

From the first year to the final year experience: Embedding reflection for work integrated learning in a holistic curriculum framework. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Transition pedagogies relate not only to transition into higher education, but also transition out – and into the workplace. This paper explores the way in which a suite of new capstone work integrated learning subjects at James Cook University's Faculty of Law Business and Creative Arts forms part of a deliberately designed program inculcating reflective skills at introductory and developmental levels, in preparation for this final transition. It highlights the importance of integrating first year experience, including content and skill development, with the whole degree.

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Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is emerging as one of the key drivers in 21st century tertiary education. With a greater focus on transformative, student-centred educational experiences responsive to employer demands for “work-ready” graduates, many universities are engaging in more deliberate and diverse WIL activities. As WIL participation increases throughout university courses, there is a need not only for adequate resourcing but also for ensuring that WIL is designed as an “integral and integrated part of the curriculum, rather than as a ‘bolt on’ experience” (Patrick, et al., 2008, p. vi).

In 2010, as part of a university curriculum refresh grant, a team of academics in the Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts (FLBCA) at James Cook University in Australia undertook a project to identify and increase WIL opportunities for students. The redesigned WIL program to be introduced in 2013 embeds foundational then developmental experiences in the early years of the degree, culminating in a compulsory capstone experience in the final semester.

As the capstone experience assumes a high level of independent and experiential learning, students are expected to commence with the requisite skills to engage with tasks that involve significant interaction with community and industry. A focus of the project has therefore required consolidation of existing activities into a comprehensive WIL program incorporating both horizontal and vertical alignment from first year to final year and that carefully situates best practice capstone design principles (Armstrong & McNamara, 2011).

Therefore this Practice Report, using the School of Law with its recognised best practice First Year Experience program as an exemplar, explains how reflective skills (an integral component of both WIL and capstone experiences) are carefully and deliberately introduced to students at the foundational and developmental levels to prepare them for the final capstone experience.

WIL as a capstone experience

Capstone subjects or courses allow students to consolidate and apply previous learning, consolidate and demonstrate “soft” skills and provide a vehicle for professional socialisation and identity formation (Van Aker & Bailey, 2011). Broad capstone objectives of providing transition and closure (McNamara et al., 2010) are analogous to WIL objectives of developing graduate attributes, employability skills and professional and cultural discipline awareness (Patrick et al., 2008). While some argue that “WIL alone will rarely assure all of the desirable elements of a capstone experience” (McNamara et al., 2012, p. 9), professional internships and authentic industry-projects are often cited as examples of capstone experiences (Van Aker & Bailey, 2011). Furthermore, the requirement that capstones provide closure to a degree with diverse disciplines or distinct subject areas, while at the same time promoting transition, requires flexibility in conceptualisation and design, such that there is no “one size fits all” approach (Van Aker & Bailey, 2011).

There are however a number of curriculum design principles that have been developed for capstone experiences (McNamara et al., 2011; Van Aker & Bailey, 2011). Where a degree program has incorporated an intentional first year experience to

effectively transition students “in” to university studies, closing the loop through an intentional final year experience enables students to transition “out” of university and into the professional workforce (McNamara et al., 2011). It has been suggested that transition pedagogy is therefore applicable to both the first and final year curricula (McNamara et al., 2011).

The researchers’ Faculty has introduced three common WIL capstone subjects of which students must choose (and be accepted into) one in their final year of study. The three subject options are professional internship, multi-disciplinary industry/community project or independent project. While variations of these subjects have previously been offered in a number of the degrees, the new program has redesigned the learning outcomes, teaching settings and assessment items in line with best practice capstone principles, course learning outcomes, threshold learning outcomes (where applicable), graduate attributes and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) guidelines. Transition is provided through an intentional focus on professional identity development, graduate attributes and authentic projects/tasks undertaken with industry and community partners. Closure is provided through the continued development of WIL learning outcomes at an advanced level—learning outcomes that are introduced to students during their

first year of study and developed further during their intermediate year/s.

