

Towards an Improved Cross-disciplinary Structure for Work Integrated Learning Programmes to Better Meet Community Needs the Student Learning Experience and Graduate Outcomes - *Dr Heather Pavitt*

Abstract

This case study looks at a work integrated learning (WIL) project in the public relations field and examines the opportunity to extend this type of learning across university schools and faculties which would make it more aligned with how organisations actually work in the community. This paper is a prelude to a stakeholder research study to obtain data to substantiate or provide discourse on the current literature.

In the final year of study towards a Public Relations degree or Corporate Affairs degree, students undertake a WIL course. A group of public relations students, supervised by a tutor, work on a public relations project with a community organisation. The students form a team, receive a brief from the organisation and research, plan, implement and evaluate a public relations event that meets the organisation's needs and expected outcomes.

This experience is an example of a learning experience that benefits the students as well as the community organisation they are working for. Students see the value of a real life experience where they can apply the knowledge and theory they have learned in a practical way. Despite not being paid for this work, students gain new knowledge and can include this in their CVs to assist them in finding full time employment when they graduate.

However, there is a gap in the structure of this public relations program comprising students solely from one discipline of study. In a real world situation a public relations professional team would not just be working with their peers. They would be collaborating with other functions within an organisation, people with different skill bases from such fields as marketing, finance, planning, advertising and design. In the public relations WIL course, these missing skills are covered by either the team's supervising tutor, or bought in by the community organisation.

The separation of academic disciplines and the creation of artificial boundaries between areas of study mean that students do not understand how their subjects interact together as they do in the real world. Thus providing students with WIL within the community that is broader than the limitations of their degree of study would provide students with a more realistic world view of how organisations – businesses, governments, local councils, charities and various community groups work.

Developing an integrated approach to university-wide WIL programs would support the university's responsiveness to its community and reflect its understanding of how organisations within the community work. Resources will be key to the success of such a program; coordination would need to be across all faculties to ensure the WIL projects are integrated into the curriculum.

Such a course of study would be responding to realistic community-identified needs, opportunities and goals and enable a more productive partnership with the community as well as providing an enriching learning experience for students.

Keywords: Public Relations, Community Engagement, Work Integrated Learning, Transdisciplinarity

At the University of the Sunshine Coast, in the final year of study towards a Public Relations degree or Corporate Affairs degree, students undertake two work integrated learning (WIL) courses. One is

an internship and one is a group experience where a team of students, supervised by a tutor, work on an event project with a community organisation.

In this latter course, the group of students receive a brief from the community organisation and research, plan, implement and evaluate a public relations event that meets the organisation's brief and expected outcomes.

The course objective is to extend students' understanding of public relations in practice and to provide them with a comprehensive learning experience, along with a real understanding of work in the community, to enable them to be 'work ready' when they graduate. Educators agree that 'the most desirable teaching strategies and assignments are those which enable students to put theory into practice' (Coombs and Rybacki 1999, p. 57). Raelin (1997, p. 574) further argues that '...workbased learning deliberately merges theory with practice and acknowledges the intersection of explicit and tacit forms of knowing'.

This paper reviews the literature that relates to WIL within the community and is a prelude to a stakeholder research study to obtain data to substantiate or provide discourse on the current literature.

Community engagement is a strategic imperative for the University of the Sunshine Coast with a commitment to 'promote and support learning and teaching by increasing the number of regional professions, businesses and industries in which students undertake Work Integrated Learning (WIL)' (Community Engagement Strategy 1.2 2010). Community Engagement is also crucial for the teaching of public relations where 'we provide projects and activities that offer students the opportunity to work directly with communities in which they live' (Fall 2006, p. 408).

Tilson reinforces this stating that 'When educators and practitioners foster a spirit of community service, students are more fully prepared for the challenges that lie ahead – and public relations can more fully realise its potential in society' (Tilson 1999, p. 5).

