

Students' perceptions of employability skill development through a theater and reality of the board model

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In this study, an in-person simulated role play as a worthwhile approach in preparation for work-integrated learning (WIL) through a theater and reality of the board (TROB) pedagogical model is explored. Students participated in a twelve week, in-semester TROB program, acting out in-person board room positions, such as Chair and Secretary before observing a real boardroom meeting. One hundred and seventy pre- and post-survey responses were elicited from international business and engineering postgraduate students to ascertain perceived employability skill growth when undertaking a TROB program. Based on the findings, two recommendations are highlighted. The first, to consider in-person simulated work-integrated learning role play (SWILRP) as a viable approach in preparation for WIL that includes industry stakeholder engagement and second, to teach and assess self-reflection through a TROB pedagogical model as a key employability skill outcome.

Keywords: Preparation work-integrated learning, in-person simulation, in-person role play, reflective practice, theater and reality of the board

Universities are accelerating their pedagogical efforts to provide students with preparation for work-integrated learning (WIL) to enhance work-readiness and workplace transition. One such approach is simulated work-integrated learning role play (SWILRP) (Clayton & Gizelis, 2005; Jackson & Dean, 2023; Jackson & Meek, 2021; Judd et al., 2023; Kay et al., 2019; Lee, 2010; Salas et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2014; R. E. Wood et al., 2009), which can be used to replace portions of and/or augment WIL experiences (Judd et al., 2023). However, the research into SWILRP as an approach in preparation WIL to improve students' employability skill growth is still evolving (Ipinge et al., 2020; Sundler et al., 2015). More knowledge is required to understand the value of this approach, the skills most improved upon and why (Dickson-Deane et al., 2023; Ipinge et al., 2020; Tezcan et al., 2020). For instance, there is modest research on the advances in preparation for WIL among international postgraduate business and engineering students, including the attainment of reflective skills (Austin et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2008; Collinson & Tourish, 2015; De Déa Roglio & Light, 2009; Duchatelet et al., 2021; Honig, 2004; Jones & Conner, 2021; Li et al., 2013; Low et al., 1994; Moon, 2013; Onstenk, 1995; Schech et al., 2017).

According to a 2020 report, *The Future of Jobs* by the World Economic Forum, reflective practice is one of the top ten skills required for success in the workplace (Al-Bahadili, 2021; Baird & Peterson, 2021; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) with others advising similar (Billett, 2001; Schön, 2017). To better understand the employability skill benefits that students attain when completing SWILRP, this study focuses on exploring a preparation for WIL pedagogical model, titled Theater and Reality of the Board (TROB) as a viable option. The model was designed for international postgraduate business and engineering students studying at an Australian university. The main purpose of this article is to first, present TROB as a viable preparation for a WIL model. Second, to highlight students' key employability skills growth when undertaking SWILRP as an approach within a TROB model. The

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research question that guided the investigation was: which employability skill(s) are most developed and why?

In the following section, the paper is constructed in two parts. The first section focuses on SWILRP as an approach to a TROB pedagogical design and delivery format, highlighting a worthwhile preparation for a WIL option. The second section centers on the findings from the research exploration into measuring employability skill growth through a TROB program. While placement-based WIL is one of the most known and used types of WIL, there is burgeoning interest in other types of WIL, including preparation for WIL approaches such as in-person, simulation role play. This study is therefore timely, helping to meet this gap.

SIMULATION WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING ROLE PLAY

In this study, SWILRP is defined as: “an act of imitating the behavior of a physical or abstract system such as an event, situation or process that does or could exist” (Youngkyun, 2009, p. 25). Further, in this study, SWILRP centers on an approach for preparation WIL that is delivered through a TROB pedagogical model, which is offered at a university to enhance students’ job-readiness and workplace transition. It is important to note that the article does not cover the specific details around what constitutes good practice, design, and delivery in SWILRP, which is covered extensively elsewhere (Judd et al., 2023). To mention briefly, the design of the SWILRP approach was undertaken according to a cognitive load theory for novice students (Judd et al., 2023). The learning design was, therefore, based on weekly scenario building exercises, providing students with a standardized support structure, pre-, during and post- role play guidelines, code of conduct, an introduction to SWILRP learning as well as set pre-readings. Therefore, the TROB model was designed to utilize SWILRP that were tailored in-person simulation sessions to minimize student learning overload (see Judd et al., 2023).

