

Title	Using technology platforms for work-integrated learning
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Publication date	2021-09-30
Original Citation	Bayerlein, L., Dean, B. A., Perkiss, S. and Jeske, D. (2021) 'Using technology platforms for work-integrated learning', in Ferns, S. J., Rowe, A. D. and Zegwaard, K. E. (eds) Advances in Research, Theory and Practice in Work-Integrated Learning - Enhancing Employability for a Sustainable Future. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, pp. 239-248. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021049-26
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021049-26
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Download date	2026-09-15 22:19:32
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12085



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CHAPTER 17: Using Technology platforms for WIL

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ABSTRACT

This chapter establishes technology-based WIL as a potential solution to meet the growing demand for sustainable and accessible WIL in education. E-internships, digital service learning and simulated work placements are introduced as examples of technology-based activities that enable WIL, and their respective benefits and limitations are discussed. The chapter finds that student learning outcomes created in technology-based WIL can be similar to those of traditional placement WIL. However, the attainment of some learning outcomes is highly context specific, and additional student, educator and placement provider support activities may be required to maximise the benefits of technology-based WIL for all stakeholders. Based on these findings, the chapter provides guidance for stakeholders interested in developing or adopting technology-based WIL activities and outlines future areas of research.

INTRODUCTION

In the current education landscape, preparing students for a complex and competitive workforce is becoming increasingly important, and numerous educational activities are used to improve students' workplace readiness. As part of these activities, work-integrated learning (WIL) is one way educators can have significant impact on graduate employability (Silva et al., 2018). WIL relies on a range of practical experiences, placements, internships and activities to deliver student learning. However, placement-based modes of WIL, in which students undertake first-hand work experiences within an organisation, continue to be the dominant model through which WIL is delivered (Universities Australia, 2019).

Due to the increased integration of WIL into curricula, and the expanding number of students participating in WIL (Universities Australia, 2019), concerns regarding the saturation, competition and accessibility of traditional work placement opportunities to deliver WIL are increasing (Maertz et al., 2014). To meet the growing demand for WIL, and to ensure WIL remains sustainable and accessible, new innovative models of WIL are required (Kay et al., 2019), and education providers are starting to explore alternative approaches to deliver WIL (Kay et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2018). Such approaches include work simulations, fieldwork experiences, and business and/or social enterprise development. The adoption of alternative ways through which WIL can be delivered are growing because they can generate comparable learning outcomes for students (Zegwaard & Rowe, 2019), while addressing some

of the major concerns of placement-based work experience activities (Bayerlein, 2015; Perkiss et al., 2019).

Education providers are increasingly experimenting with technology to support, facilitate and deliver WIL (Kay et al., 2019; Schuster & Glavas, 2017). The use of technology for WIL enables education providers and students to engage with community and businesses more effectively, and to capitalise on the long-term evolution in the way learners engage with educational offerings (Alexander et al., 2019). Several umbrella terms have been used to describe the intersection between technology and WIL, including 'blended WIL' (Kaider et al., 2009; Peach et al., 2013), 'electronic WIL or eWIL' (Schuster & Glavas, 2017) and 'mLearning' (Trede et al., 2019), the latter referring to the use of mobile technology to enhance learning outcomes in WIL. Common across all of these terms is the amalgamation of workplace focused activities and technology platforms to support or deliver WIL.

The use of technology for WIL has the potential to reduce the resource commitments of education providers and industry partners (Irwin et al., 2012), and to make access to work placements and WIL easier and more equitable (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a; Kay et al., 2019). The use of technology for WIL also enables students to interact with others across geographical locations (Irwin et al., 2012; Peach et al., 2013), and allows for deeper learning to occur (Bayerlein, 2015; Johnson & Douglas, 2010). The specific benefits that arise from the use of technology for WIL are dependent on the intentions underpinning each individual WIL activity, as well as the activity's implementation.

