A relational understanding of learning: Supporting Indigenous work-integrated learning students

NOAH ARNEY[1]

Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, Canada

The positive impact of work-integrated learning (WIL) is well-known, but there are substantial gaps in the literature related to the benefits Indigenous students receive and Indigenous students' perspective on those benefits. This article reports on a mixed methods research project into Indigenous students' perspectives on their curricular WIL experiences through qualitative semi-structured interviews and assessment of the academic impact of WIL. This study identified no difference between the academic benefits Indigenous and non-Indigenous students receive but did find a substantial gap in recruitment of Indigenous students into optional WIL programs. It argues that the WIL experience is best when situated in an authentic and challenging experience in collaboration with others where students can build confidence and develop new relationships. It concludes by advocating that WIL programs adopt a relational and holistic understanding of WIL to better recruit Indigenous students and support students beyond employment outcomes.

Keywords: Indigenous students, relational, benefits, transformative education, transferable skills

The positive impact of work-integrated learning (WIL) on employment and economic factors in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2015, 2020 ; Wyonch, 2020) and internationally (Jackson, 2013) is well researched. WIL has also been shown to decrease the wage gap between visible minority students and non-minority male students three years after graduation (Wyonch, 2020). WIL may not directly lead to better employment outcomes (Jackson & Collings, 2018), but instead it supports the gaining of the skills that do support improved employability outcomes. Unfortunately, the Canadian National Graduate Survey data does not include enough Indigenous graduates to assess their graduation outcomes as a group in the way Wyonch (2020) had done with men, women, and visible minority students, by evaluating the impact of WIL opportunities on reported post-graduate income and employment. Instead, the survey groups the Indigenous graduate responses with those who had not given information on their ethnicity. It is possible to approximate the number of respondents who are Indigenous by limiting the respondents to only those who are Canadian by birth and are listed in the category that groups together those with other ethnicity. When this methodology is carried out, it shows that the group, who may be Indigenous, are more likely than the average to have taken part in WIL at 53% as compared to the postsecondary graduate national average of 46.6% (Statistics Canada, 2020). The average salary increase that Wyonch identified among immigrants and visible minorities are similar with this group as well. However, there are fewer than 127 graduates in the group of Canadian by birth, other ethnicity, who participated in WIL (Statistics Canada, 2020), which is the group that includes Indigenous students, therefore, limited conclusions can be made from the data. It also does not distinguish between optional and mandatory WIL programs. Wyonch (2020) stated that "what is needed is careful monitoring of the results of participating in co-op programs for students both during school and after graduation to continuously improve and adapt these programs to maximize benefit for individual fields of study" (p. 19). This research provides insights into the benefits of WIL programs from the perspective of Indigenous students.

The research behind this article was conducted with students in curricular, paid, WIL programs including mandatory work experience and optional co-op programs. The purpose of this study was to

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[1] Corresponding author: Noah Arney, narney@tru.ca

discover how Indigenous students perceive the value they gain from WIL and to compare the pre-graduation benefits of WIL for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The aim of doing this research is to broaden our understanding of what WIL can be beyond a neo-liberal concept (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007) of preparation for engagement in the economy. To improve WIL, and to increase Indigenous participation in WIL programs, we must embrace a relational (Kennedy et al., 2020; Marule, 2012) and holistic (Pidgeon, 2014) understanding of WIL to better equip students to achieve their goals.

BACKGROUND

WIL is a model of work and study integration where students are able to apply their learning in a practical setting external to their academic program. For this study, the two types of curricular WIL students engaged in were cooperative education and work experience. At this institution, cooperative education is an optional program, where students work in a position related to their academic studies for an extended period of time, usually 12 months, and then return to university to apply the lessons learned, or where they participate in multiple semesters of work between academic semesters. Work experience, on the other hand, is the term this institution uses for a mandatory part of many programs where students work in a position related to their academic studies for a short period of time, usually four months, and then return to school to apply the lessons learned. Other institutions use different terminology for WIL programs.

