

Work-integrated learning: Fifteen years of learning listening and reflection

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This paper aggregates the findings from five different studies that took place over a 15-year period and collected student voice data from liberal arts students who participated in one or more work-integrated learning (WIL) experience, not including co-operative education. The research was transdisciplinary and was not originally designed to exclusively explore WIL. However, the findings related to WIL align with the findings of current WIL research, and as a result, contribute additional evidence useful for defining and evaluating high-quality WIL. This paper also provides an example of an effective student voice research method that could be used to help WIL researchers gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of WIL students. The paper concludes with ideas for future research and suggested opportunities for the WIL community to enhance its research dissemination through collaboration efforts.

Keywords: Transdisciplinary research, lived experience, student voice, Liberal Arts

This paper is a transdisciplinary response to Eady et al.'s (2025) acknowledgement that more student voice research is needed for work-integrated learning (WIL) scholarship. It summarizes the aggregated data related to WIL collected from five different transdisciplinary research projects that took place between 2009 and 2024 with Liberal Arts students from a university in British Columbia (BC), Canada. It outlines intersecting themes that contribute to further understanding high-quality WIL experiences by illuminating connections between the thematic levels derived from the work of Eady et al. (2025, p. 234), and the six essential elements described by Drewery et al. (2026).

This paper identifies areas for further research, provides an example of student voice research used by various disciplines, and demonstrates how a transdisciplinary lens can support the WIL community's work. It has significant potential to enhance and disseminate WIL scholarship by collaborating and crossing disciplinary boundaries commonly found in universities. It aims to open dialogue between academic disciplines invested in creating quality education-to-employment instruction for their students and the WIL community.

Eady et al. (2025, p. 223-225) summarized how student voice research is covered in the literature and used by WIL researchers. Notably, the authors identified an opportunity to expand the scope of how student voice data informs WIL research. This is an encouraging step forward for WIL scholarship. Adult Education, Student Affairs, Communications, Psychology, and Sociology researchers have extensive experience with student voice research, as well as research examining workplace learning, work/life readiness, and career development (i.e., Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Fenwick et al., 2012; Keeling & Hersh, 2012; Laff & Carlson, 2025; Stross, 2017; van Manen, 2001; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). These disciplines generally do not transcend WIL research, but through collaborations between and across disciplines shared expertise could enhance research useful to multiple stakeholders.

As Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 39) stressed WIL is an "educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and the external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of curriculum." Further, Zegwaard et al., outlined that the

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WIL experience needs to be authentic to the student's learning context and goals, and meaningfully assessed as a curricular requirement and demonstration of learning progression. Curriculum, programming, teaching and learning, and assessment are the core responsibilities of faculty within their individual disciplines (i.e., Fink, 2013; Keeling & Hersh, 2012; Laff & Carlson, 2025). To ensure WIL infused curriculum is responsive to the student's learning context, disciplinary expertise is essential. Therefore, high-quality WIL is challenging to achieve without direct faculty engagement, and yet at some universities WIL programming is designed without their voices considered. High-quality WIL requires intentional academic program planning and authentic collaboration with faculty and external partners.

Each of the studies that comprise the aggregated data used for this paper were designed to collect student voice using qualitative research methods. These studies were guided by Moustakas's (1990, p. 15) six phases of heuristic inquiry (Table 1). George Kuh, the developer of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that is widely used in Canada and the US to inform higher education about how undergraduate students are spending their time and what they gain from attending university, stressed that:

we can't discover everything there is to know about the conditions that promote and characterize high levels of student engagement, learning, and educational effectiveness with a short, highly focused student survey.... We look forward to working with colleagues across the country that also are searching for valid, reliable indicators of collegiate quality. (Kuh, 2001, p. 7)

Heuristic inquiry facilitates the deep exploration of the student experience and, as such, brings student voice to the forefront.

A variety of collection methods were used (e.g., case studies, focus groups, journalling, one-on-one interviews, Indigenous circle work, and photo voice). In addition, some students took both participant and co-researcher roles, examining their own experiences as data. The students examined a variety of factors related to student success and engagement such as student wellness, risk factors, institutional systemic barriers, and preparation of post-university success. As part of exploring the latter factors, students reflected on the following guide questions: 1) What were the most effective elements of their WIL experience(s)? 2) What indicators did they use to determine if their WIL experience(s) was productive or transformative? and 3) How did their WIL experience(s) contribute to their education-to-employment transition preparation?

