

Assessment criteria for work-integrated learning in a generalist postgraduate university programme

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Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) such as placements and internships are becoming increasingly common in generalist (i.e. not profession-oriented) postgraduate university programmes. Nevertheless, the justification for work-integrated learning in such programmes is not obvious. While various purposes have been proposed, this paper draws on the university's traditional role in producing and disseminating research-based knowledge. The paper suggests that in generalist study programmes, learning objectives and, hence, assessment of work-integrated learning can profitably be molded on time-tested practices in academic scholarship. Central in this respect is the ability to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice. Adopting this ability as an intended learning outcome (ILO), the paper argues that generalist programmes should embrace work-integrated learning. Specifically, the paper advances a set of assessment criteria that offer a flexible yet rigorous basis for assessing work-integrated learning in generalist postgraduate university programmes.

Keywords: *Work-integrated learning; Work-based learning; Placement; Internship; Constructive alignment; Assessment.*

1. Introduction

Universities are increasingly implementing work-integrated learning, not only in profession-oriented education but also in the generalist programmes (Billett, 2009). Work-integrated learning can take many forms, including internships, work placement and master's theses written in conjunction with an organisation external to the university. However, whereas the purpose of practice is relatively straightforward in the professional study programmes, i.e. to prepare future practitioners of The Profession, the purpose of practice in generalist study programmes is less obvious. The reason is that generalist programmes train future experts with no specific position, profession or sector in mind. Accordingly, in the generalist programmes university teachers can struggle to formulate appropriate learning objectives for students' work-integrated learning (Yorke, 2011). Arguably, this challenge intensifies as one moves from the undergraduate to the postgraduate level. A generalist master's programme is typically research-based and theory-oriented. How then, in Biggs' (2014; Biggs & Tang, 2011) language, can a university professor align intended learning outcomes (ILOs), teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and assessment tasks (ATs) relative to work-integrated learning in a generalist postgraduate programme?

More specifically, this paper asks: "*What are appropriate assessment criteria for work-integrated learning in a generalist postgraduate university programme?*" There are three reasons for focussing on the assessment element of *constructive alignment* (Biggs, 2014; Biggs & Tang, 2011). First, the assessment is a critical part of any learning activity at a university, including work-integrated learning. Students expect assessments to be consistent, objective and based on explicit evaluation criteria. More than that, assessment determines students' learning: "*Assessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students' learning. It directs attention to what is important. It acts as an incentive for study. And it has a powerful effect on what students do and how they do it.*" (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Second, to meet students' expectations of transparent assessment, and to remain in line with the idea of constructive alignment, the teaching staff must formulate intended learning outcomes and develop accompanying assessment criteria. At present, however, little practical guidance is available regarding the assessment of work-integrated learning (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Yorke, 2011). The present paper addresses this shortcoming. Third, while the academic literature on work-integrated learning is traditionally biased towards profession-oriented programmes, this paper claims that the intended learning objectives and, hence, the assessment criteria are likely to be different in the generalist programmes. This contextual aspect is often missing in published research on work-integrated learning. Accordingly, with its emphasis on assessment, this paper extends theory with respect to the constructive alignment of work-integrated learning in generalist postgraduate university programmes specifically.

2. Literature

2.1. Work-integrated learning

To the detriment of academic development, researchers apply a great variety of names for essentially the same thing: work placements, internships, practicum, practice-based learning, cooperative education, *etc.* In part, this proliferation of terms is due to divergent national traditions, regulations and political priorities that make each country's context unique. Nonetheless, there is a pressing need to develop theoretically significant taxonomies that distinguish between different study programmes, types of placement, categories of hosting organisations, and other factors that have an impact on students' learning outcomes. Here, we apply the term work-integrated learning (WIL). Symptomatically, this literature too lacks consistence in what it actually refers to. For example, authors commonly see WIL primarily as a learning activity to foster work-readiness and employability (Jackson, 2015; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016). In contrast, we align ourselves with Smith (2012, p. 247), who states that: "*WIL is not the same as work experience or work-based learning, neither of which require students to specifically learn, apply or integrate canonical disciplinary knowledge.*" And further: "*This idea emphasises that combination, assimilation or connection of theory and practice are the core intellectual activities for students*" (p. 251). The present paper develops this argument to suggest that, in a generalist postgraduate university programme, work-integrated learning is not primarily motivated by employability but by the opportunity to test theory against practice.