Generally, career development research is done in "Western, usually Anglo-U.S., white-collar contexts" (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015, p. 412). This limitation may result in perpetuating colonial perspectives (Kennedy et al., 2020) in the creation of WIL programs. Few studies have identified the impact of WIL on the whole student while at university beyond retention (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018). There has been some work regarding Indigenous students and work-based learning (McRae et al., 2018; Ramji, 2016), but there remains a gap in the literature regarding Indigenous students' perspectives on the WIL process and their learning. Some studies have involved WIL and Indigenous communities, but they have not focused on Indigenous WIL participants, instead focusing on the learning of non-Indigenous students working with an Indigenous community (Giles, 2010; Pearson & Daff, 2011).

Indigenous peoples in Canada are generally paid less than non-Indigenous peoples, but postsecondary education is a partial leveler (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010), with a bachelor's degree nearly closing the wage gap, and a master's degree fully closing the wage gap. There remain concerns about whether the Canadian postsecondary education system is designed in a way that excludes, or worse, harms Indigenous students (Dua & Lawrence, 2000; Hunt-Jinnouchi, 2001) and ignores the values that Indigenous peoples have. Much of the research into Indigenous and visible minorities in postsecondary uses a deficit model (McRae et al., 2018; Pidgeon, 2008) that may impact the resulting research. Finally, in most Indigenous educational philosophies, experiential learning is valued (Battiste, 2013; Cajete, 2005; Marule, 2012). Using suitable approaches, WIL could be an approach for supporting Indigenous learners in a holistic way that respects Indigenous educational philosophies.

THE STUDY

This mixed methods explanatory sequential research was conducted by assessing the percentage of Indigenous students in WIL programs and the Grade Point Average (GPA) data of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who have participated in WIL. This data was used to provide context for eight semi-structured interviews with Indigenous students who have completed WIL experiences. The

interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based around the theoretical framework and emerging themes.

Positionality

To position myself within the work (Lowan-Trudeau, 2014), I am a settler and first generation immigrant to Canada. I am Mennonite and I grew up mostly in the Mennonite communities in Winkler MB and Abbotsford BC. For the last 12 years I have worked with Indigenous communities in Lytton (Nlaka'pamux), Vancouver (Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh), and most recently with the Niitsitapi, Tsuut'ina, Iyarhe Nakoda, and Métis communities in Calgary. It is my intent with this article to explicitly engage with Indigenous scholars, and in particular Niitsitapi thought (Marule, 2012), to better support postsecondary students, especially Indigenous students. It is not my intent to, as Zoe Todd (2016) says, distort or flatten (p. 9) Indigenous thought or philosophy. Rather than tying Indigenous thought to, or filtering it through, Western ideas, I instead point to it as a way forward in an "ethical space" (Ermine, 2007, p. 193), that stands on its own as an educational paradigm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Integrated Learning

WIL is an umbrella term that is used by many postsecondary institutions to define curricular experiential education (CEWIL Canada, n.d.) where a student has experience in workplace or real-world setting that is in alignment with their educational program. These experiences are a partnership between the postsecondary institution and the organization. The experience itself is based in Dewey's and Kolb's theories of experiential education (McRae & Johnston, 2016). Most WIL programs use Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2014) explicitly by having students engage in an experience, reflect upon it, engage in abstract thinking based on that reflection, and then put the reflections into practice while in the authentic (Choy, 2009) experience. This method of constructivist experiential education (Merriam & Bierema, 2014) offers learners new experiences and the opportunity to reflect on them.

In Canada, there has been substantial work done around the theoretical framework of WIL. Norah McRae and Nancy Johnston (2016) developed a model that is being utilized globally to allow institutions to use a "shared language" (p. 338). It has been based on the British Columbia Comparative Matrix with alterations to account for the differences in WIL between countries. It has been widely used in Canada (CEWIL Canada, 2017).

The benefits of WIL have been extensively studied outside of the Indigenous perspective. It has been linked to increased confidence (Sambell et al., 2020), increased knowledge of the workplace (Lim et al., 2020; Sambell et al., 2020), technical and transferable skills (Babacan & Babacan, 2015; Ferns et al., 2019; Jackson, 2013; Lim et al., 2020; McRae et al., 2019; Sambell et al., 2020; Succi & Canovi, 2020), improved academic performance (Ramji et al., 2016), increased retention (Ramji et al., 2016), and stronger understanding of their own identities (Bowen, 2018; Ferns et al., 2019). WIL also can help students gain access to a community of practice and develop their "passion" (Martin & Rees, 2019, p. 197-198) for an industry. It is possible for WIL to be a transformative experience for students (Babacan & Babacan, 2015; Choy, 2009; McRae, 2015), as "the workplace is an ideal environment which can provide cognitive tools (e.g., theories, ideas, practices, concepts) to enable students to not only gain knowledge and skills but also shape their ideas, perspectives and meanings" (Babacan & Babacan, 2015, p. 173). The impact of WIL on employment outcomes is disputed, with some studies showing employment is an outcome

