

ID 007: Students' Preparation for the Workplace: The Significance of Career Development Learning in Higher Education Curricula

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Abstract

Career development learning and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) are interrelated components in higher education which provide students with an opportunity to understand their career choices and professions in depth, and prepare them for the world of work. In this qualitative study, WIL reflections of nine English studies graduates in Namibia were analyzed using the Transformative Learning Theory to establish how WIL and career development learning can be used as transformative pedagogies in higher education curricula. Transformative Learning describes the learning process as a way in which new and revised interpretations of an experience can be constructed for future action. The findings have revealed that all graduates have unconsciously gone through various stages of transformative learning during their WIL period. However, after having critically analyzed their WIL experiences, these graduates also felt that they could have had a more valuable and full transformative learning experience had they engaged in career development learning prior to WIL. Although the study revealed that not all reflection leads to transformative learning, career development learning, if embedded in curricula to prepare students for WIL, can enhance transformative learning during WIL which contributes to employability in various ways.

Introduction

Career development learning branches from career(s) education which Watts (2006) describes as planned experience designed to facilitate the development of self-awareness (interests, abilities, values); opportunity awareness (knowing what work opportunities exist and what their requirements are); decision learning (decision-making skills); and transition learning (job-search and self-presentations skills). Research has highlighted these concepts as constructs that form bounds of career education (Watts, 2006; Smith et al., 2009; and Kumar, 2007). Career development is an important component in higher education as it introduces and provides students with an opportunity to understand their careers and make informed decisions in respect of their professions. According to Savickas (as cited in Benton, 2015), "careers do not unfold; they are constructed as individuals make choices that express their self-concepts and substantiate their goals in the social reality of work roles". Understanding the type of industry and role a student will take on in life after graduation enhances employability because a student is likely to engage with industry while still in university and develop skills that prospective employers value.

Employability skills in higher education can be developed and enhanced through Work Integrated Learning (WIL). WIL is an educational strategy that integrates classroom theory and practice. Students may know what is required of them from classroom theory, however, with the WIL aspect in the curriculum, they are afforded an opportunity to put into practice what they have been taught; and to actually experience their careers and future work roles in their respective industries, becoming employable in the process. WIL in most Namibian higher education institutions is still in its infancy stages. In traditional programmes such as health sciences and

education, different WIL modalities such as teaching practice and hospital internships have always been used to apply classroom theory into practice. The University of Science and Technology in Namibia has however integrated WIL as a compulsory component in all its academic programmes in efforts to enhance graduate employability. In the Bachelor of English programme, students are placed in industry for 24 weeks in their final year. The WIL component makes up 60 credits of their 360 credit-bearing degrees. Reflections of 9 graduates who make up 81% of all registered students who were the first enrolment for the Bachelor of English degree in 2009, and graduated between 2012 – 2015, are used in this study to establish what impact the WIL experience has had on their various career choices. These students have all undergone the WIL component before graduation and none of them have gone through career development learning since enrolment. The participants are currently employed in different sectors such as teaching English in schools and university, conducting research, proofreading, editing, writing, and advertising. six graduates have enrolled for higher qualifications in English, two enrolled for higher degrees in fields other than English, while one opted to change to a completely different field of study after the WIL experience and graduation. After the immersive learning experience from WIL, the process of deliberate reflection on both the experience and learning has brought about transformation for the graduates.

WIL and career development learning are viewed as opportunities for students' transformative learning in this study. Transformative learning was first developed as a uniquely adult learning theory, that over the years, this theory has often been referred to the new andragogy. This, according to Mezirow (1996), the pioneer of the theory, means that transformative learning is grounded in human communication where "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). The students' WIL reflections, knowledge, expectations, assumptions and their ideas of work roles and careers and how these may have changed after the WIL period are explored in this study. Career development learning can be used at the beginning of a student's period of study as guidance not only on career related decisions and life in general. Both aspects contribute to the success of the student. Deveci, Petroleum Institute and Dhabhi (2014) stress on the need for universities to recognize various student needs during their adaptation to university life, and create opportunities for them to face and tackle challenges. While WIL and career development may benefit students in this way, students consciously and unconsciously undergo a total transformative learning experience which may result in new professional identities and enhanced employability skills. Culture shifts and the ability to navigate between cultural context is a new world skill emerging in employability studies as teams are more diverse.