Expanding the work of Kaider (2009), Schuster and Glavas (2017) establish four categories describing the use of technology for WIL: technology-supported, technology-facilitated, technology-blended and technology-based. The first two categories (supported/facilitated) describe WIL models in which technology is used to improve individual aspects of WIL, while the last two categories (blended/based) represent WIL models in which the delivery and attainment of educational outcomes is reliant on technology. To date, technology use in WIL is largely focused on the first two categories, with technology being used to improve administration, communication, or supporting activities of WIL (Schuster & Glavas, 2017). Although technology-blended/based WIL has been less common (Schuster & Glavas, 2017), the potential accessibility, sustainability and student learning benefits of technology-based activities that enable WIL are likely to be extensive. Examples of technology-based activities that enable WIL are e-internships (Jeske & Axtell, 2014), digital service learning (Perkiss et al., 2019), and simulated work placements (Bayerlein, 2015), including virtual reality (Irwin et al., 2012) and online role-play (Johnson & Douglas, 2010; Mundkur & Ellickson, 2012). This chapter builds on existing literature such as Kay and colleagues (2019) by offering three exemplars of technology-based activities that enable WIL, as well as a discussion of their potential benefits and limitations. In addition, the chapter provides educators, students and other stakeholders with guidance on the evaluation of different technology-based WIL modes in practice.

E-INTERNSHIPS

In the early 2000s', a number of organisations started to offer virtual WIL activities, also known as virtual internships (Jeske & Axtell, 2013) and e-internships (Van Dorp, 2008). When they first emerged, e-internships were similar to remote-work activities, or working-from-home arrangements, in which interns were able to complete parts of their internship without being physically present at their placement organisation. Today, most e-internships are undertaken entirely virtually, without any presence requirements being included in the arrangement (Jeske & Axtell, 2018a). In such e-internships, all interactions between students and their placement organisation are computer-mediated through virtual desktop applications, meeting applications, webinars, shared software and social media tools. To date, these e-internships have emerged in many discipline areas and circumstances. However, their use is still focused on industries where flexible or online work arrangements are more common, such as e-commerce, online marketing, and programming or online journalism (Jeske & Axtell, 2013, 2018b).

E-internships are conceptually similar to traditional internships because student-learning outcomes are derived from the engagement with real-world tasks, undertaken in a “temporary (non-permanent) work placement... that reflect[s] a period of transition from higher education to the world of work” (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018b, p. 29). Such placements support the creation of cognitive and skill based learning outcomes, which are focused on the development of theoretical knowledge and the assimilation of practical processes (for details, see: Kraiger et al., 1993), in a way that is similar to traditional placements (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018b). While many student learning outcomes in traditional internships and e-internships are comparable, practical benefits arise for students and placement providers due to the flexibilities inherent in e-internship arrangements. For students, e-internships increase the number of available placement opportunities because workplaces are no longer location bounded. This is particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students living with a disability, or students with family or carer responsibilities (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a; Kraft et al., 2019). Benefits for placement providers arise because the talent pool from which to recruit is no longer location bounded but expanded across national or international contexts. This enables recruitment decisions that maximise cultural diversity and knowledge, effectively match students’ skill-sets with organisational needs, and provide the opportunity to operate a business across geographical locations and time zones (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a).

Limitations associated with virtual WIL activities, such as e-internships, relate to a lack of awareness and acceptance of virtual work arrangements as students learning opportunities (Kraft et al., 2019), as well as challenges in developing affective student learning outcomes, which are focused on the acquisition of professional attitudes and values (for details, see: Kraiger et al., 1993). The extent to which virtual work placements are accepted and supported varies across countries. For example, in Australia awareness appears to be low (Kraft et al., 2019), while other countries such as the United States of America and India have adopted e-internships readily over the last 10 years (Jeske & Axtell, 2016). Despite the substantial benefits for students and placement providers, e-internships and other virtual WIL activities are unlikely to replicate all aspects of traditional internships, and particularly affective learning outcomes are difficult to obtain (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018b). However, interest in virtual WIL is growing in Australia and internationally, and an increasing number of placement providers are offering such opportunities to students.

DIGITAL SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning has a long history in WIL (McLennan & Keating, 2008). It integrates community service, classroom learning and reflection on real-world experiences into one coherent student-learning experience that is designed to create positive outcomes for students and society (Deeley, 2015; Hebert & Hauf, 2015). Traditional service learning is based on the placement of students within the community they serve, and the placement aspect of the experience is regarded as its key learning activity. However, underpinning all service learning approaches is the collaboration between students, educators and community on a project that creates mutual benefits for all stakeholders, and allows students to apply their knowledge in a practical setting (Goering, 2018). While the placement of students in the community they serve has several benefits, the intention underpinning service learning can also be achieved without the physical placement of students. When the requirement to attend a physical location to provide a service is removed from service learning, digital service learning emerges. In this type of activity, service learning is facilitated online to enable a wider reach, with the potential to impact communities globally (Strait & Nordyke, 2015).