(Jackson, 2013; Johnston, 2011; Wyonch, 2020), while others (Jackson & Collings, 2018; Wilton, 2012) disputing the extent to that it is a direct outcome.

There are concerns that WIL is too focused on employment outcomes. It is felt that WIL is being implemented from a neoliberal perspective of seeing WIL as preparation for engagement with the labour market (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007; Johnston, 2011). For these authors, the use of career development only as career training, technical skill acquisition, or preparation for economic participation is not enough. Instead, they contend that the purpose of all education, including career development education, is improving humanistic understanding, and that WIL should incorporate "fostering critical and politically participatory dispositions in students" (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 355) as well.

Another concern with WIL is that visible minorities are slightly less likely to participate in WIL in Canada, at 39% compared to the average of 46.6% (Statistics Canada, 2020). International students have a more difficult time accessing WIL, as they are not as connected to the resources on and off campus (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). Students with robust social or work networks seem to have an advantage over other students in obtaining WIL experiences. When looking at employment outcomes in Canada, though not an ideal measure of WIL program success, women have worse employment outcomes than men from WIL (Wyonch, 2020), while visible minorities have better outcomes than others, which brings them in line with the majority. Recent research has inquired into how service learning can be integrated with an Indigenous framework (Kennedy et al., 2020) and implement relational learning.

Indigenous Students in Postsecondary Education

Indigenous educational philosophies (Styres, 2017) and Indigenous paradigms (Kovach, 2010;Pidgeon, 2019) have some alignment with the transformative, humanistic and constructivist paradigms in Western education. The core concepts of education in the Indigenous paradigms are that education is relational, experiential, and interconnected (Cajete 2005; Marule, 2012). Marule (2012) was especially important in this research as the research was conducted within the traditional territories of the Niitsitapi. These three concepts, education that is relational, experiential, and interconnected, align closely with WIL.

This holistic view of education (Pidgeon, 2014, 2016) is best expressed by Kirkness and Barnhardt in "First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's--Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility" (1991). This concept of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Pidgeon, 2008) is echoed across most of the Canadian literature into Indigenous education (Archibald & La Rochelle, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2020; McRae et al., 2018; Peltier, 2018; Pidgeon, 2014, 2016, 2019; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017; Ramji et al., 2016). Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) words are as powerful today as they were 30 years ago:

> What First Nations people are seeking is not a lesser education, and not even an equal education, but rather a better education — an education that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives. (p. 108)

The Indigenous paradigm resonates strongly in experiential education. The linkage of doing and knowing (Kovach, 2010) as well as the relational (Cajete, 2016; Marule, 2012; Styres et al., 2013) resonate especially with WIL programming, as does the paradigm's reflective circularity (Styres, 2011). The best linkages in WIL programing and Indigenous education are when WIL includes reciprocal learning,

support for Indigenous identity development, culturally relevant programming, community building, relationship building, and individualized programming (McRae et al., 2018). But the concepts in the Indigenous paradigm can be useful beyond just working with Indigenous students (Kennedy et al., 2020). It closely aligns with and moves beyond the transformative paradigm, in that with the Indigenous paradigm, the transformation of the individual is the first step to transforming the community (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Much of the literature in WIL is built from the constructivist paradigm based on Dewey (1938). Specifically, WIL stems from experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and transformation and adult education theories (Mezirow, 1991) that describe how we perceive new ideas and what they mean to us. Our past experiences affect how we react to, reflect on, and absorb new ideas. Past experiences become the context (Jarvis, 2007) we bring to new experiences and ideas, therefore, everyone responds to ideas and experiences differently because of their different contexts, both lived and socio-cultural (Engeström, 1987). This socially constructed reality (Bruner, 2009) means that interactions between stakeholders in WIL, including students, workplaces, and institutions, hold differing views of being and knowing (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) similar to researchers and educators who use varying paradigms. The Indigenous Paradigm (Kovach, 2010; Pidgeon, 2019) may be a better way forward for WIL research with its focus on the experiences and perspectives of participants (Pidgeon, 2019). The Indigenous paradigm recognizes the impact of the researcher and the relationship (Kovach, 2010) between the researcher and participants or between participant-researchers, as well as its embrace of the "4 Rs" of respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 1).