Career development learning and work integrated learning

Career development learning and WIL in higher education are means of transition and application of learning for the world-of-work (Watts, 2006 and McIlveen et al. 2011). This, according to McIlveen et al. (2011), is because both concepts use work as an approach for personal development and positive exploitation of higher learning towards a specific career. A career is "a multi-faceted, complex, personal process that extends over a lifetime, and is influenced by dynamic personal, interpersonal, societal, economic, and environmental factors" (Patton & McMahon, 2005). McIlveen et al. (2011) explain that career development learning in higher education should prepare students for careers and for the ever-changing industry. This also enhances their employability skills, personal and professional growth (McIlveen et al., 2011, p. 160).

Research carried out on career development learning, include frameworks and models such as DOTS, CareerEdge and SOAR that explain career development. These models highlight constructs of career development learning and skills required for a successful career. The DOTS model by Watts (2006) highlights

self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making and transition learning as components that are vital to career education. In the CareerEDGE model, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) points out skills that should be considered to define career individuals prefer and open the employability door as Experience (Work & Life), Degree subject knowledge, understanding & skills, Generic skills and Emotional intelligence. Similarly, the key principles of the career SOAR model by Kumar (2007) include Self-awareness, Opportunity awareness, Aspirations, and Results. The skills described in all the models confirm the relationship between career development learning and benefits students obtain from WIL. Ultimately, all the aspects covered describe career development learning and WIL as opportunities in which students build their unique identities through self-awareness and critical reflection, obtain in-depth understanding of their careers, get opportunities to develop and enhance their employability, as well as to establish themselves in their careers. As argued by Watts (2006), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007); and Smith et al. (2009), notions of graduate employability, employability skills, graduate attributes, and students' experience of employability are important for the formulation of career development learning and WIL in higher education.

Career development learning may therefore be deployed in a variety of contexts to raise students' awareness on the employability notion and how to self-manage their studies and extra-curricular activities to optimize their employability. Whilst WIL may be used to provide students with opportunities to actually apply the skills they have acquired at university, develop new ones in the process and most importantly, use critical reflection to realise the personal and professional transformative influence WIL has. This is further argued by Abery, Drummond and Bevan (2015) and Smith et al. (2009) to encompass more than enhancing and developing skills and claim that WIL could potentially be described as a "transformative pedagogy, which entails personal development and experiential learning" (p. 15).

Transformative learning

Transformative Learning Theory emerged in 1978 as an adult learning theory which Jack Mezirow described as a way in which adults change the way they interpreted their world. Mezirow, in the Transformative Learning Theory describes learning as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning from one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow 1996, p. 162). The transformative learning aspect was derived from the transformative pedagogy originally introduced by Paulo Freire who challenged didactic pedagogy as a liberating and problem-solving process, rather than a banking information process. According to Freire (1972) and Cope (2015), banking education resists dialogue, treats students as objects of assistance and inhibits creativity, while problem-posing education encourages dialogue, makes students critical thinkers, is based on creativity and stimulates reflection which leads to transformation. The notion behind transformative learning can therefore be described as explaining how people's expectations, framed within cultural assumptions, existing knowledge and presuppositions directly influence the meaning derived from their experiences. The new meaning is a result of transformative learning and can be used as a tool to define a new professional identity.

Transformative pedagogy has also been described by Ukpokodu (2009) as an activist pedagogy which merges from elements of constructivism and critical pedagogies. This pedagogy "empowers students to critically examine their beliefs, values and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective base, an appreciation for multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness and agency". In a transformative learning environment, students actively and collaboratively construct knowledge. There are three common themes in transformative learning theory that are used to explain the process of meaning structure transformation. As

explained by Mezirow (1991;1995), the ideas that make up a transformative learning experience are critical reflection, and rational discourse. Experience is the starting point of transformative learning as it provides a platform for critical reflection. Experience, according to Mezirow should be socially constructed so that it can be deconstructed and acted upon. WIL reflections are therefore used to examine transformative learning and is the focus of this study because through reflection, students are able to evaluate their learning and transformation.