Digital service learning expands on the intentions of traditional service learning, allowing students to pursue and support solutions to global societal issues in international contexts. Digital service learning may be used in a variety of circumstances, including as a substitute of physical placements within a specific community, or as part of fully computer-mediated international initiatives where students impact society on a global scale. As economies, society and the environment face increasing global

challenges, digital service learning becomes a possible pedagogical approach to embed service learning to address wider sustainable development issues (Dean, Perkiss, et al., 2018; Saravanamuthu, 2015). To demonstrate the usefulness of digital service learning in this context, universities in seven countries developed, implemented and assessed a digital service learning activity for their students, using the technology platform provided by the WikiRate Project.

The WikiRate Project is a not-for-profit organisation aiming to 'make companies better' through an increased adoption of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. The project's technology platform is an open, crowdsourced and crowd-produced repository of corporate social responsibility data used for analysis and decision-making by community groups, investors and consumers internationally. When students become co-producers and users of the crowdsourced WikiRate information, a digital service learning opportunity arises (Dean, Gibbons, et al., 2018; Perkiss et al., 2019). In this example of digital service learning, students research disclosures related to corporate sustainability activities, assess these activities by applying their theoretical knowledge, support the WikiRate Project's global user community through sharing their insights, and reflect on the impact of corporate disclosures and their service work (for a detailed description, see: Heithaus et al., 2018; Perkiss et al., 2018).

The WikiRate digital service learning activity described above, and digital service learning in general, can positively influence student learning. It can develop a deep, and critical understanding of the subject matter, advance the ability to undertake professional judgement (Dean Gibbons, et al., 2018; Wersun et al., 2019), and improve reflective capacity (Perkiss et al., 2019). The use of real-world data to support a global community of interested individuals can further improve student motivation and make the learning experience meaningful for students (Dean, Gibbons, et al., 2018; Perkiss et al., 2018).

Digital service learning may not be suitable for all contexts because it shares limitations with other technology-based activities that underpin WIL. These include the limited acceptance of technology-based WIL by stakeholders, and the difficulty to develop authentic learning environments for students (for a detailed discussion, see: Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a; 2018b). In addition, digital service learning requires educators and students to be competent and confident users of technology. Within the WikiRate activity, Perkiss and colleagues (2019) identified technological challenges of students and educators as the main barrier preventing students to attain higher order learning outcomes. While these challenges may impact student learning outcomes, structured activities that prepare students for the utilised technology, as well as hands-on technology support for educators and students during the activity is likely to reduce this impact substantially (Perkiss et al., 2019)

SIMULATED WORK PLACEMENTS

Simulated work placements blend case-based instruction, narrative storytelling, and immersive virtual spaces into an activity that simulates a real-world setting in an online or blended learning environment (Bayerlein, 2015). It differs from WIL based on real-world work placements, e-internships, and digital service learning because it does not include a real-world host organisation or societal group with which students interact. Instead, designers of simulated work placements are in complete control over their students' learning environment. This enables the simulation to support and assure the development of learning outcomes effectively, which is often difficult to achieve in other forms of WIL. Within a simulation, students assume a role, and are responsible for the completion of specific work programs, either individually or as teams, that are set by the designer of the environment. Work programs can be designed to focus on cognitive, skill-based or affective learning outcomes (Kraiger et al., 1993). Simulations are most effective if they provide a realistic and immersive setting in which participants actively explore scenarios, relationships, resources, and potential solutions. This is the case because well contextualised and situationally appropriate exploration and problem solving elevates students' activities out of traditional classroom learning into a WIL activity.

Workplace simulations represent an extension of traditional classroom based/blended educational activities into the world of work, whilst real-world WIL extends workplace activities towards the educational environment. This conceptual difference results in a number of benefits and limitations for simulated work placements. Benefits arise because simulated placements enable students with minimal or no prior work experience to develop real-world skills and knowledge whilst remaining in a safe and well-supported education setting (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018b). In addition, learning activities can be deliberately designed to maximise participation and development opportunities for disadvantaged students, and increase the number of work experience opportunities in geographical regions or discipline areas where real-world placements or e-internships are otherwise insufficient (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a). Well-designed simulated placements require students to undertake cognitive processes, situational assessments, and peer interactions that are similar to those arising in real-world situations. Although students recognise the difference between a simulation and real-world experiences, realistic simulations are principally able to develop skills and knowledge that are similar to those arising in traditional work placements (Bayerlein, 2015).