The Global WIL framework developed by McRae and Johnston (2016) has been very influential throughout Canada's WIL programs. It provides a structure that has been promoted by Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada, 2017); the Canadian WIL organization that supports many of the WIL programs offered through postsecondary providers in Canada. The Global WIL Framework provides a unified language to describe WIL programs and "allows the user to situate their particular model… within this attributes and outcomes context" (McRae & Johnston, 2016, p. 344). The core attributes of a curricular WIL program in this framework are (p. 345):

- Experience: direct and hands-on; meaningful and substantial; linked to curriculum;
- Curriculum Integration: learning outcomes; assessment by institution; assessment by workplace; integration back to curriculum;
- Student Outcomes: knowledge, skills, & attributes; knowledge of discipline and workplace; capacity to contribute; and
- Reflection: Formalized, ongoing, integrated.

In her work "Moving Beyond Good Intentions: Indigenizing Higher Education in British Columbia Universities through Institutional Responsibility and Accountability," Michelle Pidgeon (2014) laid out the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (Figure 1) which promotes seeing individuals as a "whole person", including their intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical self, who exists in the context of their own family and community, each of which is made up of individuals who themselves are whole persons. This framework, rooted in Indigenous educational philosophies (Bartlett et al., 2012; Battiste, 2013; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2010; Pidgeon et al., 2013), provides a way of looking at the

benefits of WIL from the student participant's holistic perspective. The core of this perspective are the concepts of respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

FIGURE 1: Indigenous Wholistic Framework.
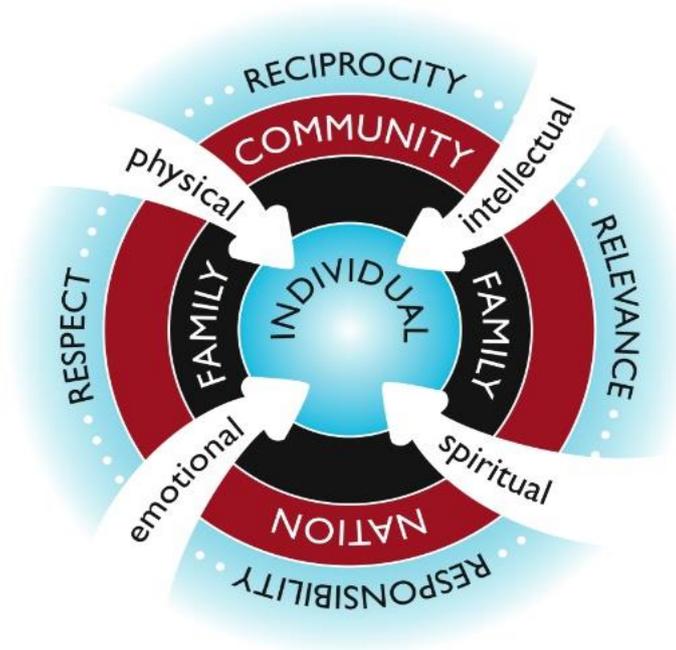
Note. From "Moving beyond good intentions: Indigenizing higher education in British Columbia universities through institutional responsibility and accountability," by M. Pidgeon, 2014, *Journal of American Indian Education, 53*(2), p. 10. Copyright 2014 by University of California. Reprinted with permission.

The Global WIL Framework (McRae & Johnston, 2016) and the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (Pidgeon, 2014) support each other when we consider the benefits of WIL experiences from the perspective of the student participant. The three attribute categories from the Global WIL Framework that support this method of assessment are experience, student outcomes, and reflection. The development of meaningful, hands-on, experiences that build students' skills and knowledge in a way that understands students from a holistic and relational perspective, treating them as individuals within a family, community, and nation context gives us a better understanding of student success. At the center, is the student's understanding of learning and self in a way that empowers them in their own growth.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted at a midsized undergraduate-focused university in western Canada using a mixed methods approach (Cameron, 2018) to explore the value of WIL for undergraduate Indigenous students and to better understand the value of these experiences. Mixed methods design provides a way in WIL research (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018) to validate the qualitative interviews and the quantitative data (Cameron, 2018). The study included eight mandatory WIL programs and seven optional WIL programs.