While this data was not collected with the intention of conducting WIL research its relevance became apparent over time. It was intriguing to compare the findings and see many intersecting commonalities that suggest the discourse on what defines high-quality WIL has merit and an important contribution to make to future higher education programming.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

None of the projects used for this research originated as specific WIL research projects. The original projects were created in response to what Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 29) described as the "increasing pressure on higher education institutions to better evidence direct links between higher education and employability outcomes." This pressure has long been felt by Liberal Arts faculty and deans, especially those in Humanities and Social Sciences (e.g., Axelrod, 2002; Clement & Vosko, 2003; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002; Rossman et al., 2020; Weingarten et al., 2015). As a result, research was needed to help

demonstrate student success and advocate for the value of Liberal Arts programs in relation to the labour market.

Research was also needed to demonstrate to students how their education transfers into the career-ready skills that many high-visibility employers stress are essential and claim are gained through a Liberal Arts education (e.g., Anders, 2017; Aoun, 2018; Coates, 2015; Hartley, 2017; Weise, 2021). While student interest in Liberal Arts subjects remains high, there has been a growing demand from students for these programs to demonstrate what career pathways and employment options are available after graduation (Pardy & Ellingham, 2021).

For more than a decade there has been much written about the epidemic of work/life unreadiness among undergraduates (e.g., Harper & Quaye, 2009; Keeling, 2004, 2006; Kuh, 2007; Levine, 2005). There is also no shortage of reports suggesting employers cannot find employment ready graduates, yet the skills gap remains ill defined. As a result, it is difficult to find reliable data to accurately determine whether it is a reality or a myth (Harrison, 2017).

Unfortunately, the ongoing rhetoric, especially in the media, questioning the value of a Liberal Arts education is an ongoing challenge for faculty and deans. There are scholars that demonstrate the contributions Liberal Arts graduates bring to employers but that universities fail at helping students translate their acquired knowledge into applied career-ready skills (e.g., Buford et al., 2023; Coates, 2015; Stross, 2017).

Finding promising practices, and integrative teaching practices so students can connect their learning to the skills needed to flourish in a complex world is an imperative for educators (Keeling & Hersh, 2012). As Drewery et al. (2026) emphasize many higher education institutions are now looking to WIL for solutions, and they must not overlook the careful considerations and planning required to ensure quality experiences.

Those conducting WIL research realize the important contribution they make to addressing programmatic and teaching and learning challenges. However, their work is often siloed within an institution and not familiar to faculty, curriculum designers, deans, or discipline specific researchers (i.e., Business and Higher Education Roundtable, 2025; Coates, 2015; Keeling & Hersh, 2012). This is especially true for Liberal Arts educators as recently confirmed by the National Association of College and Employers (NACE) survey of faculty in Canada and the United States where they cite less than half of faculty collaborate with their institution's Career Center and Social Sciences, and Humanities faculty expressed low levels of knowledge about career information and WIL practices (Gatta et al., 2024, p. 10-12).

With the underlying aim of helping students select Liberal Arts programs with confidence about their career readiness upon graduation, the five projects that inform this study set out to better understand what teaching strategies and student services students reported as most impactful. When the first project began in 2009 there was little awareness of WIL scholarship. However, it was soon realized that students found practicums, internships, industry-infused course projects, and faculty mentorship to be among the most effective in helping them become career ready (Pardy, 2010a). The students also reported that it was these experiences that had the most impact on their success during their studies and after graduation.

Consequently, the research expanded to examine the variety of experiential learning options offered. Through this work Zegwaard et al.'s (2023) inclusive definition of WIL was discovered. The definition

of WIL used by the university where the research was conducted was strictly aligned to a traditional co-operative education (co-op) model and did not include other forms of WIL. Few, if any, Liberal Arts students engaged in co-op. Co-op was administered by the university's career center and did not include faculty expertise, or an alignment with disciplinary curriculum or assessment. Students could use co-op credits as electives, yet this was not something they often did.

