

Reimagining internships through online experiences: Multi-disciplinary engagement for creative industries students

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This paper details a new dimension to an existing internship program developed in response to the effects of COVID-19 in a creative industries faculty at a large Australian university. Recent changes to workplace activities, as a result of the pandemic, have offered an opportunity to test a mode of internships in which students work and engage remotely, via on-line modes, with a workplace. Analysis of the offering is conducted using the Community of Inquiry framework. Outcomes confirm the concept of remote internships as appropriate strategies that can not only support improved student retention in the short term, but offer new opportunities for enriched, broadened and more equitable internship experiences. Workplace-based internships, while offering high impact and authentic experiences, are often difficult for many students who are unable to attend workplaces to complete the required hours due to a range of other work, study, and life factors. The new remote internship, seeks to overcome these barriers.

Keywords: COVID-19, remote internships, professional learning, creative industries, community of inquiry

In an era of national and global market competitiveness, and to respond to industry dissatisfaction with graduates' capabilities, many Australian universities have redefined their agendas to include employability as a legitimate outcome of higher education. The inclusion of professional experience as part of university studies is not a new phenomenon, however, employability has become a key priority with work-integrated learning (WIL) programs including a wide range of on and off campus experiences (Billet, 2009; Brimble & Freudenberg, 2010; Davis, Savage, et al., 2009; Jackson, 2018; Smith & Smith, 2010; Universities Australia et al., 2015). The value of WIL is recognised in many University key performance indicators, suggesting that WIL can transcend and bridge knowledge gaps and assist with student transition from university to practice (Davis, Franz, et al., 2009; Patrick et al., 2008; Tucker & Elkadi, 2011). WIL has become a key strategy in curriculum transformation, but there is a need to evolve traditional modes of WIL to meet with these increasing demands and to address the barriers faced by many students who cannot successfully engage with WIL programs. Students across all fields value industry-based learning to assist with the transition to a workplace with requisite employability skills, but access needs to be improved and made more equitable (Franks & Oliver, 2012).

While the value of WIL experiences is widely acknowledged, many students are impeded from participating for a range of reasons (Davis, Franz, et al., 2009). Until recently most internships and WIL placements were physically located in the workplace. In order for students to participate, they were required to commit to a minimum number of hours at a workplace. Students living in remote areas, with regular work commitments, families to attend to, or with disabilities, were often excluded from these programs. Some industry partners are also not fully resourced to support students in their own workplaces and therefore often do not meet regulatory requirements to support a student in their physical workplace. Professionals in the creative industries are often self-employed, have designed their own career pathway, or don't have regular employment (Bridgstock, 2013). Jackson and Bridgstock (2020) suggest that as creative industries businesses are often small scale, WIL might need

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to be different in this context and consider varying aspects of the program such as supervision requirements, that usually exclude these small businesses.

A model of remote WIL could address some of these barriers and broaden participation. While recognising the more general contemporary shift to on-line practice, Jackson and Bridgstock (2020) note the need for this type of WIL to facilitate meaningful interaction with professionals. How this meaningful interaction can be assured is the challenge in developing a remote WIL offering, and the topic of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The University Context

Employability strategies are a key priority in universities and part of their key performance indicators. Over the last decade, WIL has become a national focus for strategies to address graduate employability (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2016). The value of WIL experiences to respond to changing student needs is recognised in how WIL can provide threshold experiences for students transitioning from university to practice (Davis, Franz, et al., 2009; QUT, 2016; Tucker & Elkadi, 2011).

The rapid development of WIL programs and the diversity of offerings in the last decade has seen the examination of skills and attributes distinguished between employability and work readiness. Recent literature suggests that employability skills are valuable attributes which are necessary but not sufficient for gaining employment, whereas work readiness refers to requirements or qualifications needed for specific entry into a particular profession (Billet, 2009; Jackson, 2018; Sachs et al., 2016).