One of the most important elements for the effective design and delivery of SWILRP is its focus on employability enhancement outcomes through a purposely designed TROB curriculum (Dean & Rook, 2023; Iiping et al., 2020; Judd et al., 2023; Y. I. Wood et al., 2020). SWILRP was chosen because it is an ideal WIL preparation approach for TROB, which can encourage competency training and employability skill growth across a variety of disciplines such as professional skills, teamwork, leadership, and effective communication (Chad, 2020; Dwesini, 2014; Iiping et al., 2020; Judd et al., 2023; Nofemela & Winberg, 2020). Further, simulation learning is used widely across different disciplines and professional work organizations, providing engaging and immersive ways to help students and staff to learn new skills as part of professional development and training (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008; Dalrymple et al., 2021; R. E. Hall et al., 2018; Kahwajy et al., 2005; LaGraize & DiBartolo, 2021; Magni et al., 2013; Proserpio & Gioia, 2007; Salas et al., 2009).

In terms of post-secondary education, various researchers such as Baird and Peterson (2021) have proposed that SWILRP is highly suitable as a preparation for WIL approach because it enables students to simulate real-world, work-based scenarios and to practice essential skills in a controlled environment. Importantly, mistakes can be made through learning in action without causing injury such as training for emergency procedures, radiology, pre-hospital care, medicine, aviation, and learning to manage business superannuation finances, to name just a few (Honig, 2004; Salas et al., 2009; Zantow et al., 2005).

SWILRP increases students’ confidence and competence in their ability to navigate replicated workplace challenges and to develop professional skills for workplace interactions. However, for role play to be effective it does require a well-informed pedagogical structure that is delivered via a student-

centric approach with sound support mechanisms to ensure that dominant students are appropriately managed, creating safe spaces to learn and experiment in, while encouraging students to view failure as a positive site for experimentation and learning (Alrehaili & Al Osman, 2022). On the other hand, some students may find in-person role play extremely uncomfortable, unfamiliar or a challenging preparation for WIL approach, especially when offered in a language other than their own (Yen et al., 2015).

In the next section, the context of the TROB pedagogical model is first discussed, including the SWILRP teaching and learning approach, followed by the employability skill study that is framed by the methodology, methods, data instruments and collection as well as the analysis, leading towards a set of key findings. Finally, a discussion along with a conclusion is then offered before presenting the limitations of the study as well as future research directions.

THEATER AND REALITY OF THE BOARD

Theater of the Board

The TROB program was worth six credit points and was a core unit for international business and engineering students participating in a professional master's degree at an Australian university. The role play approach was conducted after hours at the university where this study took place, utilizing the university's boardrooms. Each twelve week semester, students undertook meetings, agenda setting, organizational strategic planning, recording minutes, and actioned items for no more than 1.5 hours per week via a fake boardroom ecosystem, including the provision of pretend budgets and company documents. Further, per week multiple classroom streams were implemented to avoid boardroom role plays exceeding twenty students per class to ensure role play equity, peer observation and feedback occurred. Prior to the first in-person simulation, the teacher provided students with a mock-up of a not-for-profit business organization that had an imaginary two million (AUD) annual budget turn-over and strategic intent. During the weekly boardroom simulations, students performed their designated roles which were selected by the teacher, asking questions, requesting information, and performing committee members' functions via a pre-set agenda that was created and disseminated to the student group by the teacher. Not all students functioned as a boardroom member and instead, these students would focus on observing, note taking and providing peer-feedback about students' professionalism, clarifying points made in discussions or how to improve their practice in a boardroom setting, using Bain et al. (2002) 5Rs reflective framework (Table 1).