Over the years by learning, listening, and reflecting on what students were sharing about their work/life preparedness needs, a deeper understanding of WIL was gained. As a result, WIL strategies, beyond co-op, were created and delivered by Liberal Arts faculty. With initial support from Canada's Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), faculty developed a variety of emerging WIL strategies such as course-based industry projects and practicums (BHER, 2025). This work expanded the student voice data for both research and program evaluation purposes, and commonalities with WIL research was discovered (e.g., Ademuyiwa et al., 2024; Drewery et al., 2026; Eady et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This research is theoretically framed within a pragmatic paradigm; as such, the research questions are regarded as central to an inquiry that seeks to understand the "what" and "how" of the problem (Creswell, 2003, p.11). Importantly, it provided a foundation that was not limited to following an explicit philosophical pairing to methodology, but instead, allowed for the use of methods selected for their ability to yield the greatest insight (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

Quinnan (1997, p.2) advocated for methodology that "allows us to see beyond the polished veneer of academia and looks into those recesses where investigation, however uncomfortable its initial findings, might do some good." As noted by Zegwaard et al. (2023, p.34), the concept of WIL can be traced back to adult learning theory, and the work of scholars such as Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), and Schon (1983). Mezirow (2005), another prominent adult education pioneer, reflected on his earlier work to suggest that the day would come when adult learning theory, in particular transformative learning practices, would become critical for reshaping of the traditional view of communities, workplaces, and higher education. Years later, Keeling and Hersh (2012), leaders in student engagement and higher education reform, promoted an integrated approach between adult education and student affairs theory as an ideal for improving student engagement, retention, and work/life readiness. As a result, expertise in adult education and student affairs framed this research.

A transdisciplinary framework also grounded this research. Transdisciplinary work can be challenging to define or to describe the differences between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work (Balsiger, 2004). A transdisciplinary approach was taken because the research not only evolved from two or more distinct disciplines often considered interdisciplinary research (i.e., English and History) it intentionally transgressed across traditional boundaries (i.e., Adult Education and Communications, or Student Affairs and Economics). In this paper, the use of the term "transdisciplinary" reflects the contributions made by Liberal Arts disciplines in collaboration with other disciplines such as Adult Education and Student Affairs because as Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 30) suggested, fields that study workplace learning, vocational training, or experiential learning, and that draw on learning theories by Piaget, Dewey, and Kolb intersect with WIL scholarship.

For example, Adult Education has an established practice of using narrative inquiry research methods, researching workplace learning, reflective practice, curriculum development, program planning, and

student experience (e.g., Baran et al., 2000; Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Bratton et al., 2004; Caffarella, 2013; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Cranton, 1996; Fenwick et al., 2006; Rothwell, 2002; Rowden, 1996). The steady growth in student affairs research is useful for examining student success factors, student service quality, and how to incorporate student voice data collection in a higher education context (e.g., Astin & Astin, 2000; Clarke & Arnold, 2022; Hardy-Cox & Strange, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2000). Kuh (2001, 2003, 2007) as leaders in measuring high-impact practices and documenting effective educational practices (DEEP) are an example of how a transdisciplinary lens could help inform defining and evaluating high-quality WIL.

In addition, both Adult Education and Student Affairs have a long history of working across disciplines and supporting faculty. The contributions of disciplines such as Communications, Psychology, and Sociology contributed to the research because of their expertise related to work, employment, and career development (e.g., Brewer, 2020; Magnusson, 2020; Weise, 2021; West, 2024). These transdisciplinary collaborations within the five projects supported a thorough analysis of the findings useful for supporting Liberal Arts programming.

Research Design and Data Collection

The five research projects were qualitative studies drawing on the fundamental practices of phenomenological and heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; van Manen, 2001). They were designed to collect input from students using participatory action research data collection methods such as case studies, focus groups, narrative inquiry, journalling, one-on-one interviews, Indigenous circle work, and photo voice.

Ethics approval for the first project was granted by the University of Calgary (Pardy, 2010a). All additional projects received ethics approval from the same BC university (653, 1029C-17, 101709, 100992). Each project included students as co-researchers. They received training in participatory action research, narrative inquiry, story listening, and facilitation, and they engaged in the ongoing meaning making as recommended by Chevalier and Buckles (2013) and Anderson and McLachlan (2016).

