

Chapter 24

Online Work–Integrated Learning (WIL) Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study in which Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and mobile telephone technologies were used to liberate Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) from the constraints of location and time, and to promote inclusive practices under a blended learning environment in a particular university subject. It was found that the use of mobile devices by the students was conservative because of technological limitations and affordability issues associated with mobile technology. Although mobile technology is still not powerful or practical enough for WIL, the use of CMC technology has provided rich collaborative online WIL for students, and there are still grounds for optimism that mobile technology will become a powerful cognitive tool in the future for enhancing student learning outcomes. This case study also affirms that such technologies will only become effective educational tools if there is a stable focus on pedagogy within the curriculum and if the needs and technology skills of users are taken into consideration when integrating the technologies into the curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) are offering new teaching and learning techniques and expanding the education horizon to embrace new possibilities. In particular, the technical potential associated with the advent of technology can be harnessed to enable and enhance an increasingly popular teaching pedagogy in higher education – Work-Integrated Learn-

ing (WIL). Universities are increasingly under scrutiny for their role in preparing graduates for the demands of the workplace, and WIL is one of the strategies they adopt to fulfill that role as educator and agent of government in producing “work-ready” graduates with social skills to communicate and work collaboratively in groups.

The common approaches for WIL, such as internship, industry-based learning and cooperative education, tend to be workplace-bound and

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occur during non-teaching semester periods. These approaches can pose a challenge for some of the programs in terms of making WIL accessible and inclusive for all students. For example, they may not be readily available to every student particularly when these placements are highly competitive and limited, and host organisations tend to prefer students with strong academic achievement. Computer-mediated communications (CMC) technology and mobile/wireless technology can be harnessed to liberate WIL from the constraints of time and distance in the form of online WIL. If appropriately applied, WIL can benefit from using technologies to deliver authentic learning and promote inclusive practices whereby learners acquire competence through their interactions with a wide spectrum of participants from different fields and locations. Technology is an effective tool when its use matches the purposes, particularly if it is suitable and relevant to the context of learning, is used appropriately and supports the pedagogy. This article presents a case study in which CMC and mobile technologies were used to liberate WIL from the constraints of location and time, and promote inclusive practices within a blended learning environment.

BACKGROUND

Community Engagement Activity for Online WIL

A community engagement activity was integrated into the curriculum of Business Research, a subject in an undergraduate business degree program in order to provide for online WIL. This engagement involves 10 teams of students (4 students in each team) undertaking market research investigating local community issues for a non-profit organisation. A blended approach to learning was adopted in this subject, in which students attended regular face-to-face classroom sessions in conjunction with online WIL. ICT was adopted to create an

online social learning environment and to leverage the strength of social interaction for WIL. Learners were grouped into teams, which each investigated a research theme as one of their assessment tasks. To achieve the research objectives, they had to interview local community members and liaise with overseas participants for their views on common issues at the international level. Each team was given considerable discretion to plan and execute its activities in order to achieve the objectives. Each team was assigned an industry partner who had experience and expertise in the team's research theme and acted as a team mentor. Figure 1 shows the communication links between students in a given project team and the various participants. Through this online WIL, learners were provided with an opportunity to construct knowledge individually and in interaction with others.

The curriculum of this subject was designed to use a range of learning technologies to support one-way information flow, interactivity and collaboration as well as course administration. These technologies were used not only to support the delivery of traditional lectures but also to enable a student-centred learning approach, in that students took control of their acquisition of knowledge and skills. Lecture sessions were recorded through *Lectopia*, an automated lecture capture (audio only or audio and screen capture) and dissemination system. This provided opportunities for teachers/instructors to review and reflect on their lectures in order to improve pedagogy, and for students to revise difficult concepts or review lecture content in order to achieve their desired learning outcomes. However, concerns have been expressed by staff members that the use of such technology may decrease lecture attendance, replace actual lecture experience and ultimately, replace teaching staff. However, this case study has noted minimal decrease in attendance. In this subject, the purpose behind the use of *Lectopia* for recording lecture sessions is not to replace teaching staff or to eliminate the need for class

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