A strength of WIL programs is developing 'work readiness' capabilities in disciplines by enhancing employability skills in industry. While internships and placements are not new experiences for many university programs—particularly professional degree programs—there are now high expectations that all students will have access to WIL experiences during their university studies. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for WIL in university blueprints and strategic plans mirror these high aspirations. As an example, the Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) 2016 Blueprint 5 had KPIs set at 60% of all graduating students to have completed a WIL experience. By 2019 this rose to 90% with a target of 100% by 2020 (QUT 2016). These KPIs are reflected across many Australian universities and reveal support for WIL as an important teaching and learning framework.

This demand presents exciting opportunities for advocates of WIL, and is driving rapid change to pedagogy, curriculum and delivery modes to meet KPIs across multi disciplines that have not traditionally included WIL programs.

Students need to develop skills that will assist them with communicating in a transdisciplinary setting within a constantly evolving professional environment (Ferns, et al., 2014; Nicol & Pilling 2005). However, opportunities to participate in WIL experiences can often be limited by the rigid academic structure of programs and the constraints of physical location requirements. Remote WIL can overcome these barriers and allow WIL experiences for a much greater diversity of students.

Work-Integrated Learning in Practice

The term WIL reflects a broad range of strategies and offerings including workplace learning, industry-based learning, practicum, cooperative learning, internships, service learning, work-based learning, and shadowing programs. To a significant extent there is a lack of consensus over their meaning despite numerous attempts to define and categorise WIL (Kay et. al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2012).

Cooperative education and internships are terminologies more widely used in America (Cooperative Education & Internship Association [CEIA], 2019) than WIL, and are described as being a structured combination of classroom education and practical work experience for cooperative education with internships separately defined as paid or unpaid work in their field (CEIA, 2019). The cooperative education and work integrated learning association in Canada define WIL as a mode of experiential education, which intentionally integrates academic theory with learning in a workplace (Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada [CEWIL Canada], 2019).

In the Australian context, that of this remote WIL project, the Federal Government defines WIL as “any arrangement where students undertake learning in the workplace outside of their higher education provider as a part of their course of study” (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2015, p. 1). It concurs with Orrell (2011) regarding the variance of nature and scope of WIL experiences and the extent of integration of the learning experience in the workplace. In this context WIL is ‘an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum’ (Patrick et. al., 2008). This range of approaches can and should include remote offerings.

Remote Work-Integrated Learning

As long as eight years ago Franks and Oliver (2012, p. 274) noted that “institutions of higher education are starting to recognize the value of virtual internships as valid experiential learning opportunities to acquire professional skills and competencies”. More recently Jeske (2019, p. 1) highlights that “a number of studies have demonstrated the increasing popularity of virtual internships over the last ten years”. [The term “virtual” is substituted with “remote” for this study to describe a WIL experience undertaken remotely from a physical workplace with all communications and engagement occurring on-line]. Like workplace-based WIL, noted above, eWIL or remote internships can take many forms including: virtual reality, asynchronous platforms, on-line role play, blogging, on-line forum, iPortfolios, live chat rooms, virtual simulations, and video conferencing (Schuster & Glavas, 2017). Like workplace-based WIL ‘virtual internships can serve as a bridge between academia and the world of work, a world becoming increasingly virtual’ (Franks & Oliver, 2012, p. 275).

Recent research into remote WIL offers the following recommendations: careful planning and preparation, regular on-line contact/communication, clearly outline expectations, compensate interns appropriately, connect the internship scheme with institutional diversity initiatives, employers must provide meaningful experiences for skills development (Jeske, 2019). Further to these suggestions, the advantages of remote WIL have been identified as: mobility, flexibility, access, autonomy, empowerment, and professional networking (Medeiros et al., 2015). Students appreciate the capacity of the on-line environment, much the same as the physical one (Rintala, 2009), to enhance the practicality of learning and the ability to then contextualise theory in practice (Smith et. al., 2020, p. 193).