Phenomenological research is a way to receive, hear, and interpret the lived experience of others (van Manen, 2001) and it served the collection of student voices as data effectively. Phenomenology is considered both a philosophy and a qualitative social science research method. A fundamental definition of phenomenology is “textual reflection on the lived experience and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact” (van Manen, 2001, p. 4). Heuristic inquiry is a qualitative research method, drawing on the phenomenological tradition but different in that it does not require the researcher to ‘bracket’, as Husserl (1970) described, their own personal experiences outside the inquiry. Because the research included students as co-researchers’ heuristic inquiry enabled them to include and compare their own voices as data alongside the narratives they collected from multiple other participants.

This study used Moustakas’s (1990) recommended six phases of heuristic inquiry (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Six phases of heuristic inquiry.

Phase	Explanation of Process
Initial Engagement	An opportunity for the researcher and student participants to enter a self-dialogue and reflective phase.
Immersion in the Topic	Data gathering from focus groups, one-on-one interviews, journal entries, photo voice exhibits, shared storytelling, and Indigenous circle work. Time/space to read/listen and reread/relisten participant's stories and co-create transcripts that summarized central themes as described by Moustakas's (1990) as the cycle of "immersion inside the data followed by intervals of rest and return to the data until intimate knowledge is obtained" (p. 49).
Incubation	Researcher(s) retreats from the data for a time to gain a renewed outlook.
Illumination	Themes are extracted from the data through the creation of individual depictions or stories.
Explication	Moves the analysis from the individual to a representation of the group experience.
Creative Synthesis	Aligns the narratives (i.e., individual and group depictions) to the guiding research questions and produces an exemplary portrait that represents and highlights the group's common insights, experiences, and reflections. The exemplary portrait can take many forms such as a descriptive narrative, an artistic/visual poster, or presentation. The main requirement is that the findings are presented as a collective voice or summary from the group.

Because the five different projects span a 15-year period this study had the luxury of fully embracing each phase. This was especially beneficial to the incubation phase(s) because it allowed for multiple opportunities to retreat from the data and to return to it later posing further questions. Without this phase the students' insights specific to WIL would not have surfaced. Likewise, the illumination phase created a richer way of capturing the students' WIL experiences, stories, and reflections at a deeper level and collective meaning making way than what could be achieved by Likert scale or short response questions.

Explication moved the analysis from the individual to a representation of the group experience. As a result, the final findings use the collective voice "we" referring to the common insights of the group. Finally, the creative synthesis phase aligned the narratives to the guiding research questions. During these two final phases the data corresponding to WIL from the five projects was aggregated for this study. Reflections, responses, and narratives directly related to WIL were extracted and developed into a thematic analysis used to synthesize the findings and identify if there were commonalities with current WIL scholarship.

Participants

The participants in each of the studies were Liberal Arts students (i.e., Humanities and Social Sciences) from a university in British Columbia (BC), Canada with 15,960 undergraduate students. The first study, conducted in 2009, involved a two-year long narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of six students the university had considered 'at-risk.' By the end of the study the students graduated with a bachelor's degree, and it was their stories that brought to light the critical importance of faculty

mentorship and teaching and learning strategies that infuse WIL. It was also this group of students that demonstrated the effectiveness of student voice research and that paved the way for the additional research.

Between 2011 and 2024, a total of 578 students participated in various research projects. All participants had completed one or more WIL experiences as defined by Zegwaard et al. (2023). They had engaged in paid and unpaid practicums, local and international internships, or industry-lead projects that incorporated the student's goals, curricular requirements, and collaborations with external stakeholders. The WIL experiences were developed and facilitated by faculty in various Liberal Arts disciplines because as Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 37) pointed out "some disciplines (e.g., the humanities and social sciences) lead to diverse career options and therefore, diverse WIL contexts will be relevant to these disciplines." Only two participants reported having arranged co-op experiences through the university's career center. The lack of engagement in co-op was confirmed by data obtained from the university's Institutional Research Office that indicated that less than 1% of Liberal Arts graduates participate in co-op.

Data Analysis

The analysis of student voice data can be complex because of the variety of ways it is collected (i.e., journal entries, narratives, stories, photo voice etc.). There was a need to interpret and synthesize information to establish themes using creative processes that honored the stories, efforts, and insights shared by the participants. It should be noted that heuristic inquiry requires the researcher(s) to be highly skilled in receiving, listening, deconstructing, and honoring self-reflective work, narrative inquiry, and the stories of others.