Quantitative Methods

For the quantitative portion of this research, specific courses that students engaged with concurrently with their WIL experiences were identified, excluding courses that were not connected to career development learning. This was done to ensure that the WIL courses included preparation for reflection (Mezirow, 2012) and that the WIL programs were designed to align with the Global WIL Framework concepts. All students who had taken these WIL courses in the last eight years and had completed at least 30 credits, or two full years of their studies, before their WIL experience and 30 credits after their WIL experience were included (n=2337 non-Indigenous, n=84 Indigenous). This allowed for comparisons of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student numbers within each program. The aggregate Grade Point Average (GPA), an average of the letter grades received by a student and converted into a numerical value, was then determined for the two student groups based on the 30 credits taken before the WIL course and the 30 credits taken after the WIL course and converted to grade equivalent. The comparison between the two groups starting and ending average grade was used to provide context for the qualitative portion of this study. The quantitative data was obtained by requesting the information within the parameters of the university's Institutional Analysis and Planning department policy.

Qualitative Methods

The recruitment of Indigenous student participants was based on the pre-requisite that the students had completed at least one four-month, full-time work term as well as completing at least 30 credits of academic work. Recruitment of students was completed through email, supported by the University's Indigenous student services department. Eight Indigenous students participated (three First Nations women, one First Nations man, and four Métis women).

The qualitative portion of the research; individual semi-structured (Cameron, 2018) interviews with student participants, was facilitated using Zoom. The questions were built based on the Global WIL theoretical framework and were designed to allow students to explain their WIL experiences and how they have constructed the value of their experiences. After the interviews, the audio recording was transcribed, and member checked. The transcripts were then deductively coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in NVivo 12. Themes were organized around the Global WIL theoretical framework as well as utilising inductive coding and emerging themes.

Ethical Considerations

The concepts of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility put forward by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) formed the ethical foundation of this work. The research was undertaken under the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (REB20-1612) as well as the Mount Royal University Human Research Ethics Board (102410), with special consideration of chapter 9: "Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada" of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). The relationships built (Kovach, 2010) with the Indigenous participants as part of this research created an accountability to the participants (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). This relationship included reciprocity (Pidgeon, 2014) and ensured that the students understood the purpose, goals, and process of the research. The students learned about the research process while the researcher showed respect for the student, their culture, knowledge, experience, and point of view. This was relevant in both helping participants to understand themselves better, and helping the university to improve the programs for future students (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).   Finally, this ensured building

"responsibility through participation" (Pidgeon, 2019, p. 430), both the responsibility the researcher towards the students but also the building of responsibilities for the student to have an active part in their learning, and improving the learning of others.

FINDINGS

Alignment of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Student Success

Both groups of students in the quantitative portion of the research had very little change in their GPA after taking WIL courses. Both the Indigenous (n=84) and non-Indigenous (n=2337) students had an aggregate GPA in the B+ grade range for the 30 credits before their WIL experience and both groups remained in the B+ grade range after their WIL experience. The difference in the change was not considered meaningful both because of the very slight difference it represents and the low number of Indigenous students in the sample.

During the period investigated none of the mandatory WIL programs had more than 4.35% Indigenous students and the average Indigenous student participation in WIL during that time was 3.91%. These numbers align with faculty level Indigenous student data for the mandatory WIL programs. The optional WIL program for the business program, on the other hand, had the lowest Indigenous participation of only 2.67%, which was substantially lower than the Indigenous student percentage in the relevant faculty.

Indigenous Student's Perception of their Work-Integrated Learning Experience

Several core themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews (n=8) including authentic experience, collaboration, confidence building, reflection, and the relationship with the postsecondary institution staff member supporting their WIL. An authentic experience in this case is one where a student is able to apply the skills they have learned in a real-world situation that does not have a defined correct response. Confidence building included seeing that they were able to accomplish the work set out for them as well as building capacity for future work in the field and development of their knowledge of the discipline. Collaboration includes both forging a connection with others, including co-workers and supervisors, as well as developing new and maintaining prior relationships with communities. Reflection included formalized reflection and informal reflection both during and after the WIL experience. The majority of students identified that if the WIL experience had not been paid, they would not have been able to engage in it.

