

Editorial: Work-Integrated Learning in Scandinavia

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) as a pedagogical philosophy is, as a result of the so-called Bologna process, gaining more and more interest in the strategies and policies of many European Universities. The idea seems to be that students' employability could increase if we could design educational models that bridges the gap between higher education and professional work. Concepts such as work-based training, internships and cooperative education is being discussed and evaluated in a wide range of educational fields ranging from teacher and nursing education to engineering and business.

In Scandinavia, the VILÄR network's annual conference on work-integrated learning is an example of an arena where different educational fields meet to present and discuss ideas on research and development on WIL from a multitude of perspectives. In December 2010, the conference was hosted by Kristianstad University which is one of the leading universities in promoting work-integrated learning in Sweden. The conference initially attracted 36 contributions from Sweden, Norway and Finland, and after a double blind peer review process, five papers were selected for this special issue.

The common denominator for the papers in this special issue is that they all address the problematic relationship between theory and practice. The tensions and the potentially added quality that could come from critically contrasting work in theory with work in practice is probably an eternal theme for research on work-integrated learning, and the papers all contribute to our understanding of how these challenges could be conceptually and methodologically addressed.

In the article by Karlsson, the tension between theory and practice is explored through a study of different ways that students in work placements understand and frame academic qualities. The results reveal five archetypical mental models amongst the students, and the author argues in favour of supporting the students to better integrate academic thinking in their reflections on work experience.

The fact that work-integrated learning models involve experts from both academia and the workplace is explored through a survey in Sweden and Finland, where Hill Melender and Jonsén has explored how preceptors perceive their role as brokers between nursing practice and nursing education. The results show that most preceptors view themselves as role models that should guide the students in being socialized into existing best practice of nursing. Furthermore, it is concluded that closer and richer interaction between preceptors, student nurses, and academic nursing supervisors from the university could result in model that is better equipped to develop nursing practice and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Similarly, In a survey by Sandvik and Fagerström, the difficulties relating to the assessment and the understanding of students' performance during work placements are explored. Students' in general seem to think they do better than their supervisors think they do. Based on the data, this is argued to be more an issue of miss communication than mere over confidence on behalf of the students

A more methodological contribution to how to address the gap between theory and practice is provided by Gustavsson and her colleagues who have studied the outcome of a pedagogical model aimed at developing the ability to perform critical reflection and analysis among student teachers during their work placements. The model is built on the students documenting their work experiences in video and text logs, and these reifications are subsequently used for a reflective dialogue between the students and their academic supervisors. The results from the study indicate that critical and analytical skills do increase as the result of the dialogues.

Finally, Dimenäs and Jaffari demonstrate how work-integrated learning through internships for immigrant academics plays a central role in the socialization into a new social and cultural work life. Their empirical data highlights how work-placements become instrumental in a collective process of translating educational and professional knowledge between different national contexts.

To summarize, we realize that this special issue by no way is a silver bullet that once and for all will resolve the inherent tension between theory and practice in models for work-integrated learning. But hopefully, you will find the articles thought provoking and challenging where theory and practice is less of a dichotomy and more of a duality.