Heuristics is not about measurement, but is concerned with meanings, capturing the essence of experience, and quality over quantity (Patton, 2002, p.107). However, Patton (2002, p.110) also stressed that the analysis should be focused on identifying similarities, accordance, analogies, and homologies within diverse data. The five projects used Moustakas' (1990) recommended research phases and concluded with an exemplary portrait that profiled the individual participants yet characterized the group or central findings.

The analysis unfolded in three steps (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Three steps of data analysis.

Step	Explanation of Process
One	The data related to WIL was aggregated from each of the five projects and used to create one explication and creative synthesis using three themes to organize and differentiate the participants' contributions.
Two	Participant responses were coded and categorized using the three guiding research questions: 1) What were the most effective elements of their WIL experience(s)? 2) What indicators did they use to determine if their WIL experience(s) was productive or transformative? and 3) How did their WIL experience(s) contribute to their education-to-employment transition preparation? This phase also compared themes found in the literature review conducted by Eady et al. (2025).
Three	Compared the findings with the six essential elements of high-quality WIL that Drewery et al. (2026) explored.

FINDINGS

To organize and differentiate the participants' experiences and perspectives, three themes were created to capture what the students reported as contributing to high-quality WIL. The themes were: 1) personal/self-readiness; 2) instructional readiness; and 3) institutional readiness. They present similarities with those used by Eady et al. (2025, p. 232-234) to develop a conceptual model for better understanding how the WIL literature contributes to establishing criteria for measuring quality WIL. For example, Eady et al. (2025) used personal/relational as opposed to personal/self-readiness, programmatic as opposed to instructional, and community/context as opposed to institutional as themes.

Step one summarized the themes in Table 3. Step two expanded upon the themes by sharing quotes from the group exemplary portraits. Step three compared the findings with the six essential elements of high-quality WIL that Drewery et al. (2026) explored.

Personal/Self Readiness

The personal/self-readiness theme captured the students' evaluation of their: 1) readiness to engage in a workplace setting or project; 2) ability to determine the type of WIL experiences they participated in; 3) level of confidence in seeking support during their WIL experience; and 4) readiness to develop relationships and networks outside of a classroom setting.

Students reported that the most effective elements of their WIL experiences were having learned to trust that their education had prepared them to contribute to the workplace, and that engaging in WIL required them to often take risks.

We had to embrace our strengths and work around our weaknesses – appreciating that our shortcomings, for the most part, were socially constructed and not a true reflection of what skills we have. This is easier said than done because we thought only certain skills are job ready. We did not feel ready, and we did not trust ourselves. But in the end, it was our ability to problem solve, remain calm when searching for solutions, and thinking creatively and critically that were the skills we appreciated. Learning this was the most effective part of WIL. (Project 3 group)

As students we were not taught to use Excel like they do in Business. We found ourselves in workplaces where things like Excel were often used. At first, we freaked out – thinking the university had placed us in the wrong WIL experience and that we had no business skills. But we were wrong. Many of us soon learned that people in workplaces know how the Excel formulas and columns worked – but they were not great at determining what to put in them or what questions to ask of the data. Big take away – you can learn Excel on YouTube, but not how to think/question. The most effective part of WIL was it helped us realize we can contribute and that we had skills that transfer -even to business. (Project 4 group)

We all reflected on how unready we felt when we got our WIL placements. Our group exemplary portrait is about failure mainly. Sorry - but the truth is the most effective element of our WIL experience was the excellent support we received from our faculty and our supervisors when we failed. We took risks and then learned we could get it right! A quality WIL experience should challenge you and push you to try new things. We needed the ongoing faculty feedback – even if it was not always easy to hear! We don't really think we failed – WIL was effective in teaching us success. (Project 2 group)

TABLE 3: Themes summarizing key elements of high-quality work-integrated learning.