While there is much research into remote internships or WIL, it has primarily been from a student perspective (D'Angelo et al., 2011; Franks & Oliver, 2012; Medeiros et al., 2015; Shirley & Cockburn, 2009), with research into the perspectives of supervisors being limited (Franks & Oliver, 2012). As such there is still a need for diversified research and analysis of virtual programs. A broader holistic analysis would encompass all stakeholders and integrate their views with a constructivist theory of learning as appropriate for internship contexts.

A Theory of Learning in the Workplace

The value of WIL, and particularly remote WIL, can be understood through its approach to facilitating learning; as the case study presented here will demonstrate. "On a pedagogical level, a virtual work placement requires a specific pedagogical approach... Research concludes that approaches such as guided independent self-study, collaborative learning, problem/project-based learning are the better methods for organisation of virtual activities" (Vriens et al., 2010, p. 1181). Such approaches are aligned with an understanding of transformative learning and constructivism.

Transformative learning theories were conceived for adult education referring to skills associated with an adult approach to the world (Mezirow, 1997). These capabilities include being discerning, deliberate and reflective, and engaging with the world in a broader way through the development of 'habits of mind' and 'points of view' (Mezirow, 1997). This approach has relevance for examining the potential of WIL programs for the transition from university to practice. Increasingly students and employers prioritise work ready skills such as self-determination and reflection; to deal with uncertain futures and to be professional in their approach during this threshold transition from university to practice (Barnett, 2004; Franz, 2007).

Barnett (2004) suggests that while the future may have always been uncertain, the increased complexity and different kinds of change in the contemporary world require a fundamental rethink of pedagogical skills at an ontological level, an approach that is also relevant for current and proposed WIL strategies. Reflective practice as a key strategy for lifelong learning, addressing knowledge gaps and employability capabilities during the threshold phase from university to practice, is applicable for academic frameworks for WIL (Ryan, 2014). Learning in the workplace is also part of developing a professional identity to understand the particularities of that profession. Transitional learning opportunities such as WIL enable students to participate in professional roles as opportunities for transformative learning and the development of professional identity (Trede, 2012). Adult learning strategies are also relevant for the pedagogical and theoretical linkages to WIL programs as transitional experiences between university and practice.

This view of adult learning is consistent with a constructivist approach to education. The design of remote internships can draw upon a constructivist learning theory in which the student builds their own understandings within a constructivist learning environment (Cheney et al., 2008). Each student develops their own understandings as knowledge emerges from meaningful experiences (Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016). While constructivist learning theory offers insight into how our students learn and how we can facilitate their learning, a more specific theoretical approach to understanding on-line learning is desirable for the analysis of the case study in question here.

Community of Inquiry

One significant and valuable contribution to an understanding of on-line learning is offered by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Swan et al., 2009). The CoI provides a conceptual framework

that offers both an understanding of educational practice and a methodology for studying the potential of educational experiences; a methodology used later in this paper to analyse the case study presented here. The CoI can be used to describe and measure the elements of a collaborative learning experience (Garrison et al., 2010). In particular, the framework provides a structure for examining learning in on-line environments and contexts (Wagner, 2020). This process of examination includes a system of coding data for content analysis (Akyol & Garrison, 2008); an analysis that can guide curriculum development. CoI provides an empirically validated conceptual framework for examining learning experiences in on-line spaces (Caskurlu, 2018; Garrison, 2017).

The CoI is particularly relevant to analysis of remote WIL since it is conceptually grounded and developed for the theories of learning in higher education (Garrison et al., 2010). Further to this theoretical approach, it is applicable to both workplace-based and remote experiences, is consistent with a constructivist view of learning, but specifically it can highlight the affordances and challenges of on-line education (Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016).