Community organisations that have been involved in public relations projects at the University of the Sunshine Coast over the past few years include; Cystic Fibrosis, Energex Sunshine Coast Rescue Helicopter Service, Bloomhill Cancer Help, The Noosa Longweekend, The Sunshine Coast Regional Council and The Encouragement Foundation.

"...it is with immense respect that I acknowledge the professionalism and enthusiasm with which your five Sunshine Coast University students approached the launch of The Encouragement Foundation. [It was] a sophisticated, multi-faceted event that delivered education, engagement and enjoyment to all who attended. I have been immensely impressed by [the students'] dedication, resolve, creativity and talent and especially by their absolute willingness to go the extra mile – their commitment has been exemplary. Personally, I am impressed to know that this calibre of student will be the business leaders and academics of the future" (Mr John Shadforth, Director, The encouragement Foundation, letter, May 2009).

The sentiments expressed above are typical of the community's response to the projects completed by the final year students under the guidance of this regional university and highlight the extreme value of WIL activities for all who are involved.

In Semester 1, 2010, one of the projects, and the subject for this case study, was Operation Rescue. This project required a team of seven students to stage an event to celebrate the work the emergency services carry out within the community. The students were supervised by an industry

professional, who became their mentor, and the course coordinator.

The event project was initially attempted in 2007. Unfortunately, due to extreme weather conditions the event could not be held. But valuable lessons were learned – particularly by the academic staff – regarding the planning and logistical implementation of large-scale student/community events.

To ensure the WIL course is current and meets both the students and the community organisations' needs there is a focus on continual improvement. Students undertaking Operation Rescue in 2007 had reported that in their planning for the community event they felt that they needed revision on some of the theory and practical aspects of public relations planning. The need to integrate learning and practice is supported in the literature.

In order for students to engage in an academically fulfilling civic engagement projects – whether they be internships or other on-the-job training opportunities – it is necessary that they be able to use what they have learned in class (Fall 2006, p. 413).

In response to this feedback, formal teaching was incorporated into the course in the form of a two hour lecture/workshop each week. Students were also required to have a one hour team project meeting each week– in practice often more than one hour was required as the event timeline became close to completion.

Students commenced the project in week one of the semester and they had 13 weeks to make the event happen. They had no budget, no emergency organisations signed up and no prescribed event structure or format.

This paper will focus on the planning and preparation of the 2010 Operation Rescue project rather than the implementation.

The course commenced with a team building exercise using Tuckman's five stages of group development (Tuckman 1965, cited in Lewis and Slade, 1994, p. 176-178), Karpman's team dynamic model (Karpman 2007) and the Myers Briggs personality tests (Myers Briggs 2010), to help students understand the different aspects of team work and to help identify how each member might contribute to the team. The team was structured to correspond with how a public relations consultancy might operate and each team member was allocated particular areas of responsibility within the group.

The Operation Rescue team's first task was an environmental scan which included researching the emergency and rescue organisations in the community, their potential target publics and prospective venues. The team also carried out some primary research and discovered that the community were unaware of many of the activities that the emergency services carried out. From this data they prepared an event plan, partnership proposals for each emergency service, as well as sponsorship proposals to raise necessary funds to cover venue hire, facilities, security, signage and promotional costs. They prepared logistic plans, risk management and contingency plans, and media and promotional plans, including designing the Operation Rescue logo and planning the promotional material.

In week six the students, as part of their assessment, were required to present a formal presentation and event brief/proposal to the class. In this briefing they identified their goals as educating the community and raising awareness of the work the different organisations do, helping the organisations attract potential volunteers and some fund-raising for the local AGL Rescue Helicopter. By the six-week milestone, the team has undergone the traumas of finding its feet, working with the

different personalities involved and the ups and downs of 'will it really happen'. They struck setbacks such as the high cost of venue hire and public liability insurance, the difficulty of reaching the decision makers within organisations along with the pressures of completing tasks, involving external organisations, within the short time-frame. Moreover, students were not able to dedicate themselves to the project exclusively: they had to cope with their workloads for other courses and juggle outside university obligations. '...students often juggle existing employment, family and study commitments whilst engaging in WIL (Patrick et al 2009, p. 43). Students also struggled with the necessity of developing and working to schedules and Gantt charts, the complexities of creating feasibility and budget plans, the division of labour and the general problems of getting the team together when there were conflicting study schedules.