2.2. Practice as data collection

In the words of Dubois and Gadde (2002, p. 555), "*the main objective of any research is to confront theory with the empirical world*". This formulation resonates with Smith's (2012, p. 251) emphasis above that "*combination, assimilation or connection of theory and practice are the core intellectual activities for students*". Extending the parallel between academic research and work-integrated learning, we here adopt the view that practice in a generalist postgraduate university programme serves the purpose of illuminating theory. Accordingly, the student's understanding is cemented as the student applies theoretical knowledge to an empirical setting. Collecting data in the workplace by means of personal observation, interviews or written documentation permits the students to draw conclusions and to relate their own findings to the theory found in textbooks and academic journals. Do their findings corroborate theory? Do they differ? Can the student explain how and why?

An academic research project can be understood as learning under a set of established quality criteria to ensure sound methodology and robust findings. The researcher's learning experience while contemplating extant literature, and collecting and analysing data, is in essence very similar to that of the student. The students, too, familiarize themselves with

previous research (be it in the form of a textbook or original journal articles) and – yes! – internships and work placements allow them to collect data and relate these data to appropriate theories, akin to what the researcher does.

Accordingly, generalist postgraduate university programmes should embrace work-integrated learning as an integral part of a research-based and theory-oriented curriculum. Indeed, such programmes should highlight “the ability to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice” as a key intended learning outcome (ILO) for work-integrated learning (Billett, 2009; Duignan, 2003; Smith, 2012). Hence, whereas scholars in the past have identified diverse motivations for work-integrated learning, such as active learning (Jackson, 2015), employability (McNamara, 2013), and the appropriation of generic (transferable) skills (Hayes & Cejnar, 2020), the vantage point in this paper is to align the teaching/learning activity (TLA) of practice with the intended learning outcome (ILO) of being able to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice.

In line with the above, this paper assumes a view of *practice as data collection*. In other words, the assumption is that we can assess work-integrated learning against the same quality criteria that apply to academic research. This idea is spelled out below, together with a set of suggested assessment criteria for work-integrated learning in a generalist master-level university programme in the social sciences and, arguably, in a wide range of other disciplines.

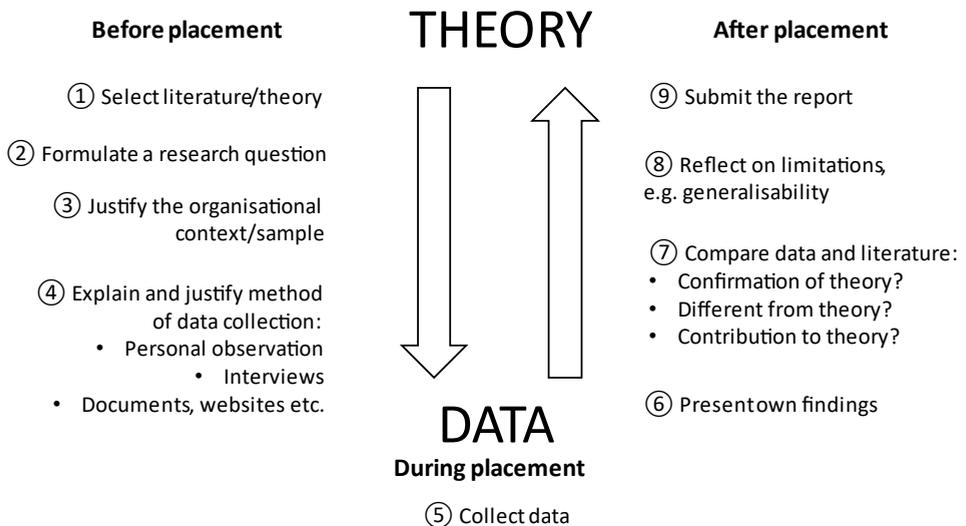


Figure 1. Practice as data collection. Source: The author.