Reality Board

The aim and scope of the reality board was to provide students with a hands-on-learning experience that enabled them to participate as an observer on a real board with active members. Students were not active boardroom members per se, rather observing how an agenda was displayed and actioned as well as the formalities associated with boardroom practices and processes, for instance. Some students sourced not-for-profit organizations, such as community sports centers or student advisory groups that occurred on university campus. Each student elected the type of industry or not-for-profit community organization to source and secure, receiving a Chair's acceptance email that was then shared with the teacher for final approval. No two students attended the same boardroom meeting to ensure that each student took part in sourcing an appropriate experience. Students, therefore, located to an approved physical workplace where a boardroom committee functioned, observing practice and where they freely engaged in conversations, asking questions of the Chair and board members.

TABLE 1: Theater and reality of the board pedagogical framework.

Activity	Process
Set up the room	A university boardroom was used, which included one large table with multiple chairs around it. Power point slides were used so that the students could see the information that was being presented. Students were provided with a clear understanding of the roles that they were to play and the scope of each role with opportunity to ask questions and gain clarification. A code of conduct that the students co-developed and approved as well as how to best provide peers with constructive feedback was also undertaken, facilitated by the teacher.
Introduce the activity	The teacher introduced the activity and re-explained the goals. Clarification was provided for each boardroom role such as Chair. Students were provided with enough time to discuss the information and make decisions.
Present the information	The teacher presented the information that students needed to know. This information included financial data, market research, and competitor analysis. Students were provided with enough time to discuss the information, identifying the key issues and challenges. Students were encouraged to share their ideas and perspectives as well as any concerns.
Role Play	Students acted in their designated roles and made decisions about how to address the key issues and challenges. The acting boardroom members were encouraged by the student-Chair to develop a plan of action. The teacher was an observer and only interacted with the board if students were not able to progress the meeting.
Wrap up the activity	The teacher wrapped up the activity by summarizing the key points. This is where the teacher needed to be prepared to answer questions from students and provide students with the opportunity to self-reflect, undertake peer-reflection, and promote feedback about key insights, observations, and areas to improve upon for those students who acted in a boardroom role.
Debrief	The teacher, in consultation with students, summarized the key points at the end of the activity and encourage other students to opt in for the following week's role play.

Students were provided with support to source and secure a real boardroom observation activity through seeking assistance in class, online and via the program's learning management system. The reality board session occurred for no more than two hours and prior to the final simulation activity commencing. Students were provided with Bain et al. (2002) 5Rs framework to structure their reflections, which formed part of an assessment task in the form of a workbook. The key focus of the workbook was for students to highlight the similarities and differences between the simulated and real boardroom experiences as well as key employability skills they believed they had developed the most and why. Students were required to share the findings with peers and the teacher during pre-simulation class time and towards the end of the TROB program. A debriefing session was also provided to students prior to the final pre-simulation activity to further share findings and insights.

Curriculum Design

The curriculum design and delivery format included a three hour introductory workshop, 1.5 hour weekly role play activities and students sourcing and securing a real boardroom observation opportunity. The SWILRP activities were framed through a TROB curriculum and designed based on Avramenko's (2012) evaluated simulation learning framework, "providing lifelike experiences, ensuring the formation of certain business skills and, by that, boosting the students' self-confidence" (p. 359) through role play. This included reflective learning based on the scholarship of teaching and learning (Hains-Wesson & Young, 2017) as well as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework. The TROB curriculum involved introductory sessions, code of conduct for boardroom etiquette and peer feedback, role play expectations, and reflective learning and practice. The peer feedback was especially important for the TROB model. Students were supplied with a template based on good practice in peer feedback that focused on providing specific and constructive points, showing empathy and being supportive through actionable and purposeful insights (Wiggins & McTighe, 2013). Great care was

taken to ensure simulation learning was balanced with students' stress overload without minimizing real world implications. This encompassed the introduction of tight deadlines such as discussing boardroom agendas within a set time limit to increase stress levels while working with others (Judd et al., 2023). For instance, the TROB teacher encouraged students to ask questions pre- and post- the simulation to clarify expectations and to receive role play guidance. This was achieved by providing examples of how to develop and progress an agenda in the role of Chair. To take minutes in the position of a Secretary and for those who acted in the role of general board member to actively partake and contribute to operationalizing the governance functions of the board. Other activities included generating discussions, debates, and conversations through boardroom professionalism (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Theater and reality of the board curriculum framework.