Authentic experience

Students' perception of their experience as being authentic was when they were, as one student put it, "able to take things you're learning and apply it" (P. 3). A student whose work was less connected with their program, on the other hand, felt that the experience was not authentic but was merely a summer job to pay for school. Students who felt the work was meaningful mentioned finding it more enjoyable and more rewarding. Several students mentioned that the experience was "more practical" (P. 7) or "relevant" (P. 2, 3, 5, 7) than their academic learning, specifically mentioning that the theory work they learned in school was important, but the application of that theory was more meaningful to them.

Students identified certain transferable skills as having improved during the WIL experience. The three most improved skills students identified were self-management, critical thinking, and implementation. They identified self-management as the ability to set clear objectives, create plans and accomplish their

goals. Critical thinking enabled students to assess tasks, information, or ideas, and determine potential outcomes from their actions. Implementation was seen as being part of self-management but also the ability to take technical skills and put them to use as needed. Other skills that were commonly identified were leadership, communication, lifelong learning, self-assessment, and collaboration.

Building confidence

The main source of personal and professional confidence from the students' perspective was their engagement in an authentic experience. As they saw themselves able to accomplish the same type of work as others who were full-time regular employees in their workplaces, they realized that they were ready for this. One student described this as being able to "realize my competency" (P. 1)which prepared them for going into the industry. Another aspect of confidence was the demystification of the social situations of their industry, as most students identified being able to learn the etiquette and norms of their workplace as being core outcomes. Students identified the "smaller low stakes experience" (P. 1) of their WIL terms as preparing them by giving them the disciplinary knowledge they need for moving into the next phase of their career plan. Others identified the freedom and autonomy of the experience and gaining the respect of coworkers as giving them personal and professional confidence.

Collaboration with others

All of the students talked in detail about the importance of collaboration with others and community. The development of relationships with their co-workers and supervisors was seen by those who discussed their experiences positively as being important for both their learning and for their self-development. Being able to talk with those who had been in the industry much longer and learn "how the industry functions from an insider perspective" (P.1) was discussed by many participants. One student who worked alone for one of their two WIL experiences found that not having that collaboration made it harder to develop new skills and to reflect on the experience.

Students found connecting with new communities as well as reconnecting with their existing communities supported their WIL experience. One student who had been disconnected from their community for many years said: "it kind of gave me a push to strive for that connection more" (P. 8). They mentioned the community built through their co-workers, classmates, family, nation, or shared identity gave them the strength they needed to support them during their experience. Several students also discussed discovering a "different sense of what community means" (P. 2) through their WIL experiences.

Reflection

Students identified that when they were able to undertake authentic, or "real world" (P. 1, 7), work, they were able to reflect on their future plans. This included helping them to critically assess their prior career goals and develop new career goals and education plans, one student saying that it "really opened my eyes" (P 6). All of the students talked about how they were able to take the time to reflect upon their career path and how their education and experiences would support them. Some of them mentioned specifically the formalized reflections both as part of their WIL program or as part of their workplace. For several students it helped them to identify new possibilities or as one student put it "shifted my motivation" (P. 5). All of the students discussed introspection and reflection as being critical parts of their experience.

Relationship with postsecondary institution staff

Most of the students discussed the importance of the postsecondary institution staff in the Career Services department who worked with them to secure their work placement and support them during their WIL experience. Students discussed the helpfulness of the resources and the preparation that was provided by the staff prior to their experience. One student identified having a staff member to talk to "if we did run into a problem during the work term" (P. 3) as being something that made the entire experience much better and supportive. Other students discussed that the formal reflection completed with the staff helped them make to make sense of their experience.

DISCUSSION

This study determined three outcomes: first that there was no grade difference between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students; second, that there was a lower proportion of Indigenous students in optional WIL programs than in the academic program it was part of; finally, that students felt their WIL experiences are best when situated in an authentic context in collaboration with others that provide challenging responsibilities. When students had experiences that aligned with the final finding, they identified it as being of great value to them, while they identified WIL as of less value when it was not.