Themes	Key Elements of High-quality WIL
Personal/self-readiness Characteristics, attitudes, attributes, and mindsets of students taking on WIL	Students have: - a readiness to engage in a workplace setting or project - a willingness to engage in learning and reflective processes - an ability to determine the type of WIL experiences they participated in - a level of confidence in seeking support during their WIL experience. - a readiness to develop relationships and networks outside of a classroom setting - a willingness to take risks and make mistakes
Instructional readiness Types of teaching and learning, and programming practices that the participants perceived as effective in preparing for and participating in WIL	Programs have: - WIL intentional infused into curriculum & program - Practicums and internships are applied to meeting degree requirements - WIL includes multiple options other than co-op - Faculty skilled in teaching transformative learning, reflective practice, mentorship, and authentic assessment. - WIL experiences are designed for all disciplines and not offered as a co-curricular activity - Faculty evaluate student's WIL experiences on: - Their ability to gain experiences related to their own goals - Their work is valued by the workplace supervisor. - Their ability to self-assess and articulate their far transfer of skills.
Institutional readiness Findings related to systemic barriers to WIL access and participation.	Institutions have: - Quality relationships and networks with employer/community organizations that involve the individual faculty that directly support students with WIL. - Faculty partnering with business and community organizations to open doors for students that demonstrates how a Liberal Arts education applies to the economy, society, and the workplace. - Support for disciplinary faculty to infuse WIL into their curriculum and establish partnerships that connect their discipline to the workplace and labour market. - Faculty that feels empowered, on an individual level, to use a variety of transformative teaching and learning strategies, engage with community/business partners, and mentor students.

For WIL to be a high-quality experience, students themselves need to be ready to engage in the learning and reflective processes. Credit needs to be given to the faculty and workplace supervisors that enabled risk taking and provided a supportive environment. Repeatedly the data highlights the importance of WIL as a curricular element that has faculty direction, engagement, and ongoing support. WIL did not appear to work as well when the programming was designed around students simply putting in hours in a workplace off campus and then summarizing what they learned in a random assignment that did not include an ongoing formative feedback cycle.

Instructional Readiness

The critical importance of intentional programming and faculty skilled in career development, transformative learning, mentorship, and authentic assessment has been a finding across the various projects that has grown substantially over the years (Pardy, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Pardy & Ellingham, 2021). In 2009, the students' reflections centred around the importance of the university helping them to get work experience so they could get a job after graduation. They advocated for WIL types that fit within their degree requirements. The university listened, and a variety of changes were made to the Bachelor of Arts degree, including, in 2017, the inclusion of courses that taught portfolio skills so students could demonstrate their academic learning in a workplace context.

However, each of the studies that followed indicated that these first attempts to improve education-to-employment instruction were not as effective as hoped. Since 2019 further programmatic changes have been made and the findings from this study demonstrate significant improvements have been achieved because of a focus on instructional readiness.

The findings indicate that students are aware and appreciative that WIL was being facilitated in collaboration with their specific disciplines and offered as part of their degree as opposed to co-op being offered by the career center. They cite WIL, not co-op, as the most effective. Students reported having to work almost full-time while attending university to pay for their education and stressed that they often could not afford to participate in co-op because they could not take time away from their precarious paid work positions. They also reported not wanting to delay their graduation for something they did not see as an effective way to achieve their career goals. One group explained this common finding well:

Co-op works for accounting, computer, and business students, but we don't think the co-op office understands what to do with us Liberal Arts students – especially the more mature students. Co-op might be a way to get some work experience, but for us we did not see the value – we often already have the same type of entry level experiences that co-op offers. When our faculty talked about practicums and how our disciplinary knowledge could transfer into the workplace, we got excited. Also, the university's Arts faculty coordinator that worked with us was amazing. She helped us find placements that fit our education/career goals – which was outstanding. We got amazing feedback from our faculty and our work supervisors; we got to share our ideas, and we advanced our skills. We were surprised by the freedom and flexibility we were given. We gained confidence because we felt valued – and the best part was that we got course credit and the types of experience we need – this is all due to the expertise of our faculty. (Project 5 group)

Another finding that surfaced was the importance of faculty and curriculum that taught students how to develop a reflective practice and that empowered them to embrace and acknowledge transformative learning. The project four group explicitly captured the common sentiment of the other groups.