The CoI framework is structured around the three elements of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence; each of which is made up of a number of dimensions or categories of activity (refer to Table 1). The three elements overlap to create the environment of an educational experience (Swan et al., 2009). While the CoI has become increasingly utilised over the past decade, Garrison and Akyol (2013) note that more research is needed regarding the application of the framework within different contexts. More recently it has also been suggested that in some applications of the framework some of the elements or categories of the framework may not be needed to the same extent, and that additional elements may be required in some contexts (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). With this final point in mind, the CoI framework utilised in this current remote WIL case study has been expanded to include a fourth element, collegial presence, described below.

Garrison and Akyol (2013, p. 106) define a community of inquiry as “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding”. This group of individuals collaborate in the space of the educational experience. In the context of WIL however there can be perceived an additional space; the work place. While this is still a space of learning it has additional categories, not made explicit in the original CoI framework. WIL also comes with an additional group of individuals, work place supervisors who collaborate with the others but in a parallel relationship. As such we shall include a fourth element in an extended CoI framework; this fourth element is called the collegial presence. This extended framework is used later to analyse the case study remote WIL project.

CASE STUDY

Context

The Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology has offered a workplace - based internship program for hundreds of students each year for over a decade. The existing internships program is delivered centrally as part of a range of WIL experiences offered as either an elective subject, to complete a study minor, or for a particular degree offering as a core requirement. Internships are offered across eighteen different disciplines including design, architecture, film, animation, drama, entertainment, visual arts, and communications. The current program offers a high degree of flexibility in response to stakeholder needs including ‘frontloading’, which enables students to commence their internship before semester commences and during semester breaks. This process acknowledges that industry, a key stakeholder, does not work to semester timeframes. With the onset

of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, students were at varying degrees of completion of their internship hours and assessment so a range of strategies to support both students and stakeholders were quickly applied to keep as many students on track during the unprecedented changes.

Remote Internship Pilot

With the onset of the pandemic, and the lock-down of workplaces, many industry partners were unable to continue to support student placements for the traditional internships programs. This shift was rapid and devastating for the program particularly for the creative industries disciplines that included performance (dance and drama) and technical (theatre) production. While many workplaces could not support students to complete their internships, others were supportive of alternative provisions to continue with the program despite the interruptions. Industry partners were contacted to see how they might be able to cope with a remote internship program instead of an on-site program. Almost two thirds were interested in the idea, and over half were willing to participate in a trial program. This reaction initiated a systematic approach of evaluation to understand the implications of shifting current requirements to continue to meet the unit learning outcomes while recognising the changes in the internship environment. A pilot program was therefore developed which was trialled during the semester as an alternative internship offering for students who could not withdraw from the internships program and re-enrol in another study period during the first semester of 2020 (February to June).

It was quickly realised that the opportunities existed to further expand the internships program with the inclusion of remote offerings to achieve a broader, richer, global, and equitable program and to address the barriers often faced, particularly for the creative industries. Priorities impacting on the development of the pilot included ensuring authentic experiences for students, meeting the learning outcomes and course requirements, equity for all students in the programs, maximising retention and minimising disruption to study plans for graduands. In the remote internship, students work for/with an industry partner on a particular project that can be engaged with on-line. Students are briefed by industry partners and then spend a number of weeks researching the partner and the industry more broadly, assessing the issues, and working collaboratively with other students on the project to develop a proposal which is presented to the industry partner at completion of the internship.

The remote internship pilot was modelled using the four phases that currently articulate the workplace-based internships program: preparatory phase, before the placement, during the placement and after the placement. The programs were differentiated in the second and third phases of the program with assessment to address a particular industry task or priority. This process relates to the company driven scenario discussed by Vriens, et al. (2010) for their framework for scenarios for virtual [remote] internships. The program also differs in that all engagement between industry, students and the university is performed on-line. The frequency of engagement is agreed with the students who are expected to show agency and initiative with arranging meetings, taking minutes and managing time.