Phase of Simulation	Structure	Activities	Framework	Learning type	Outputs & data collection process
Prep-learning	1 x 3 hour workshop.	Expectations, rule setting, explanation of simulation process, goals and aims, developing group structure.	An example of what to expect was shown to students where the teacher along with students piloted a role play scene to show students what to expect.	Employability skill goal setting.	500 word performance goal setting brief worth 25% and pre-survey activated.
During-learning	1 x 1.5 hour weekly role play.	Solving problems as a board, role experience and group decision making.	Agenda pre-determined and shared with students, code of conduct and fake organizational prospectus with budget and strategy.	Group reflections and discussions.	750 word professional e-portfolio profile presentation worth 30%.
Post-learning	1 x 2 hour student sourced and secured observation activity and 1 x 1 hour debrief.	Observing a real board room process.	Students provided with a letter of introduction template, requesting to become an observer of a real boardroom along with a list of potential organizations to contact.	Reflective writing tasks using Bain, et al. (2002) 5Rs model.	2000 word reflective workbook worth 45% and post-survey activated.

Ethics

University ethics was received before conducting the research (i.e., reference 521). A research assistant was hired who was not associated with the design and delivery of the TROB model, administering the surveys and to collect the data. No data was accessed or analyzed until the finalization of students' grade results occurred, adhering to ethical requirements.

METHODOLOGY

A case study methodology was chosen because it was essential to implement a research design that allowed the authors to focus on the detail of one SWILRP approach via a TROB pedagogical framework over a set period for a distinct cohort. Further, case study methodology allows researchers to use a variety of methods, including mixed methods to help develop a full understanding of the case being studied (Yin, 2017). Additionally, case studies can assist researchers to gather detailed information

about the subject being investigated, via its natural setting, and cross examining various data sources to answer the research question. This type of methodology also helps researchers gain a deep understanding of complexities, nuances, and underlying factors (Flyvbjerg, 2011) while recognizing the topic's complexity and its context. Case studies have been used extensively to examine real-world situations and problems, and to generate theories that can be evaluated in further research (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2017). Finally, case study methodology is beneficial when undertaking research that investigates a context, a process and/or an outcome (Punch, 2013), including individuals, collectives, and diverse perceptions (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

METHODS

It was important that the choice of methods was based on the best way to answer the research question, keeping in mind the requirement of a case study methodology. After careful consideration, which centered on the authors' strengths and limitations in both qualitative and quantitative methods, the decision to use both was chosen to answer the research goal. The use of mixed methods is an effective measurement process in case study methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Patil Vishwanath & Mummery, 2019) because it allows a comprehensive understanding of change over time (Creswell & Clark, 2017), helping control for individual differences, and to evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of interventions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

Finally, to effectively answer the research question, this study focuses on a specific set of mixed method data due to the limited word count. Future plans are underway to undertake further research, which will focus on the comprehensive set of qualitative data, such as students' reflective workbook entries, which are not presented here.

PARTICIPANTS

Students who took part in the study were international postgraduate business and engineering first year master's students, studying at an Australian university. All students enrolled in the TROB program and over a three-year period were recruited by a research assistant who was separate to the teaching team to meet ethics conditions. The participation invitation was delivered through an email communication and a posting on the learning management system, which aligned to the university's ethics requirements. Students who agreed to participate did so by activating the communication message's hyper link that directed students to provide consent before undertaking the pre- &/or post-survey. Upon completion of the survey, we allocated a unique identifier for each response such as A, B, C, etc.