4. Practice as data collection

Having laid the intellectual foundation above, Figure 1 *Practice as data collection* sums up the contribution of this paper. The diagram presents nine steps that can serve as assessment criteria for an internship report, a placement reflection paper, a work-integrated master's thesis or a similar assessment task (AT). The steps in Figure 1 are aligned with the intended learning outcome (ILO) "reflect on the relationship between theory and practice". The ILO and the assessment criteria are indicative only, and should be adjusted and refined to match the requirements of the individual course or study programme. Similarly, the steps can be further developed into detailed grading criteria or rubrics to specify how various levels of learning correspond to individual grades.

In Figure 1, the relationship between theory and data takes centre stage. In Step 1, the student should acknowledge the stream of literature or the theoretical model used as analytical lens. In Step 2, the student formulates a research question to guide data collection at the workplace. Step 3 requires the student to justify why the hosting organisation in question is relevant to the theoretical lens and the research question. The student must next (Step 4) account for the choice of method for data collection. In Step 5, the student describes how data collection was carried out and notes any methodological challenges that were encountered. Step 6 demands that the student identify his or her findings and present these in a suitable manner. In Step 7, crucially, the student reflects on the relationship between own findings and the academic literature. Step 8 involves considering the limitations of one's own work, such as the generalisability of one's findings to other organisational contexts. Finally, Step 9, the student hands in the report for assessment.

As illustrated in Table 1, the nine steps enjoy broad support in the established methods literature as standard quality criteria for academic enquiry.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper addresses a knowledge gap concerning intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and suitable assessment criteria for work-integrated learning at the university level. The topic is relevant as universities are increasingly expected to offer work-integrated learning, not only in the profession-oriented programmes but also in the generalist study programmes, including at the postgraduate level. Nonetheless, few guidelines exist to aid course and programme coordinators in this area. Based on the notion of *practice as data collection*, this paper advocates the use of academic quality standards as assessment criteria for work-integrated learning, notably in generalist (i.e. not profession-oriented) postgraduate programmes. Although much remains in terms of conceptual refinement and testing, this study represents an early attempt at answering the question: "*What are appropriate assessment criteria for work-integrated learning in a generalist postgraduate university programme?*"

Table 1. Support for the nine steps in the academic methods literature

Step	Assessment criteria	Reference
1.	Select literature/theory	<i>"...a paper using a case as illustration might more usefully present the case after the theory..."</i> Siggelkow (2007, p. 22)
2.	Formulate a research question	<i>«Defining your research question(s) is probably the most important step to be taken in a research study...»</i> (Yin, 2018, p. 11)
3.	Justify the organisational context/sample	<i>"...it is often desirable to choose a particular organization precisely because it is very special in the sense of allowing one to gain certain insights that other organizations would not be able to provide."</i> Siggelkow (2007, p. 20)
4.	Explain and justify method of data collection	<i>«A research design is a statement written, often before any data is collected, which explains and justifies what data is to be gathered, how and where from.»</i> (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, & Jaspersen, 2018, p. 93)
5.	Collect data	<i>«All six sources discussed here are commonly found in case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation and physical artifacts.»</i> (Yin, 2018, p. 113)
6.	Present own findings	<i>«One of the most common issues that qualitative researchers face is how to condense highly complex and context-bound information into a format that tells a story in a way that is fully convincing to others.»</i> (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 234)
7.	Compare data and literature	<i>«[The research] should synthesize by bringing into dialogue theory and data in a way that translates into a cohesive argument.»</i> (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 6)
8.	Reflect on limitations, e.g. generalisability	<i>«...essentially [the conclusions] need to summarize the nature of the research, the main findings or contributions, provide an indication of the limitations of the work, and make suggestions for future research directions.»</i> (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 374)
9.	Submit the report	<i>«For Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Master's courses, the required dissertations are often longer than project reports (perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 words), and are the product of individual rather than group efforts.»</i> (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p. 384)

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