We had been asked to submit reflections and do many make-work e-portfolios before. These types of activities started for most of us in grade 10 and two of us had done the reflective co-op assignment. These assignments were useless. We were good at playing the game and "documenting" what we did, but even if we created great e-portfolios we did not have the skills to tell our success stories at job interviews. These assignments have no real world "land the job interview" skill building. It was not until faculty taught us why self-reflection and self-assessment was important and how to practice it, did we make any headway. WIL assignments

without instruction and support to develop a reflective practice are just more make-work projects. (Project 4 group)

The participants outlined that the quality of WIL can be evaluated by whether students are able to gain experience related to their goals and given opportunities where their work is valued. They also found that quality WIL includes helping them learn to self-assess, articulate what they learned beyond the tasks they did, and demonstrate far transfer as referring to the transfer of knowledge and/or skills across different or new domains (Weise, 2021). They attributed instructional strategies and faculty expertise with transformative learning and reflective practice as a critical, but often a missed element in WIL, such as co-op.

Finally, it is important to note that from the first study to the last study, the critical importance and appreciation for the ongoing support and mentorship the students received from faculty was evident. Disciplinary knowledge, formative feedback, and authentic (not make work) assessments were strongly recommended as a significant indicator of high-quality WIL.

Institutional Readiness

When reflecting on what WIL experience(s) contributed to the participants' education-to-employment preparation, students most often talked about factors associated with institutional readiness. Students acknowledged that they first had to be willing to take risks to fully benefit from WIL. They also noted they needed faculty expertise to help them develop far transfer and self-evaluation skills. However, the quality of WIL placements and the type of relationships the university had with community organizations was what they cited as having a significant impact on their WIL experience.

Most of us had looked at co-op job postings but could not find anything that matched our career goals. We were all suspicious when we were told about practicum opportunities – especially for those of us from Philosophy, History, or Theatre etc. But the more we explored the types of practicum job postings available the more we learned the university had built some creative partnerships with businesses and community organizations. There was a variety of different jobs to select that opened doors and possibilities – ones that we could not have imagined for ourselves. Bottom line our faculty/university seemed to be forward thinking and ready to help us. (Project 5 group)

We have many examples that demonstrate how our education-to-employment transition was supported. The Indigenous students in our group were able to participate in WIL placements or projects in their communities that included the involvement of Elders because of the Indigenization and decolonization work our university does. Many of us had WIL placements that gave us opportunities to propose solutions or be innovative because our faculty were actively involved with external partners. Some of us were able to secure full-time positions following our WIL placement – all because of the close relationships our faculty had established in the community. We realize this takes great effort – but the job market is hard these days. If WIL has no endgame (i.e., helping us get jobs) what is the use? Seriously we know it is not the university's job to get us career jobs, but we think quality WIL should at least open doors and the faculty's relationship with the community should be considered important. (Project 4 group)

This study found that institutional readiness was a key factor in creating conditions for effective WIL. With institutional support faculty were empowered to connect WIL to curriculum and the goals of both students and the community. It takes institutional vision/leadership to realize how impactful

collaborating across disciplines to create high-quality WIL experiences can be. It takes institutional readiness before faculty feel supported in using different teaching strategies, and engaging community partners.

WIL is an excellent strategy for helping to address the dichotomy between the value of a Liberal Arts education and alignment to the labour market. WIL can help address this challenge by supporting faculty to educate students beyond their individual intellect by providing learning opportunities that support their development through personal reflective work that enables them to find balance, relate to the outside world, and grow to become work/life ready.

Six Elements of High-quality Work-Integrated Learning

This final step compared the findings with the six essential elements of high-quality WIL that Drewery et al. (2026) identified. Acknowledging that this study was not explicitly designed to collect student input on the six elements, the findings suggest that additional research in this area could be advantageous because the data demonstrates alignment. For example, the six essential elements as described by Drewery et al. (2026, p. 3) “include: 1) they have a learning mindset; 2) they maintain balance; 3) they make a difference; 4) they grow, 5) they belong, and 6) they receive competent support and mentorship.”

Each exemplary portrait included examples that align to these six elements. For example, students reflected on the importance of their own personal readiness to take on and learn from a WIL experience demonstrating their awareness of having a learning mindset. Several of the groups provided evidence about how important it was to have a WIL experience that allowed them to graduate on schedule and that did not take them away from their “pay the rent” jobs. Having balance for each aspect of their life came through in their comments, especially about co-op and needing different types of WIL experiences that served their goals.

The data also indicated that effective WIL experiences provide opportunities to make a difference, grow, and feel a sense of belonging. The comment shared earlier from the project five group, “we got to share our ideas, and we advanced our skills. We were surprised by the freedom and flexibility we were given. We gained confidence because we felt valued”, is a perfect example of this.