The majority of student participants represented different cultures from India with sixty eight pre-survey responses (N=68) and eighty nine (N=89) for the post-survey. Male students accounted for 98% of the survey responses with an average age of 24.23 years with 76% being under 25 years of age. Many of the students already worked in their family businesses or were seeking full-time employment in their chosen professional areas in Australia. The majority of students' first language was English with no interpretation or language challenges (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Sample size and participants' demographics.

Demographics	Pre-survey		Post-survey	
	No.	%	No.	%
No. of responses	68	100%	89	100%
Age				
Mean	24.29		24.39	
Standard deviation	2.80		2.76	
Gender				
Male	55	81%	70	79%
Female	13	19%	19	21%
Nationality				
India	64	94%	83	93%
Other	4	6%	6	7%
Field of study				
Business	14	21%	9	10%
Engineering	53	78%	79	89%
Other*	1	1%	1	1%

*Other: Communication, Literature, History, Sociology, Psychology, Health, Medical.

DATA COLLECTION

Survey fatigue in WIL research is quite common. This is when participants are less motivated to complete surveys due to repeated exposure to survey requests, decreasing response rates (Fass-Holmes, 2022). Initially, student participants were invited to complete the pre-survey to assess their employability skill baseline and characteristics. Then, once the twelve-week TROB program was completed, the post-survey was introduced to assess students' employability skill growth. Despite reasonable student participation rates for both the pre- and the post-survey, only twenty nine (N=29) respondents completed both pre- and post-surveys. Due to the low number of both surveys being completed by each student, the combination of all pre- and post-survey responses was chosen. Consequently, the adoption of independent sample t-test for the pre- and post- comparison was used instead of paired sample t-test, which can disregard valuable data. Therefore, pre-, and post-survey responses are, arguably, comparable given the characteristics of participants being similar.

ONLINE SURVEYS

A tested employability skill focused survey was chosen (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) for the study's pre- and post-survey. This survey has been adapted and used by the authors previously to suit employability measurement in WIL research (Hains-Wesson & Ji, 2020). The surveys centered on students' self-awareness around their employability standards through a set of sixteen questions, including open-ended and demographic questions. The survey was placed onto a web-based, longitudinal survey platform, inviting students to self-assess their employability skills prior to the first and final SWILRP activity each semester (Appendix A). Once the data was collected, the calculation of the percentage of students who chose the skills for each available option was obtained before applying an independent sample t-test. This allowed the authors to empirically measure whether the percentage of students who had chosen a particular skill in the pre-survey had significantly changed in the post-survey. The findings were interpreted in light of the research question and aim of the study, drawing

conclusions based on the implications of the findings. The data analysis and process was based on R. P. Hall's (2020) mixed method framework, which proposes that in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied, it is best to remain open to new discoveries while pawing through diverse data points. Finally, with the open-ended survey responses, a word cloud technique was utilized to help visualize the frequency of common themes that were mentioned by student participants.

FINDINGS

The following findings are presented through the lens of international postgraduate business and engineering students' perceived employability skill growth. This is achieved through two key focuses, which are: 1) students' main perceived skill developed prior to beginning the TROB program and 2) the main perceived skill developed during the TROB program. As illustrated in Table 4, students' perceived their employability skill readiness (pre-TROB) as being consistent across the spectrum, with only a marginal difference in cultural awareness. For instance, 15% ($p < .10$) more participants considered that they had already obtained cultural awareness as an employability skill prior to participating in the TROB program. Whereas, in the year-by-year sub-sample analysis, 24% ($p < .05$) more participants considered reflective practice as both one of the skills developed prior to participating and also a skill most developed during the TROB program (Table 5). Reflective practice is significant in both the all-sample analysis (+24%, $p < .01$) and year-by-year subsample analysis ($p < .05$ in year one and $p < .01$ in year two).