Slowly the project began to take shape and the team was able to notch up some successes. The selected venue agreed to waive their hire fee for the community event. But unfortunately the preferred date was unavailable and so the team were forced to hold their event early – week 12 of the semester, making their tight operational timetable even tighter.

The local council came on board as a partner. The local councils in Queensland are the coordinating bodies for emergency services and therefore, the Sunshine Coast Regional Council had all the contacts in the organisations the team wanted to partner with. The council was able to assist in signing up more of the emergency services as well as contribute some funding towards the project. The University of the Sunshine Coast Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences agreed to underwrite the event should the sponsorship funding fall short.

By week eight the Operation Rescue community event was beginning to become a reality but the next four weeks saw the team struggle with many logistical setbacks, including uncertainty as to whether two of the major emergency service organisations; the Queensland Ambulance and the Queensland Fire Service, would be participating on the day.

Finally on Sunday 30 May, it all came together. With all the major services turning up on the day with their trucks, displays and personnel. Over 600 people from the community, many of them families with young children, attended and were able to enjoy the activities; the opportunity to climb through the rescue helicopter, ambulances and police vehicles, see displays from the Police Dog Squad, watch firemen abseil from their high extension ladder on the fire truck, sound the sirens in the Ambulance and Police cars and give their support and encouragement to the service teams during the tug-of-war games.

The Challenges

The team structure

Much has been written about the effectiveness of teams. 'Teamwork represents a set of values that encourages behaviours such as listening and constructively responding to points of view expressed by others' (Katzenbach and Smith, K. 1993, p. 21). Working in teams also provides students with the experience of working and relating with others within a formal team structure.

The team developed its own social culture over time, reflecting others' researched experience: 'Team members also provide encouragement to one another' (Raelin 1997, p. 569). Some of the problems the team encountered regarded knowledge gaps outside of the area of public relations. The students' task in reality required skills outside their expertise; skills such as marketing, graphic design and financial planning. In trying to give the students a real-world experience, the course requirements were, at the same time, making them work in an artificial structure.

Borrill and West discuss how important teamwork is to organisational performance. They point out that understanding how to develop effective teams that can perform to their best potential is critical and this includes ensuring that teams 'have the resources they need to carry out the team's tasks, this includes having a sufficient number of team members with the appropriate skills to achieve the task' (Borrill and West 2005, p. 152).

In the real-world, an event organisation's project team would be staffed with members who had a mix of skills with only one or two public relations professionals. The student team had to work additionally hard to find ways to overcome these missing skills which came from different academic disciplines.

In the Operation Rescue team one student had graphic design skills and the tutors provided assistance with marketing and financial requirements.

The time-frame

The course is offered during a one semester period of 13 weeks. There is a 'need to be realistic regarding what can be achieved in the time frame available' (Patrick et al 2009, p. 14).

In this limited time, Operation Rescue had difficulty signing up all the emergency organisations as well as sourcing sponsorships.

They were also hindered by the ideal date for the event in the selected venue not being available so they were forced to select an earlier, less satisfactory date to fit in to the semester requirements.

In the planning of the course, the academics in public relations found that many worth while community projects that would have been ideal projects for students and the community fall outside of this 13 week timeframe. Swinburn University's IBL programme's set criteria for WIL programmes has identified this issue and have stated that they would need to 'be available throughout the year' (Levin et al 2010, p. 4). The academic workload implications of this are yet to be studied.