The learning outcomes that have been identified for the capstone subjects can be broadly grouped under the following headings: problem solving in a real world context; team work skills; an understanding of other disciplines; professional responsibilities/identities; self-management and interpersonal skills; professional communication and reflective practice. Articulating the standard of the learning outcomes for the capstone subjects and working backwards has required a comprehensive overview of how the WIL learning outcomes can be achieved from the first to the final year. This reflects the importance of “scaffold[ing] the student experience of the ... degree purposefully from the first year to a capstone experience and then out to LPC [Legal Practice Course] and/or the world of work” (Kift, 2008, p. 19). This has become particularly important since the release of the Discipline Standards, or threshold learning outcomes in Law (TLOs) (Kift, Israel & Field, 2010) which are likely to form the foundation of the standards assessed by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). As such, scaffolding throughout each degree takes on a new imperative.

As an example, the following table provides a brief overview of how one of the learning outcomes, reflective practice, has been scaffolded and articulated in the WIL program.

Learning Outcome	Foundational Level (first year)	Developmental Level	Advanced Level (capstone)
Reflective Practice	Describe reflective practice and apply through simple reflective exercises.	Explain how reflective practice can improve learning outcomes as well as demonstrate it.	Identify, critically evaluate and action learning opportunities and self-improvements.

Effective reflection promotes the acquisition of lifelong learning skills and can be used to assist students to develop a sense of professional identity, promoting transition from university to the workplace (Fairchild & Taylor as cited in McNamara et al., 2012). Using reflection to better understand values, assumptions and ethical frameworks relevant in the workplace also promotes effective decision-making and professional practice (Evans et al., 2012). Further, reflection incorporates “a transformative approach to learning that sees the pedagogical process as one of knowledge transformation rather than knowledge transmission” (Ryan & Ryan, 2012, p.3). Thus it is argued that students who understand the nature of reflection and are able to effectively engage in reflective practices will navigate the complexities of experiential learning and the world of professional work more successfully, as against those versed only in conceptual or theoretical material.

FYE program in Law at James Cook University

The first year program in Law takes a holistic approach to student learning, adopting a specific philosophy of transition pedagogies (Galloway, Shircore, Corbett-Jarvis, & Bradshaw, 2012; Westcott & Shircore, 2006). While the program has evolved since its inception, it has always had the aim of providing an authentic and student-centered learning environment. While the first year is designed in an integrated way from a number of educational perspectives, including sustainability, key foundation concepts in law and self-management, it also includes a scaffolded approach to skills development in an authentic context. This learning environment provides the perfect platform to introduce students to WIL at a

foundational level, including reflection.

Reflection at a foundational level

The most recent iteration of reflective assessment at first year, introduced in 2012, involves a foundational “reflection exercise” identified as a mechanism to enable students to gain an appreciation of expectations in relation to their written assignments while also facilitating the fundamentals of self-evaluation and identification of action necessary to improve performance. This form of rudimentary academic reflection “involves a conscious and stated purpose” (Moon as cited in Ryan & Ryan, 2012, p. 3) and can be seen as a form of reporting and responding (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester as cited in Ryan & Ryan, 2012).¹

In accordance with transition pedagogy, the reflection exercise occurs at an early point in first semester so as to provide students with timely feedback (Field & Kift, 2010; Kift, 2008). Although the predominant objective was to encourage students to become independent reflective learners (Roebuck, Westcott, & Thiriet, 2007), the first stage in the reflection exercise involves engaging in “peer review.”

Students are required to prepare an authentic tutorial task and submit approximately 600 words prior to the relevant tutorial. Students’ answers are peer reviewed, through an anonymous process, during the tutorial. Peers are provided with a rubric against which the work should be marked and also engage in a discussion of the role and application of the rubric with their tutor. They are also

¹ All references to Bain et al. are as cited in Ryan & Ryan (2012).

provided with an answer guide that is written in the form of a “sample answer” in order to see what good performance of the task looks like. In turn, this motivates learning by “relieving student anxiety and confusion and by letting students into the ‘secrets’ of assessment success” (Huggins, Kift & Field, 2011). As well as responding to the rubric, peer reviewers are asked to provide at least one positive comment and one piece of constructive feedback, emphasising to them that reflection includes identifying areas of success and those for improvement. The completed rubrics/reviews are returned at the end of the class so as to provide immediate feedback to students about their written work.