The overall quantitative survey results, therefore, propose that one of the most profound areas of skill attainment is reflective practice. This is a principal discovery because we posit, along with others, that reflective practice is a key employability skill, which industry require in graduates. Reflective practice is valued in a variety of professions and industries, allowing individuals to learn from their lived experiences and to continuously improve practice (Boud et al., 1985; Liu & Zhang, 2014).

To further unpack this finding and to assist with understanding TROB's influence on the learning journey of students who undertake SWILRP, we analyzed the main open-ended survey question responses. A total of 69 participants responded to the question: "how has being a part of the TROB made you feel?" We display the summary of responses through a word cloud technique (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Word cloud of students' feelings about theater and reality of the board.



According to the frequency of the keywords mentioned, students confirmed that the TROB program, which utilized SWILRP activities was a “great experience,” “informative,” “well supported” and “highly motivating”:

Great experience. I felt like I am being helped by everyone. Everybody tried to contribute their best about whatever I am speaking of or writing about. And it motivated me to do the same to others as well. Overall, the feeling is great and would definitely use the skills that I learned here in professional life. (student A)

Further, 16 students expressed that the SWILRP activities enabled them to learn more about boardroom etiquette, such as being aware of prevailing customs, procedures, responsibilities, and tactics. Other students highlighted that the TROB program enabled them to develop teamwork (n=5) and communication skills (n=5), especially when presenting in front of their peers and communicating effectively during group conflict, problem solving (n=3), critical thinking (n=1) and participating in career aspiration conversations (n=2).

Noticeably, one challenge encountered by participants was when they were working in diverse boardroom teams (n=5). Students mentioned that cultural awareness skills were most required, despite stating that they felt this had already been developed pre-TROB. Students went on to suggest that diverse age, learning experiences, and different disciplinary backgrounds were also critical factors when considering how to best work with others: “It was a difficult task to be part of the TROB and indulge yourself in the discussion as all students’ thinking and perspectives are totally different to each other” (student B). However, through the self and peer-reflection formats, students went on to suggest that they: “*became comfortable to work in diverse teams*” (italics authors, student C).

TABLE 4: Pre-theater and reality of the board employability skills.

	Aggregated Analysis				Year one sub-sample				Year two sub-sample			
	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)
Communication skills (oral)	56%	51%	-5%	0.511	52%	40%	-12%	0.439	55%	55%	1%	0.959
Communication skills (textual)	38%	42%	3%	0.675	38%	35%	-3%	0.842	43%	51%	8%	0.445
Communication skills (visual)	32%	34%	1%	0.859	43%	50%	7%	0.656	31%	34%	3%	0.759
Communication skills (interpersonal)	44%	33%	-12%	0.141	43%	30%	-13%	0.406	50%	36%	-14%	0.192
Problem solving	62%	66%	5%	0.560	57%	70%	13%	0.406	62%	64%	2%	0.853
Time management	57%	45%	-12%	0.125	62%	50%	-12%	0.455	57%	45%	-12%	0.245
Reflective practice	25%	31%	6%	0.378	24%	20%	-4%	0.775	17%	40%	24%	0.014**
Critical thinking	54%	56%	2%	0.827	71%	60%	-11%	0.453	43%	53%	10%	0.336
Cultural awareness	38%	53%	15%	0.07*	43%	50%	7%	0.656	38%	55%	17%	0.107
Discipline knowledge	43%	44%	1%	0.884	43%	25%	-18%	0.239	43%	47%	4%	0.712

*** Significant at 0.01 level; ** Significant at 0.05 level; * Significant at 0.1 level

TABLE 5: Employability skills most developed.