Critical reflection refers to the act of questioning the integrity of assumptions and beliefs based on prior experience (Mezirow, 1995). Mezirow adds that it often occurs in response to an awareness of contradictions in thoughts, feelings, and actions that are a result of the nature and use of knowledge, the act of acting inconsistently from self-concept, and mechanisms by which society and language limit perception assumptions (Mezirow, 1995). Rational discourse is the essential medium through which transformation is promoted and developed. How does transformation learning then take place?

Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2012) explains that the transformation learning experience emerges from an individual's experience of a disorienting dilemma. This dilemma is a shift from the natural setting which brings awareness to the significant change of an individual's view of the world. An individual is also forced, after experiencing the dilemma, to understand the new world. This can be achieved through critical reflection and rational discourse. After understanding the new world, individuals see themselves and their world in an improved and more effective manner because their assumptions and outlook is modified to better fit their reality or context. The transformation learning process is said to be made up of ten steps. As explained by (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2012), the ten steps are:

- (1) experiencing a disorienting dilemma;
- (2) self-examining, with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
- (3) critically assessing assumptions;
- (4) recognising that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
- (5) exploring options for new roles, relationships, and actions;
- (6) planning a course of action;
- (7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan;
- (8) provisionally trying new roles;
- (9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
- and (10) reintegrating new perspectives and capacities into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspectives.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, 11 graduates who are 100% population of graduates who had enrolled for the Bachelor of English programme at a Namibian University in 2009 and graduated from 2012 to 2015 were purposively selected as participants. From 11 graduates, a sample of 9 responded to the questionnaire. This sample used for the study is 88% representative of all the registered students in this non-traditional programme. All students completed a compulsory WIL course before graduation and did not have any formal or informal career development course. A total of 88% of the participants had not applied for this programme of study and few who had applied to be admitted into the programme had it as their second choice. Although, this may be attributed to the programme having just been introduced, it may also mean that the students enrolled with limited knowledge on what to expect regarding career opportunities. A questionnaire comprising 12 open-ended questions was distributed to all participants via e-mail. The questionnaire aimed to solicit student reflections and to find out how WIL and career development learning can be used as transformative pedagogies in higher education curricula.

The Transformative Learning Theory was used to qualitatively analyse the graduates' WIL reflections. Clark and

Cresswell (2015) explain qualitative data analysis as a process that inductively builds from data to larger patterns. Thematic analysis was carried out from the questionnaires responses by coding responses into segments. Pillars of the transformative learning theory were used to classify similar information into segments. The segments were then aggregated into larger ideas which were used to build themes and discussion on how career development learning and WIL may be used as tools for students' transformative learning.

Early indicative results and discussion

Transformation learning demands self-examination, alienation from past social roles and expectation as well as exploration of options for new ways of living and making provisional efforts to try out new roles (De Natale et al., 2015). When students are provided with new roles and especially in a new environment such as a workplace where opportunities to learn are available and nurtured, they are placed in an environment with a strong mentorship system that guides and assists them to grow and there is a willingness to learn from students; then their level of competence increases and consequently, their self-confidence. Pop (2009) confirms the importance and need for mentorship in workplaces where students are placed for WIL because of the influence it has on the students, in terms of professional and career guidance, soft skills development, constructive and useful feedback, and emotional support. According to Mezirow (1975), the transformation process includes planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, and finally a reintegration into society on one's own terms with a new, inner-directed stance. The pre, WIL placement and post WIL stages can be viewed as important to the contribution of transformative learning. The context, planning and well execution of all the three stages of WIL are essential for transformation learning to take place.

Transformation from WIL

WIL can be credited to provide opportunities for students to apply their classroom theory in workplace environments, particularly those who may not have ready access to industry or professional networks. Professional networks are usually cultivated or made while students are still at university. Career development learning courses and career fairs are some of the platforms that could enable students to engage with prospective employees and industry in their respective fields. These can assist students to get a glimpse of their career direction as well as organisations that they may wish to work with. However, as an initial stage, these networks may provide students with organisations that students may get WIL placements at. Getting the right WIL placement is essential because it could be the key to exploring the preferred career option for a student, finding strengths and weakness from the duties and roles taken up during WIL as well as exploring options for new roles. Students may also create relationships that will assist them grow, get assistance in planning their course of action after WIL which includes acquiring knowledge and skills for implementation, building competence and self-confidence in new roles. Students may reintegrate new perspectives and capacities into their lives on the basis of the conditions dictated by the newly found experience. These are all stages of transformative learning. The right WIL placement is not only right in terms of a student's future career direction but in terms of an uplifting mentorship system and an environment that enable and promotes growth.