For the remote program developed from the pilot, students will be selected by the industry partner and will work in small multi-disciplinary internship teams. While the selection process is similar to workplace-based internships, collaborative and peer learning is encouraged using teams of students. Industry partners are encouraged to include students in their weekly organisation meetings (on-line) to build social and professional connections and for students to participate in workplace culture. They will develop an industry task or priority as discussed during a briefing with their industry partner and research and develop a proposal in response. Assessment includes written reports, verbal pitches,

research tasks, written reflections with a final verbal presentation to their academic supervisor and peers.

Analysis of the Case

The pilot remote internship program has been developed within a constructivist paradigm of education and workplace learning. The potential of the program to deliver the full range of educational interactions and affordances can be gauged using the extended Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. We can use the framework to analyse this remote WIL offering. In particular we can assess the educational experience for evidence or indicators of the categories in the framework (Table 1).

It is obvious that WIL, in both workplace-based and remote forms, allows students to become part of a community, and in particular, remote WIL can provide “the ability for students to learn from experienced professionals and to become part of a community of learners regardless of geographic location” (Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016, p. 108). This idea of belonging to a community is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of on-line learning compared with an internship in the physical work place. In an on-line setting, care must be taken to address the social presence (Swan et al., 2009), and in the case of remote WIL, also the additional element of the collegial presence.

“The three dimensions of social presence may be defined in terms of the participants identifying with the community, communicating purposefully in a trusting environment, and developing interpersonal relationships” (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 7). In remote WIL this occurs in two settings, that of the university and that of the work place; it occurs within the extended framework elements of the social presence and the collegial presence.

Curriculum development documents, unit (subject) outlines, activity plans, and assessment tasks were reviewed and assessed for alignment with the elements of the CoI. This process reveals the indicators of the presence of educational activity that support learning (Akyol & Garrison, 2008). These indicators or presences have then been mapped against the categories of the CoI framework (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

All of the categories of the four elements are present in the case study remote WIL offering (Table 1). The diversity of activities provides ample opportunity for students to have a fulfilling educational experience. As well as the categories, the Community of Inquiry framework also highlights the importance of ‘supporting discourse’ and ‘setting climate’ within a remote ‘social presence’ (Swan et al., 2009). The extended framework, proposed here in response to the unique contexts of internships, also highlights the importance of these affordances in the ‘collegial presence’. Analysis of the pilot shows that this is indeed the case with important activities in the (remote) workplace creating a sense of support and cultural integration in the host industry.

TABLE 1: Case study indicators of the presences within the extended CoI framework.

Elements	Categories	Indicators
Social Presence	Open communication Group cohesion Personal/Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work in multi-disciplinary teams to build collaborative skills and understand that current practice settings involve cross disciplinary engagement • 'Interviews' with industry to secure the internship to develop professional development skills • Weekly on-line catch-up gives students agency and enables the development of tacit skills including communication, professional engagement, teamwork and time management • Industry partner meetings to include student teams to interact with organisation and participate in workplace culture settings • Industry partner presentations give students the opportunity to pitch ideas professionally, reflect on their experiences, and receive formative feedback from industry • The learning or knowledge of industry based skills
Cognitive Presence	Triggering event Exploration Integration Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry brief developed collaboratively with students to address a key priority or task for that industry to be resolved through research and development with regular and consistent feedback by Industry • Research the industry partner and broader industry to understand industry context and current practice environments • Consult in multi-disciplinary team with partner • Prepare and present report
Teaching Presence	Design & organisation Facilitating discourse Direct instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project brief framework enables contribution from Industry and students to develop organisational task or priority while meeting key work integrated learning outcomes • Schedule and activity timeline is developed to work with industry and student timeframes with additional flexibility due to frontloading prior to the semester • Academic support/mentor engagement with students to guide assessment and progress • Interim review of progress to date is arranged by student with industry supervisor to receive formative feedback • Establishing and managing expectations with stakeholders • Critical reflections on experiences
Collegial Presence	Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduled and regular meetings with industry supervisor and student teams to maintain workplace interaction • Regular feedback from Industry supervisor regarding project aims and objectives • Industry mentoring for effective teamwork strategies and how to work collaboratively in a workplace environment • Enabling teamwork as a core component of workplace culture • Supporting reflective practice strategies through group discussion and formative feedback by Industry supervisor • Support and mentor group reflections during organisational meetings