Resources

Resources for this public relations course are tight both for the academic, the students and the community. Some otherwise viable community projects cannot be considered due to lack of resources. 'WIL is undoubtedly resource intensive.' (McLennan and Keating 2008, p. 11) and 'time consuming for faculties' (Levin et al 2010, p. 8).

Financial Resources: The course is non-funded. Students are advised that they may have to spend around \$80 over the semester to cover items such as phone calls, printing, travel to client meetings etc. This is deemed to be equivalent to the cost of a text-book. In reality students spend much more than this and there is little, often no, reimbursement available. This finding is supported by Patrick et al's research (2009, p.43) in which participants '...suggested assistance with fuel costs plus financial support...'

The course does not have faculty or school funding to back-up projects or provide resources such as printing, phone calls or administration.

On top of this – and partly due to the nature of community events – the projects themselves are non-funded. Again, in reality, few such events would be planned with zero budgets over such a limited time-frame in which to source funding via grants, donations or sponsorships. Part of the rationale behind the course undertaking specifically community rather than commercial events is that it is an opportunity for the University to satisfy its charter and contribute to its local and

regional community in unique and valuable ways. Occasionally, some of the event projects, such as with Cystic Fibrosis and the Encouragement Foundation, have a support client who is able to manage any budget shortfalls, however, Operation Rescue and many of our projects have no such support. Operation Rescue particularly was a large project with no 'client' other than the University.

It is recognised in the literature that WIL programmes 'are constrained by the financial costs involved in providing the ongoing support and facilitation required to achieve the intended and desired learning outcomes for students' (Levin et al 2010, p.10).

Human Resources: Operation Rescue is a large event. The Police, with three vehicles; a car, a boat and a motorbike; Queensland Fire and Rescue Service with their trucks; paramedics with ambulances and equipment; and the AGL Rescue Helicopter as well as marquees, tents and an area for food and entertainment activities all required planning for staff to assist in setting up, running the event and during the shut-down process.

Volunteers were the major source of staffing. This relied heavily on other students in the public relations or communications courses. In fact students saw this as an opportunity to participate in a community event and their enthusiasm is to be acknowledged; signing up volunteers was not a problem. Students viewed this work as being useful for their CVs – good experience for finding employment on graduation. Certainly much anecdotal evidence from former students supports the value of WIL in finding industry employment. Fall's (2006, p. 413) research also found that 'students perceive civic engagement activities to be beneficial to them as well as the organizations and publics they are service – even though they are not being paid for their work'.

Project Preparation and Co-ordination

There is considerable research available on 'the workload involved in preparing WIL placements for students' (Patrick et al 2009, p.14). Planning for the projects takes considerable time for the academics involved. Relationships with the community organisations need to be developed maintained and nurtured. There is little recognition of, or support for, the additional workload this takes.

Current academic workload models reward research, and although there is an allowance for teaching activities, there is little recognition of the mentoring and administrative tasks associated with internships (Levin et al 2010, p.8).

Driscoll's reflections on a new Community Engagement Classification system introduced by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of teaching, identified areas that were a challenge for institutions which included: 'Promotion and Tenure Policies Supporting Community Engagement' (Driscoll 2009, p 10).

There are particular skills necessary to be able to plan and develop and manage community WIL programmes. Academics may need training to develop 'skills to manage and facilitate WIL effectively but also [be] recognised and rewarded for their work in this area' (McLennan and Keating 2008, p.11).

Student Learning

Taylor and Furnham (2005, pp 35-39) discuss Kolb's learning cycle and the development from this of the trainers learning theory. The application of this theory applies to a new entrant in a work situation. The new entrant will learn from other's behaviour in these new situations thus giving them new attitudes as well as skills.

Billet's (2001, p. 103) work builds on this theory citing 'there is clear evidence that workers learn through everyday activities in the work place'. His workplace curriculum model comprises the following elements:

- *Movement from participation in low to high accountability work activities*
- *Access to knowledge that would not be learnt by discovery alone*
- *Direct guidance from more experienced others and experts; and*
- *Indirect guidance provided by the physical and social environment (Billet 2005, p.104).*

It is in the third point of the model which highlights a potential area for improvement in the WIL of projects such as *Operation Rescue*.