The GPA data shows that viewing Indigenous WIL students from a deficit model is lacking. There was no difference in academic performance between Indigenous students who participate in WIL programs and non-Indigenous students. The students interviewed identified the same beneficial outcomes from WIL that are discussed in the literature. Instead of using a deficit model, postsecondary providers can turn their attention to the "assets" (Martin et al., 2018) students have and achieve through WIL. For a fuller examination of WIL's impact on GPA, a future study would need to look at the comparisons between students with similar GPA before WIL, with one who is enrolled in the program and one who is not or would need to use a larger sample size and run statistical analysis. The more startling quantitative data gained was the difference in Indigenous student numbers between programs. The institution, during the years considered for this study, has had between 5.2% and 6.1% Indigenous students (Fisher & Quinn, 2019) with substantial variation between programs and faculties. This means that the more pressing concern are not from a perspective of Indigenous student achievements, but rather with how postsecondary institutions work with Indigenous students and how well they understand Indigenous students and their contexts and backgrounds. Since Indigenous students are underrepresented in optional WIL programs, more work needs to be undertaken by postsecondary institutions in supporting Indigenous students in accessing WIL programs. As postsecondary institutions engage in the work of decolonization or Indigenization, those engaging in the work need to be cognizant of the barrier to access that unpaid WIL experiences pose to underrepresented students. Ensuring that WIL experiences align with what Indigenous students see as being a good WIL experience is also key to increasing Indigenous representation in WIL programs.

The Indigenous students interviewed saw a good WIL experience as being an authentic, what they defined as connected to the type of work they would be doing post-graduation, and challenging collaborative experience that allowed them to build their confidence and develop relationships. The engagement in an authentic experience, what Bowen (2018) called "practical applications in the workplace when solving real-life problems" (p. 1148), helped students to develop transferable skills and to gain confidence in their place in the world. Transferable skills and confidence were so entwined that all students connected them strongly. Students felt that the placement in an authentic experience is what developed their confidence. Students' interactions with others as equals, was also tied to their

confidence building. They began to see themselves not as students but as developing experts in their own right.

This collaboration also helped students to learn the skills needed to develop or improve their relationships with their communities or nations: something that the LE,NOṈET program at the University of Victoria identifies as one of the goals of decolonizing WIL (McRae et al., 2018). Finally, the importance of reflection in WIL, as with "all academic programmes" (Bowen, 2018, p. 1157), cannot be overstated. The practice of reflection is what enables WIL to become more of a transformative practice (Babacan & Babacan, 2015), and it is through reflection that students are able to develop their skills and self-management through their authentic experience, their building of confidence, their collaboration, and relationships. Previous WIL research has already identified engagement in an authentic experience (Choy, 2009), collaboration (Sambell et al., 2020), as well as confidence (Succi & Canovi, 2020) as being core objectives of WIL programs. Findings from this research found that a core part of the benefit of the students WIL experiences was a relational understanding of learning, an element that needs more exploration in the literature.

Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) concepts of "respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility" (p. 100) are entwined with a relational understanding of learning. All four are multilateral within the relationships that exist between students, faculty, staff, and employers. This reciprocity was a core feature of when students expressed that their experience was a good one. Students in their discussion of the experience and confidence talked a great deal of the responsibility they were given by others, as well as the responsibility others had toward them. The work that they did was relevant to their lives and goals, while also being relevant to their employer. The respect between them and their employers was a strong part of the building of confidence as well as the collaboration and relationship with postsecondary institution staff. As Elder Roy Bear Chief explains in an interview, the "web" (Kennedy et al., 2020, p. 8) of relationships is what supports all of us and will support students in their studies and life path. By maintaining and intentionally building these relationships between students, faculty, staff, employers, co-workers, and communities, postsecondary institutions are able to provide a more "supportive environment" (McRae, 2015, p. 140) that leads to transformative change.

If the goal of a WIL program is to create a transformative space, then the best way to achieve this is by embracing a relational understanding of it. "Relational learning" (Kennedy et al., 2020, p. 11) is learning that embraces an understanding of people within their contexts including the holistic individual's interaction with other holistic individuals. These include their family members, nation, and communities (Pidgeon, 2014) and treats all with respect, ensuring that the experiences are relevant, that learning is reciprocal, and that everyone involved understands their responsibilities to one another. This relationship building component may be more difficult in virtual or online WIL experiences.