From the reflections, one graduate explained that although WIL opened her eyes as to what it felt like to be in a workplace and what was expected of her, it was a challenge finding a WIL placement that she felt matched her career direction. Her application to do her WIL in an advertising company was rejected and she had to settle for teaching. She states:

I feel, I had presented myself well in my CV and explained my abilities in my application letter but maybe for WIL opportunities as opposed to actual employment, the university and my faculty in particular needed to assist us by providing platforms to network with our prospective employers, especially for

fields of study like English which do not have an obvious career choice. One would think teaching is an obvious one but one school principal who had also rejected my application told me that English alone was not enough for me to get a WIL placement as an English teacher.

Understanding a career for companies who take on WIL students is crucial as it is associated with the ability to effectively direct prospective or upcoming professionals in the same career. This is an important an important factor in WIL mentorship as it contributes to providing a student with a transformative learning experience. Transformative learning in this context does not only suggest enhancement of employability skills but the students' professional and professional growth.

Two graduates who expressed that they "found themselves" in the WIL period, in terms of what they like and dislike as well as how they can operate in the workplace emphasized the role their mentors played in their growth. They also explained how this has enabled them to easily adapt into their current workplaces, one of them being in a leadership position and another pursuing a doctoral qualification. The transformative learning process recognizes that changing one's perspective is not a rational process. Being forced to consider, evaluate and revise underlying assumptions can be an emotionally charged experience (Donnelly, 2016). This can be alluded to from one of the participants' reflection who had transformation experience from WIL. According to her, she had no specific career interest so she had to trust in the options provided by faculty. She however found her career interest during WIL. For her, the solid mentorship in her workplace enabled her to critically reflect on her learning experience. Although she felt that during her WIL placement, her mentor expected too much from her and felt emotionally and physically drained, it was all worth it in the end because she was able to critically reflect on the experience and realize that she has really transformed personally and professionally from it, has found a career interest from the process and enhanced her employability skills. She states:

"I have really grown personally and professionally from WIL and appreciate my mentor for guidance and for giving me opportunities that have helped me to learn and grow".

For students to go through transformative learning, there should be a platform where students critically engage with new ideas which leads to them questioning their existing worldview and ideas and proactively acknowledging their new beliefs. The mentorship and guidance that promotes growth and enhances critical thinking should therefore be considered as one of the factors contributing to learning from WIL. Students should be able to think and reflect critically about their career choices and roles they would take up in future after WIL, provided that the WIL environment gave them a platform to do so. This reflection may bring about different types of transformation, to either realise that the students are indeed into fields they like or not. Either way, the transformation learning process entails a shift of culture or experiencing a dilemma which leads to critical assessment and reflection of the experience and then new way of thinking as a result.

One graduate who changed her career and field of study after graduation felt that WIL had been a revelation that she was not in the career or profession she would have liked to be in. Two other graduates enrolled for completely different qualifications and felt they had not utilized the three years they spent studying English. However, one graduate explained that now that she was studying towards something that she could identify with, she could have learnt more from the WIL opportunity had she been open to learning. Reflecting on the experience, she recognized skills and networks she felt she needed in her current field of study, but missed the opportunity when she had the chance. These reflection suggests that after experiencing a disorienting dilemma, which in this context is a cultural shift from the classroom to the workplace, the students did self-examination

and feelings of regret and lack of interest and passion resulted from the experience, hence the decisions to change careers. Students have experienced this dilemma, they have critically reflected on their experience and came to a realization that they needed to change.

According to Deveci, Petroleum Institute, and Dhabhi (2014), when university students face various disorienting dilemmas, one of which is becoming accustomed to a new environment where they have to assume new roles and meet expectations of their new professors, their parents and peers, and in this context; (workplace) new learning environment, students may feel inclined to think critically and to question their existing beliefs and assumptions. However, it was also highlighted in the reflections that the first step to developing critical thinking skills is having passion for the work that you do, and passion comes with full understanding of a career and the purpose behind it.

