no structure to effectively connecting and integrating the different elements of work-integrated learning to each other and thereby creating a clear connection between the various parts of these activities so called WIL-elements. How do you reach the goals? To achieve the goals, you should have defined goals. Without known goals, no one can claim that the goals are reached or not. Have you been successful in achieving the goals or not, is impossible, without knowing them. There is no definition for what does it mean by WIL or WL-element. As well as focus is not on workplace learning. It is on the university.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Lack of clear common definition: The first conclusion and finding is that, there is lack of clear definition of what WIL is according to University West. What University West is doing is WL-element. And there by is impossible to judge if the goals of WIL are achieved or not.

Focus on work-place or reflection over applicability of the theories and WL-element: In WIL is focus and emphasis on the work-place and knowledge collected from practice and workplace. WL-element is what done in university west, which has nothing to do with knowledge collected and provided on the workplace, neither it is concerned with knowledge accumulated on the workplace. It is an effort to make students more aware of the application of the theoretical studies in practice.

Another issue, which should be emphasized on, is in University West is focus on learning at the university, while In WIL in other contexts is focus on work-place learning. This is a further more important deviation from WIL-perception generally.

WL-element and lack of strategy for combination of different WL-element: There is no strategy for integration of different WL-element’s, which in a process can lead to a meaningful establishment of WIL-effect. WL-element is not as same as WIL. However follow-up and integration of different WL-element, could contribute to improvement of the process.

Employability: Can WL-elements improve employability of students in the University West? There is no evidence for confirming or questioning it. Nothing indicates that WL-element (as it is in UW) contributes to increased employability. But logically, one can conclude that WL-elements could contribute to students awareness and improvement of understanding of working life, which in turn improves performance and thereby can contribute to employability.

Recommendations: WIL should be, defined, exemplified and outlined clearly. Defining and exemplification of WIL, facilitates the application process and a conscious integration process of varying WL-elements, which can lead to establishing a well-functioning process of work-integrated learning. A well-defined WIL, can even make it easier for those involved, to measure and be able to judge whether they have achieved the WIL-goal or not.

REFERENCES


**Homepages/digital adresser**