Billett emphasises 'the contributions to learning through shared problem-solving between the learner and expert others' (Billett 2001, p. 112). The expert other's in the case of Operation Rescue were missing in some of the knowledge and skills required in marketing, finance and graphic design. While tutors are sometimes able to fill-the-gaps (whether through experience or their own quicklearning) the 'gap' in the student team and, therefore, the student learning opportunity is problematic.

Also important in this part of the model is 'guarding against inappropriate knowledge' (Billett 2001, p. 113). Billett discusses how 'not all learning that occurs ... may be appropriate or desirable'. In the case of Operation Rescue where the knowledge gaps exist, students may not have the skills to achieve tasks outside their area of public relations. The risk is then that these important tasks may not be carried out as well as they could be and the community event is not as successful as it has the potential to be.

A further point is 'accessing knowledge that is hidden'. Billett discusses how 'assistance of a more experienced partner to ease the way to access of knowledge may be required' (Billet 2001, p. 114). In some cases the expertise required is not available or alternatives have to be made to cover the knowledge gaps as in the case of Operation Rescue, where the tutors had to supply the missing expertise.

Discussion

The fundamental basis of the public relations project course is sound. Biggs points out that 'Problem-based learning reflects the way people learn in real life' (Biggs and Tang 2009, p. 151). Community projects present students with a real challenge in which they can use their problem solving skills and apply the knowledge they have learned in their studies. Through this programme students engage positively with the community and their 'learning outcomes will be enhanced through curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities' (Universities and Community Engagement 2006, p.3).

There are additional benefits to students working on community projects. It is argued that WIL not only makes graduates 'work ready' but that there are other benefits, often not promoted, that working on a community project can provide. 'Senior university managers and academics identified the potential for promoting other more broadly defined educational goals – such as community participation and citizenship – rather than just employability through WIL' (Patrick, et al 2009, p.17). Fall further argues that '...students are more apt to consider a career path in a profession/industry in which they personally believe that they are "making a difference" among the publics they are serving while participating in community-oriented projects' (Fall 2006, p.413).

Tilson's (1999, p.5) research with students on a community service project found that

...students developed both professional skills and a sense of commitment to the service of their community – skills that proved advantageous later in their academic careers and values that spurred an enthusiasm for further charitable projects.

The area where the community projects could be enhanced is by having teams of students comprised of public relations students along with members from other disciplines. There are many areas in a university where knowledge and skills can be integrated – and be aligned with the realworld. The argument is in line with Wallis' (2005, p.7) view that 'the campus approach to scholarship includes interdisciplinary work'.

In the practice of public relations, professionals will work in teams on organisational projects in many different fields. In an IT company for example, a PR practitioner may work with team members who include marketing, engineers, information architects, financial controllers and systems developers. As Raelin (1997, p.569) expounds in his discussion on action learning, 'organizational members need to enter each others' area of operation in order to provide new perspectives and stimulate inquiry'.

Students benefit by being able to identify how concepts from one subject can be applied to another and are able to adapt to multiple faculty perspectives. If students are able to work on projects that overlap course boundaries, the experience is more aligned to how the real workplace operates. Dodge and Kendall's (2004, p.150) paper on Learning Communities describes how 'the separation of academic disciplines creates artificial boundaries between subjects that students could better understand as interrelated parts'. Learning communities are able to integrate logically related disciplines.

Communities of Practice develop amongst people who are united in a common enterprise and the experience creates stronger and more solidified learning. Being part of a community of practices allows students to 'not only learn to observe and experiment with their own collective tacit processes in action, but, while doing so, seek to improve their own performance' (Raelin, 1997, p.575).