After acting as peer reviewers, students embark upon the second and third stages of the exercise, known as a “reflective piece.” The second stage requires students to consider the comments of the peer reviewer and then engage in a review of their own tutorial answer. The third stage requires students to determine how they will approach similar tasks in the future. To encourage students to experience self-evaluation positively, students are required to identify one thing that they felt they did well as well as at least one thing to improve in future. The fourth stage is implementation. As the reflective exercise is conducted within the context of a series of tutorials that incrementally build towards a piece of summative assessment, students can utilise what they learnt and experienced in the reflection exercise to assist them with their future assessment. In this sense then, it can be seen that the predominant objective of the exercise is to enable students to learn the skill of reflective practice rather than it being used as a means of generating or enhancing discipline-related knowledge.

In addition, the rubric focuses significantly on writing. Structure, clear communication of knowledge and arguments, grammar, spelling and referencing are all emphasised under the appropriate criteria in the rubric. This exercise therefore provides students with background information and basic skills to assist them in assessing their own work and identifying what they need to do to improve their overall performance across all subjects (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Engagement with the exercise can be seen from the following student comments: *...this review has really surprised me and helped me to feel a little bit more confident in myself and my work; I am very pleased about my performance, and believe this was an excellent learning exercise; and Overall it was valuable feedback and I'll consider those points for my future essays.*

Reflection at a developmental level

To build on first year student learning, two second year subjects (Land Law 1 and Land Law 2) engage students actively in reflection on their own learning through a weekly learning journal. While it is slightly less structured than what students experienced in first year, the journal is part of the preparation and participation assessment in these two subjects. For the participation component, students are required to attend weekly seminars and engage in large and small group discussion. Preparation is evidenced through this discussion, but importantly also through the learning journal. From the second week, students are required to submit a weekly online journal entry of a paragraph to explain how they have gone about their learning this week. While attached to the entry are two documents that evidence learning, the critical factor is the link between these “artefacts” of learning and

the student's reflection on how they have gone about the process.

Students are provided with ample instructions on how to undertake the task, including an example of an entry. While the sample entry is more "constructed" than most student entries, it aims to model how a student would go about thinking about their study and relating these various activities to their discipline (or content) understanding. In contrast to the step-by-step guided model in first year however, students construct their weekly reflection independently. Within this exercise students have submitted poems, flow charts, mind maps, mp3 recordings talking through how they solve a problem, as well as photos of workings on a white board.

Many students are reluctant to engage in the activity initially, seeing it as an imposition. However, almost all students change their attitude after only a few entries, and many express positive views on the task. For example, one student stated that *[t]his subject is really teaching me how to use a bunch of information to get out what I need to learn*. Students appreciate the lecturer's response to each journal entry within 24 hours and a rapport quickly builds between student and lecturer.

In terms of the reflective scale developed by Bain et al. (2002), this task is designed to fall at the level of "relating." Students make a connection between what they have learned and the skills and processes they engaged in, or applied, to learn that. The task requires them also to select the "artefact" that evidences their learning, which also requires a level of reflection on what will best represent this process or the application of these skills.

Additionally, through weekly feedback, the task embeds formative assessment (Yorke, 2003). Through this feedback, the task becomes collaborative, through the guidance and support of the lecturer, a "more skilled person," reflective of Vygotsky's (1979) "zone of proximal development" (as cited in Yorke, 2003). Evidence that the collaboration is effective is observed through students' increasingly open reflections as the semester advances. In only a short time, the journal entries become far less formal than the example offered above.