Across Canada and around the world, postsecondary institutions are looking to support Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and provide them with transformative learning opportunities. Engaging students in an authentic, relevant, reciprocal, and challenging experience rooted in the respect for and responsibility toward students with integrated formal and informal reflection will lead to both. To accomplish this, a relational understanding of students and their contexts is needed.

CONCLUSION

This study identified that the pre-graduation benefits from WIL are the same for both Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students, based on the grade data and on the students' understanding of their WIL experience. The difference found was that fewer Indigenous students are recruited into

optional WIL programs. The Indigenous students' construction of the value and benefits of WIL aligned with those outlined by McRae and Johnston (2016). The most valuable WIL was seen as those experiences that were authentic and collaborative where students were able to build their confidence and develop relationships. For WIL to be improved in a way that increases the participation of Indigenous students, it must consider a relational understanding of WIL and WIL programs. These would be programs that engage students in an authentic and challenging experience where they collaborate with others toward a goal. The outcomes of this study support the development of WIL programs that explicitly work toward creating transformative experiences.

This study shows that rather than looking at Indigenous student success from a deficit model, applying the lessons learned from Indigenous student's perspectives on WIL helps create an "ethical space" (Ermine, 2007, p. 193) that can improve WIL programs for all students. This would require practitioners to use a more holistic approach to WIL with all students, supporting students beyond merely employment outcomes and focusing WIL on becoming a transformative experience. For this to occur, WIL staff and faculty must embrace a relational understanding of students, their learning, and WIL in general as well as maintaining the reflective practices and authentic experiences WIL programs already focus on.

This article suggests that postsecondary institutions across Canada and the world consider Indigenous educational philosophies as a way forward. In particular, the concepts of relational learning (Kennedy et al., 2020), the four Rs of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991), and a wholistic understanding of students (Pidgeon, 2014, 2016). These concepts can be built into new or existing WIL programs and lead to an improvement in student's development and transformative change. In addition, postsecondary institutions must examine their recruitment of Indigenous students into optional WIL programs, assess for gaps in recruitment, and where the relationship with Indigenous students needs to be improved.

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STATEMENT OF PLACE

I am an immigrant to Canada and settler of European descent. I am Mennonite and was raised primarily in the Mennonite communities in Winkler MB and Abbotsford BC. I have worked for most of my adult life with Indigenous communities including the Nlaka'pamux, Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, Sto-Lo, Niitsitapi, Tsuut'ina, Iyarhe Nakoda, and the Métis community in Calgary. In addition to the Indigenous scholars I have referenced here I want to acknowledge the Indigenous Elders who have taught me much about the importance of good relations including, respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility. This includes but is not limited to N'kixw'stn James of the Nlaka'pamux, Lilly Whonnock of the 'Namgis, Joanne Brown of the Cheslatta, and Miiksika'am of the Siksiká. Though I conducted this research in Niitsitapi territory in Treaty 7, I now reside in the lands of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc within Secwépemc'ulucw.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning

Special Issue

Indigenous Perspectives and Partnerships: Enhancing Work-Integrated Learning

About the artist:

Harry Pitt is an Indigenous Australian artist, who resides on Yuin nation. He is a proud Torres Strait Islander and Fijian man from Darnley Island on the Torres Straits. Harry has completed a Bachelor of Creative Arts, majoring in Visual Arts and Design, at the University of Wollongong and is a proud member of the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre community.

Harry shares that the Hawk is a representation of 'connectedness'. The hawk is the proudest and self-ruled animal of the sky. With its eyes looming over all those that move below, he is the master of its own rule. But like all living things, the Hawk recognizes they live in a sophisticated and interconnected relationship with all the elements of County including the sky, the land and the waters.

This artwork has been gifted to represent the Special Issue of the International Journal of Work Integrated Learning 2022 entitled "*Indigenous Perspectives and Partnerships: Enhancing Work Integrated Learning*". The co-editors of this Special Issue envisioned the three entities of community, university, and students on the Hawk, working together to help our students soar.

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning gratefully acknowledge the guest editors and the sponsors of this Special Issue

About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace*". Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.