	Aggregated Analysis				Year one sub-sample				Year two sub-sample			
	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)	Pre-	Post-	Δ	Sig. (two-tailed)
Communication skills (oral)	56%	69%	13%	0.105	52%	80%	28%	0.065*	55%	68%	13%	0.201
Communication skills (textual)	38%	42%	3%	0.675	38%	35%	-3%	0.842	43%	55%	12%	0.245
Communication skills (visual)	32%	33%	0%	0.976	43%	45%	2%	0.893	31%	32%	1%	0.923
Communication skills (interpersonal)	44%	47%	3%	0.704	43%	55%	12%	0.449	50%	53%	3%	0.767
Problem solving	62%	61%	-1%	0.890	57%	60%	3%	0.857	62%	62%	0%	0.985
Time management	57%	55%	-2%	0.776	62%	50%	-12%	0.455	57%	60%	2%	0.819
Reflective practice	25%	48%	23%	0.003***	24%	60%	36%	0.018**	17%	57%	41%	0.000***
Critical thinking	54%	58%	4%	0.618	71%	45%	-26%	0.090*	43%	64%	21%	0.048**
Cultural awareness	38%	39%	1%	0.890	43%	45%	2%	0.893	38%	32%	-6%	0.547
Discipline knowledge	43%	27%	-16%	0.040**	43%	20%	-23%	0.122	43%	30%	-13%	0.204

*** Significant at 0.01 level; ** Significant at 0.05 level; * Significant at 0.1 level

Noticeably, the qualitative post-survey responses also echo students' sentiments that reflective practice assisted them to critique strengths and weaknesses in the domain of employability skill attainment during the TROB program. As one student commented: "It was amazing experience to be part of TROB, as it is a great platform to express ourselves in unfamiliar situations and to discover our strengths and weaknesses" (student D). For instance, 17 survey participants, consequently mentioned, as an example, improved self-confidence, which was evident by participants using words like "introvert," "uncomfortable," "shy" and "embarrassed" to describe their initial feelings. Students later realized that it was not as "daunting" as they initially had thought:

At the beginning it was awkward as it was out of my comfort zone, but gradually by observing and mimicking the real boardroom meetings, talking and interacting with my fellow board members and build strong friendship, I reflect on my own skills and start to think about how to improve the skills to be like a real board member...The more I improve my skills, the more confident I became. (student D)

Thereby, students expressed that the opportunity to practice and observe boardroom etiquette while building relationships with peers, instructors and community members encouraged them to "push my own limit" (student E), through "regular class activities" (student A), which "helped me gain confidence and connect with people from various backgrounds, which also polished my reflective skills." As another student stated about the TROB program, "filled me with enough confidence that I can handle all sort of problems and learnt how to behave in an actual board meeting" (student F).

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that using a SWILRP approach via a TROB pedagogical model is a highly beneficial WIL preparation option to help develop, and improve international postgraduate students' employability skills, especially in their capabilities to engage in reflective practice to improve their work performance. In this study, this was evident not only in the pre- and post-survey comparison on participants' self-assessed employability skills, but it was also underscored in the main open-ended post-survey responses. Participants mentioned that their boardroom etiquette, teamwork, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, time management skills as well as career aspiration conversations were largely improved through reflective skill attainment.

The positive learning outcomes obtained by students upon completing the TROB program can be further theorized due to students' ability to practice and observe boardroom work-like environments, mirroring professional practice, and to develop reflective practice as a key capability skill (Al-Bahadili, 2021; Baird & Peterson, 2021; Billett, 2001; Boud et al., 1985; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Liu & Zhang, 2014; Römgens et al., 2020). Further, TROB's curriculum structure may have aided to transform participants' initial feelings of being nervous at the beginning of the SWILRP activity to then become excited, inspired, and engaged in reflective learning. Additionally, the results show that working in diverse teams was beneficial, too. Participants learnt to acknowledge the diversity in simulated and real working boardroom environments. They learnt to take advantage of the richness in human characteristics, ideas and diverse approaches in problem solving. This in turn, enhanced students' self-confidence and to accept their own weaknesses and strengths.

Finally, an overall growth and attainment in students' self-reflection and cultural awareness skills was most evident through the TROB program, while keeping in mind that the reflective assignments may have further assisted students to reflect on how they behaved and worked with others.