For improved creativity Nijstad et al (2005, p. 175) conclude that groups work best when 'group members have mutually recognized areas of expertise and an adequate division of labour (i.e., group members should perform the tasks they are good at)'. Their research also showed that group members who are able to approach a task from a different perspective are less likely to 'get stuck in a rut' and therefore be more creative.

The opportunity exists to provide a learning experience for students where they can excel in creativity and innovation and use this to develop community programmes that better meet the community need. Ford (2005, p. 227) discusses how 'the diversity of knowledge represented in the team is an important issue'. He discusses that in an entrepreneurial setting the four areas of knowledge that need to be covered in a business venture tends to be segmented into: product/production, marketing/sales, management/administration and finance. These areas correlate to some of the missing skill bases noted in the public relations project teams: marketing, finance and production (e.g. graphic design).

Russell (2005, p.36) argues that many of the areas that academics work in 'simply cannot be adequately addressed by single disciplines'. She explains that as transdisciplinarity transgresses disciplinary boundaries it provides 'the integration and synthesis of content, theory and methodology from a number of disciplines in new knowledge production' (Russell 2005, p.35).

It is important to recognise that introducing team members with different knowledge bases may cause conflict as the same problem is viewed from a different perspective. Weingart et al (2005, p. 104) conclude that 'task conflict is a linchpin between functional diversity and quality outcomes'. Their model of cross-functional product development team conflict and performance shows how to manage conflict arising from team members' different points of view based on their different areas of skill and approach. One method to counteract this is explained by Weingart et al (2005, p. 105-106) whereby

Cognitive integration might be improved by providing opportunities for team members to shadow and interview one another to gain knowledge about the other functional areas, perspectives, concerns, demands, and so forth

Weingart et al conclude that conflict can be managed and that overall cross functionality does provide an organisation with the means to maximize potential.

There are new opportunities that present themselves for 'graduates with a mix of knowledge and skills: biologist with law to work in biotechnology companies, historians with management to work in public agencies, IT specialist with creative arts to work in web design.' (Russell et al 2007, p. 576). In the field of public relations there are many cross disciplinary areas that work together.

The challenge is to embrace new modes of thinking, researching and interacting and to follow new directions of enquiry. For universities to fulfil their role in providing dynamic, independent knowledge production for the public good, there needs to be academics and students within universities who courageously and creatively work across disciplinary boundaries (Russell, 2005, p.41).

One of the challenges for WIL identified by Patrick, Peach and Pocknee (2005, p.29) is improving communication and coordination across disciplines and faculties. This, they state, would enable better sharing of information and knowledge. They found that programmes across faculties were 'not thought of in a consistent coordinated way' and there was a need for 'greater inter-disciplinary networking' and 'networks across faculties' as well as 'being able to draw on knowledge and information across disciplines and faculties'.

Universities have to think more creatively and broadly regarding students learning. In a technologically and relationship-complex professional world, cooperation is more and more required among experts from different disciplines. 'It is not simply a matter of pooling information. It is, rather, a matter of bringing diverse points of view and talents together to define and construct the human world.' (Zelderman et al 1992, p.138).

Stakeholder research is currently in the field to gauge how the experience of community partners, students and tutors on the Operation Rescue project match with the discussions found in the literature review. This should then provide evidence based outcomes, benefits and impacts for further analysis. It is envisaged that the findings of this research will be published in a subsequent paper.

Conclusion

Operation Rescue's learning experience for students could have been enhanced by having team members with the missing skills such as members from the Faculty of Business with marketing and financial skills and team members from other schools in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with skills in web design, and graphic art. The time-frame limitations of the 13 week semester also prevented the maximisation of the potential for the community event. Some of this pressure would

be mitigated by having team members with existing expertise in the identified non-public relations areas as students would not need to put so much of their time and effort into performing outside-of-discipline tasks.

It is vital to try to sustain and improve the WIL approach to professional learning: 'Civic engagement, as part of public relations education, not only introduces students to service learning but also enhances a university's relationship with the surrounding community.' (Fall, 2006, p. 410).

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