The latter three elements were not as clearly demonstrated in the data as the first three. However, it was encouraging to see elements four, five, and six randomly referred to in the group portraits. Additional transdisciplinary research focused on these three elements would allow for learning more about how students define making a difference, what helps them realize they are growing, and how they define belonging.

The expectations for this type of learning can be different for each student. For some they may want simple recognition of a job well done, whereas other students may be looking for skills needed for what Paul and Rabbat (2021) call an impact-first profession. Gaining a deeper understanding for how the final three elements are defined and taught as well as gaining a clearer vision of the lived experiences of the students would be beneficial for future research and creating high-quality WIL programming.

LIMITATIONS

Lincoln and Guba (2000, p.167) stressed that “knowledge and truths are located in specific historical, economical, racial, and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice, and marginalization.” Like many

qualitative studies, this study acknowledges it is limited to data from knowledge claims rooted in specific contexts, timeframes, and the epistemic responsibility of the individual researchers. This study's ability to be generalized to all learners has limitations. Additionally, because this paper used aggregated data it could be considered secondary and not primary research. Finally, heuristic inquiry may not have created the easiest data collection method to explain or replicate for WIL scholars and therefore it may have limited utility for future research.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings showcase how student voice research creates a foundation on which to define high-quality WIL. It demonstrates the important role students play as one of the three partners in WIL and how understanding their lived experiences can improve how faculty facilitate their curricular responsibilities. In addition, the transdisciplinary lens of this research illustrates how Liberal Arts faculty and curriculum designers can benefit by using the literature Eady et al. (2025), analyzed and thematically organized into similar categories as those used in this study.

As mentioned earlier WIL scholarship is not commonly used by Liberal Arts disciplines engaged in developing and improving the education-to-employment education for their students. Faculty are aware that the traditional use of co-op, as Wyonch (2020) confirmed, no longer meets the needs of many students, yet they are not always aware of other forms of WIL or how best to create effective programming that will ensure students graduate future ready with real-world experiences.

This study affirms that data being collected through transdisciplinary research has potential to enhance and grow WIL by creating opportunities to collaborate with the WIL community to cross boundaries and silos commonly found in many universities. For example, there are evident similarities between this study's findings and the Drewery et al.'s (2026) six essential elements of high-quality WIL. Both Eady et al. (2025) and Drewery et al. (2026) appear to be working towards establishing common benchmarks for evaluating high-quality WIL.

Reflecting on this it was noted that although additional research is still needed, there is significant potential for the WIL community to establish a project like the renowned Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) that was led by Kuh et al. (2005a, 2005b) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). As already noted in this paper, the NSSE, something very familiar to those that work in adult education or student affairs, is widely used in Canada and the US to inform higher education about how undergraduate students are spending their time and what they gain from attending university. While the WIL community may not need a mechanism as robust as the NSSE, the concept of benchmarks and common definitions could serve as examples for creating evidence-based quality measures that capture students' perceptions and voices that would in turn support measuring high-quality WIL.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an example of how student voice research is conducted outside of WIL scholarship and demonstrates that scholars from other disciplines are also engaged in learning to better develop programming that supports students in becoming career ready. It contributes additional student voices and evidence that affirms the work of Eady et al. (2025) and Drewery et al. (2026), and it recommends opening dialogue with researchers outside of the WIL community to support defining, creating, and evaluating innovative and student responsive WIL programming.

It also highlights an opportunity for a robust intentionally designed longitudinal student voice WIL research project. This of course is not something that can be addressed in a short window of time, but that would require considerable planning and coordination. However, as mentioned in the introduction there is a growing interest in WIL that is transdisciplinary and that can offer the WIL community new opportunities to disseminate their research and help influence the infusion of WIL in higher education.

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In addition to the data related to WIL, the five research projects also included data related to student success and risk factors, academic advising, wellness, and persistence. These data sets have been used for various publications and presentations (i.e., Pardy, 2010b, 2010c, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2023; Pardy & Ellingham, 2021). Findings from the specific WIL data have not been previously published. The idea of starting to intentionally collect WIL data was presented in 2015 at the BCCampus Symposium: Scholarly Teaching & Learning in Post-secondary, which took place in Vancouver, BC.

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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, entrepreneurship, 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 [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

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

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