CONCLUSION

Encouraging students to confidently step into a persona and participate in skill building exercises through a TROB model, which mirrors the world of work is no easy task (Hirani & Varin, 2022; Y. I. Wood et al., 2020), however the benefits are many. In this study, the results show that using a TROB pedagogical framework that utilizes SWILRP as an approach for preparation WIL can empower students to learn from mistake making, which encourages deep and transformative learning to occur (Betts et al., 2009; Kilgour et al., 2015).

When SWILRP approaches are complex, routinely replicate real professional practice, several employability skills are honed. For instance, in this study cultural awareness, critical thinking, and discipline knowledge skills through the development of students' self-reflection attainment were improved upon via the in-person SWILRP activities, which the literature also points towards (Ipinge et al., 2020). Therefore, as in-person SWILRP through a TROB model becomes more popular because students can learn about real life scenarios, reducing the risks to develop professionalism in action (Faria & Wellington, 2004; Puto, 2004; R. E. Wood et al., 2009; Zantow et al., 2005) and during high stakes decision making (Keys & Wolfe, 1990; Zantow et al., 2005), case studies such as these will be essential to share practice more broadly.

Finally, appropriate teacher facilitation, deep consideration around learning structures and tailored support mechanisms to effectively design TROB, including SWILRP approaches that are equitable and inclusive are required. This should include the purposeful integration of industry stakeholder engagement in TROB models to increase student employability learning while also benefitting the teaching and assessment of self-reflection as a key employability skill.

LIMITATIONS

The TROB program reported here was only open for international business and engineering postgraduate students at an Australian university. The majority of students were under twenty five years of age, from Indian background and male. Therefore, other backgrounds, genders, or differing demographics as potential variables were not explored. Additionally, this study only focused on the main employability skill developed, namely reflective practice due to word limitations. Future studies on other skills such as critical thinking, cultural awareness, and discipline knowledge as well as the findings from students' reflective workbooks will be presented at a later date.

It is also important to note that not all students completed both surveys, creating challenges to control for heterogeneity across individual students' characteristics. Therefore, the results do not determine, absolutely, the key influences of which parts of the TROB program, including students' SWILRP experiences, the reality board and how the combination of these activities may have specifically predisposed the attainment of reflective practice skills. Finally, students volunteered to respond to the surveys, and potentially some students may have been more competent and self-confident in their employability skills to begin with.

FUTURE AREAS OF RESEARCH

There are many models in preparation for WIL beyond what has been presented here (Judd et al., 2023; Y. I. Wood et al., 2020; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that future research expands on the findings presented here, and to include teacher perceptions and practice, diverse TROB curriculum structures, various discipline settings, genders, and educational year levels for a variety of

SWILRP approaches. Finally, a comparison study between diverse SWILRP activities such as career mock interviews through other types of preparation for WIL pedagogies would also be worth considering.

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APPENDIX A: Survey questions.

No.	Question	Options
1-7	Demographics	Optional selections
8	What do you hope to get 'personally' out of participating in the role play simulation?	Communication skills (oral) Interpersonal skills Written skills Time management skills Discipline knowledge Boardroom etiquette skills Taking minutes Being the Chair Being a member of the Board Understanding not-for-profit organizations Understanding for-profit organizations Meeting new students Making friends Getting to know the convenor of the unit
9	What are some of the specific employability skills that you hope to achieve by being a part of the role play simulation?	Communication skills (oral) Communication skills (textual)
10	Which skills do you believe you are able to bring to program?	Communication skills (visual) Communication skills
11	Which employability skills do you think you might need assistance with?	(interpersonal) Problem solving Time management Reflective practice Critical thinking Cultural awareness Discipline Knowledge
12	How important do you believe taking part in the program is to your current studies?	Very important Mostly important
13	How important do you believe being a part of the program will be for you after you have completed your studies?	Important Neither important nor
14	How important do you believe taking part in the program is to your career?	unimportant Unimportant Mostly unimportant Very unimportant
15	How has being a part of the program learning activities made you feel? Please explain.	Open-end question
16	Any other comments, questions, feedback about the program learning activity so far?	Open-end question (optional)



About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as " *An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development*" (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38). 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, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

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

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is 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 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.

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