Importantly, student learning becomes not just about the content, but about self and how the student is engaging with the subject materials and constructing meaning (Biggs, 2003). For example, as one student commented: *I was inspired by our last exercise in Land Law 1 to make separate mind-maps for each module and have continued this for Land Law 2. I have been surprised at how helpful this has been.*

While the task is designed to develop skills at the scale of "relating," there are some students who reflect at the "reasoning" or even occasionally the "reconstructing" level (Bain et al., 2002). These students tend to have undertaken additional research on a topic of interest, and make relationships between the structure of the subject content and their additional learning. Often this results in a different perspective—for example, through engaging with the concept of sustainability in land law by thinking about Indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing a relationship with land.

Interestingly however, depending on the subject content with which the student is engaged, the level of reflection (relating, reasoning, reconstructing) may differ, even to return to the foundation level of

reporting and responding (Bain et al., 2002). As with cognitive understanding and acquisition of skills in other domains, learning need not occur in a progressive linear sequence. The structure of this task allows students to advance at their own pace and achieve a grade reflective of their overall performance.

Reflection at an advanced/capstone level

Capstone courses generally involve limited introduction of new conceptual or theoretical discipline specific material (Van Aker & Bailey, 2011). Instead they provide the opportunity for students to question and apply their learning in a manner which equips them “with the ability to deal successfully with the uncertainty, complexity and change that will attend a lifetime of modern professional practice and will demand continuous engagement with new learning” (McNamara et al., 2012, p. 3).

While individual journals and discussion board entries form the basis of reflection in the WIL capstone subjects, at this advanced level, students are expected to demonstrate a critical level of deep and active learning (Ryan & Ryan, 2012). This builds upon foundational and developmental levels where reflection is introduced as a personal learning tool, to a more outward looking exercise at the advanced level, where students see themselves in their developing role as a professional engaging with professional others. As reflection takes place in the real world, consideration of the underpinning assumptions, values and ethics of the chosen profession provide rich ground for reflexive practice; described by Prpic as one “which allows us to see ourselves in the context of our interactions with other

individuals, embedded within the multiple contexts in which we live” (Prpic as cited in Roebuck et al., 2007). Semi-structured reflection takes place in the internship subject through a series of discussion board entries requiring students to comment on matters such as their developing awareness of ethics in practice and how their professional identity is being influenced and shaped, while unstructured reflection occurs through journal entries.

Engagement with literature on reflective learning and professional identity enriches the intensity of reflection and enables students to develop a deeper sense of their personal and professional cultural identity. For law students, ethics in practice takes on a new meaning, as one student noted after reflecting on a client interaction: *...it made me aware how little I understood about the ethical framework we work within ... ethics will require continual learning.* After reflecting upon the varying approaches to client interactions by different practitioners and how this was influencing identity development, one student commented upon the imperative to belong *or appear to belong [to the] profession [noting that] I was acutely aware on my first day that I was not considered part of the profession.* More critical and personal reflection has led students to question cultural awareness within the profession and the teaching of law more generally. This in turn has provided opportunity for academic reflection on the extent to which such issues are treated within the curriculum. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive on personal development, as demonstrated by the following comment: *I am absolutely loving this subject and learning so much about myself and what lies ahead in my future as a lawyer.*

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For law students, the multi-disciplinary project subject to be introduced will provide a new and challenging environment. Students will be required to critique learning from other disciplines and apply their own knowledge in creative and different contexts. Ideas will be trialled that involve reasoning and reconstructing, a more complex level of reflection (Bain et al., 2002). "Process" rather than "outcome" will be the main focus of assessment, a concept relatively foreign to law with its traditional emphasis on individual assignments and examinations. Reflective skills introduced at the foundational level and built upon at the developmental level will therefore be critical to success in this subject.

Conclusion

WIL and capstone experiences can be used to assist in the transition of students from their university studies to the workplace; a transition "out" that can be as demanding as the transition "in" to university in the first year. Therefore designing capstone WIL experiences requires an understanding of transition pedagogies and a commitment to a holistic curriculum framework that carefully positions skill acquisition and WIL experiences. The above discussion provides an example of how reflective practice positions students for the challenges of a capstone WIL experience and a life of professional learning.

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