Implications

With an expanding expectation that university graduates will be work ready with 21st Century employability skills, the importance of WIL is set to increase (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2020; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017), and the ability to be able to provide high quality work place learning opportunities to students will increase with it. In order to be able to provide such opportunities to all students, irrespective of location, cultural context, family and financial setting, and deal with an increasingly on-line industrial context, remote internships will be a significant part of this future. Such remote internships cannot simply be delivering the same type of learning experience as a workplace-based internship, but on-line; a remote internship must offer a different high quality experience (Smith et al., 2020). However guidance is needed to direct this different type of delivery of new learning opportunities.

The pilot program described here illustrates a number of practical issues that highlight some of the expected benefits of this remote program. Mapping against the generic framework of the CoI also suggest that these benefits are transferable to other applications and contexts. The potential benefits include:

- Improved equity for students who may otherwise not be able to participate in workplace-based internships (Franks & Oliver, 2012; Jeske, 2019;)
- Greater diversity of activity types; not limited to workplace-based activities (Medeiros et al., 2015)
- Better suited to small industry partners (as is typical in the creative industries) so greater number of industry partners can be involved (Bridgstock, 2013)
- Flexibility of time; not restricted to normal working hours (Vriens et al., 2010)
- Scalability of the program; easier to expand the program
- Increased student agency; students must operate more independently and be more proactive in their learning, as opposed to traditional employee-like roles (Medeiros et al., 2015)
- Reduced attrition, largely due to the increased flexibility of activity and timing

Further to these practical implications are the lessons learned from using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as a way of assisting the pedagogical development of this pilot program:

- The CoI is a robust framework that can be used to guide curriculum development (Garrison et al., 2010; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Swan et al., 2009)
- The CoI framework can be expanded (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020) to better assess WIL offerings, as illustrated in this case study
- The CoI framework can be used in curriculum development, as well as in reviewing existing curriculum for improved pedagogical opportunities; as a form of checklist (Caskurlu, 2018)
- The CoI framework is consistent with an overarching philosophy of constructivism; which is highly appropriate for WIL offerings (Mezirow, 1997)

This curriculum review and mapping is limited to one case of remote internship, however the case covers a large and broad multidisciplinary cohort of students in a wide range of creative industries settings. Analysis of this case illustrates the usefulness of the Community of Inquiry framework in assuring good pedagogical practice: “the two constituting notions of community and inquiry form a pragmatic organizing framework of sustainable principles and processes for the purpose of guiding on-line educational practice” (Swan et al., 2009, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic caused by Coronavirus has forced many universities to transition, at short notice, into on-line learning modes. This short term adjustment to normal activities can however teach us valuable lessons for the longer term. While the pilot WIL program presented here is still undergoing its first iteration of delivery, the process of designing and implementing this program has already provided some interesting ideas and useful experiences, both practical and theoretical, as noted above. This case, and its analysis using the CoI, also provides a model for future remote WIL offerings. Remote WIL is not just workplace-based WIL on-line, it has the potential to be accessed by more students, engage more industry partners, be flexible in time and space, align with good pedagogical practice, and encourage student autonomy and lifelong learning.

In order to realise these goals, further trials and investigations will be required. The next step is for the educational outcomes of this pilot program to be assessed through surveys and interviews of all the stakeholders; to confirm the proposed benefits. Ahead of those results, we can still, with some confidence, offer the above case and the CoI as useful guides for good practice in a range of other contexts and environments.

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