The quality of a simulated environment for WIL, as well as its impact on student learning, is largely dependent on its real-world relevance, and the students' ability to engage with the simulation successfully. In order to improve the practical relevance and quality of a simulation, extensive interactions between employers and educators are required. Such interactions are highly important because educators and designers of simulated work placements may be unfamiliar with the contemporary work environment into which students enter after graduation (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). Additional barriers for student learning in simulated environments arise if students are unable to engage with the environment effectively. Students are more likely to attain extensive learning outcomes if they exhibit traits similar to those required for successful remote-working arrangement and distance learning activities. Specifically students are more likely to be successful in a simulated workplace environment if they are able to work in isolation (Xu & Tracey, 2014), are internally motivated, exhibit strong self-efficacy, and tolerate substantial levels of anxiety (Xiao, 2012). Students can be supported to develop these traits through preparatory activities, such as scaffolded online learning modules or activities (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018b).

CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE FORM OF TECHNOLOGY

The development of innovative, sustainable and scalable modes of WIL is important to improve access to WIL for all students (Kay et al., 2019). In order to meet the increasing demand for WIL across all sectors of education, the range of available WIL activities, as well as the diversity of industry and community partners that participate in these activities, has already been expanded, and is likely to grow further (Kay et al., 2019). However, unless students, placement providers and educators are prepared to challenge the foundations of existing models and implementations of WIL, and to experiment with new mechanisms to organise and deliver WIL opportunities, it may not be possible to meet the growing demand for this form of education. Literature recognises these challenges and calls for the establishment of new models of WIL that follow different rules of engagement (Kay et al., 2019).

This chapter described three technology-based WIL opportunities. These examples are representative of the benefits available in a much larger and diverse range of opportunities arising from the use of technology platforms to deliver WIL. The three examples described here differ substantially from most of the prior literature because they are fully reliant on technology to deliver educational WIL opportunities to students. While e-internships, digital service learning, and simulated work placements all represent a different use of technology to deliver a WIL opportunity, each example is deliberately designed to use the affordances of technology to the benefit of students. For example, both e-internships and simulated work placements provide WIL opportunities that overcome the location-boundedness of traditional internships. The emergence of these WIL opportunities means that disadvantaged student groups, as well as students residing in remote geographical areas, have the

opportunity to engage in work placements and WIL, even if traditional opportunities are unavailable (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018a). While similar advantages arise for digital service learning, its original intention and key outcome was to connect students with a global societal issue by encouraging them to contribute to a worldwide change process (Perkiss et al., 2019).

Educators considering the development of a technology-based WIL activity should initially identify what learning outcomes are most critical to their stakeholders, and develop a suitable activity around these outcomes. This recommendation is not new to WIL practitioners because it is widely accepted that any WIL activity must be appropriately situated in the context of the student undertaking the activity (for example, see: Bilsland et al., 2019). However, technology-based WIL opportunities such as e-internships, digital service learning or simulated work placements require additional considerations because not all learning outcomes are equally well supported by technology-based WIL models. In addition, comparative analyses of technology-based WIL models are not yet widely available, and educators may consequently be required to undertake their own analyses and comparisons. Some support for such comparative analyses is provided in the literature. For example, Bayerlein and Jeske (2018b) proposed the use of the assessment framework by Kraiger et al. (1993) to determine the suitability of technology supported activities for particular educational purposes. However, other assessment frameworks, such as that of Abeysekera (2006), are also available and their relative suitability will depend on the particular context in which an assessment is undertaken.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Technology-based WIL models are a relatively recent development, and their benefits and limitations are not yet fully understood. However, generally observed benefits of technology-based WIL relate to improved accessibility and sustainability, while limitations generally relate to the technology competence, confidence and infrastructure required by students, placement providers and educators. Although the relevance of these general observations in particular circumstances will vary, it is important to note that all benefits outlined above are focused on improving participation and student learning outcomes. On the other hand, all outlined limitations are focused on practical considerations that may be addressed through adequate resourcing and training of students, placement providers and educators.

Further research is required to understand the impact of different technology-based WIL models in particular contexts better. Such research may build on existing comparative assessments (for example, see: Bayerlein & Jeske, 2019b) or context specific evaluations (for example, see: Perkiss et al., 2019) to investigate the impact of different delivery modes and technologies on students, educators and a wider stakeholder audience. While this chapter does not argue for the wholesale replacement of placement-based WIL with technology-based WIL, evidence based evaluations of technology-based WIL are critically important to support stakeholders interested meeting the growing demand for WIL through the development or adoption of technology-based models of WIL.

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