Transformative learning challenges students to use critical thinking in order to question what they know and what they have gone through in order to come up with a new way of thinking or belief system. Critical thinking is therefore an important component of transformative learning. One of the skills that the English graduates were trained on, especially in their literature courses, which universities and industry require, is critical thinking. They also pointed out how critical thinking was one of the most important skills, especially in professions related to English studies because graduates are often required to be innovative, creative and to solve problems, whether during research, writing, editing, marketing or advertising. Their WIL experiences have sharpened this skill, particularly from critical reflection but reflection has also, to a large extent, highlighted their need for career development learning.

The role of career development learning in transformative learning

Students' ability to make successful transitions from school to the world of work underpins how students can successfully secure and then retain access to a WIL placement and essentially learn from the experience. McIlveen et al. (2011) explains that this can be developed in career development learning which can be used to facilitate students' preparation for WIL, reflect upon their learning during and after the WIL period, so as to exploit the experience as a personally meaningful one, especially when viewed from a transformative learning viewpoint.

One graduate felt that although work-related learning experiences can, and should, especially for students who had not had an opportunity to go through career development, provide genuine career development learning, an opportunity to network and provide insightful information on career options, needs to come before WIL in order to find suitable placement opportunities. McIlveen et al. (2011) confirms that in the long term, career development learning experiences may indeed facilitate a good decision to enter training for a particular profession, or alternatively facilitate a decision to adjust career plans and study towards a qualification that interests an individual. From the responses, although these students have not gone through a formal career development course, career development stood out as something that they feel would have helped them transform and enhance their WIL experience. One graduate states:

“Looking for a WIL placement was really a challenge because our faculty provided us with industry options that we could apply to. I however was hesitant to apply to some of them because I was not well informed about what my role would be as an intern. I only came to realize during our final WIL report presentations that I had the skills that I would have applied in some companies. This is where career development as a course earlier in the programme really comes in hand.”

Career development is even crucial in fields of studies that do not have obvious career choices. WIL can be used as a platform to raise awareness of these non-traditional programmes and the value and role these students can take up in industry. WIL as a transformative pedagogy, according to Abery, Drummond and Bevan (2015), is mostly relevant to the regulated professions where a perceived identity fits the profession. However professional identity also develops with experience, which can be gained through WIL, which in turn provides quality experience opportunities, but cannot be controlled (Trede, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, in professions that are not regulated by competencies or explicit industry skill requirements, and placement opportunities are varied, the experience may or may not transform into learning that enhances future professional practice and identity (Trede, 2012). However, this can also apply to any field of study, given that the student better understands the career selected as a result of WIL placement. Students who have highlighted the need for career development learning before WIL argued that it would have enabled them to choose careers that they would like to pursue. Their WIL experience would have been a transformative learning opportunity. One respondent, in particular, who is currently teaching English as a Second language at a university, and completed her WIL at a school explains that:

“One of the fields I really wanted and could have ventured in as a graduate in English Studies is Speech Therapy. My interest in speech therapy was confirmed when we had a course in psycholinguistics. I felt like I had finally found what I really like and could see myself doing in future because English was initially not my first option to study but, I didn’t know where to start to actually get into it. I just needed to find a WIL placement in an environment where I could apply my knowledge in psycholinguistics in real-life”.

According to Cranton (2011), the transformative learning theory proposes that change will occur where opportunity is provided to challenge existing perceptions or assumptions as a result of experiencing or observing new phenomenon.

Conclusion

The research agenda on transformative pedagogies is wide-ranging, referring not only to strategies or styles of instruction but also to the facilitation and management of sustainable transformations, whether individual, social, structural or institutional (Donnelly, 2016). It can therefore be concluded from the study that WIL and career development, if well managed, can result in a transformative experience. It is recommended that greater overlays are created between WIL and career development education. Faculties should also look into introducing the career development theory in their curriculum earlier in the programme such as in the 1st or 2nd year. To ensure that the students benefit from career development learning, faculties can make use of interventions such as excursions, role playing as well as sessions with guest lectures from industry to provide students with full understanding of career choices in their fields of study. The study was used as a pilot to measure work readiness of students in Namibia. The validation of the instrument and methodologies employed can be expanded and tested in other fields of study which can contribute to the current proposed national graduate employability framework in Namibia.

Additionally, the implications can inform the selection criteria set for programme admission as a closer correlation is established between competencies required in workplaces and the natural propensity for said competencies are developed during the course delivery and pedagogical approach adopted in the teaching and learning methodology employed.

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