The Symbiotic Relationship Between the Classroom Experience, Work-Integrated / Experiential Opportunities and Mentorship

Dr. Cory Ross, *DSc*[a], **Dr. Rajeev Chib,** *DBA*[b] **and Isabelle Callahan-Nasser,** *BA (Hons)*[c]

[a]Bioresearch Management Systems Inc., [b]CIBC, [c]George Brown College

***Essays** advance a new idea, summarize a development, or initiate or engage in discussion. They may be narrower in scope than the above categories, but the subject matter should be of general scholarly interest.

Abstract

The world of education, training and employment has changed drastically over the last decade. The need for post-secondary institutions to reach even deeper to their respective partners is imperative. Long gone are the days when students enrol in programming and are matched with a work-related opportunity. The need for these opportunities has grown, and the mosaic of sophistication for the placement is much more complex. A missing part of the matching process of the student and their work-integrated/experiential learning opportunity is the bringing together of a mentorship program embedded in this learning equation. A learning opportunity can last for only a term, while a mentorship relationship can last for life.

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving job market, the necessary qualifications required to secure a post-graduate job have become extensive. Several years ago, candidates with the possession of a college or university degree found themselves in a secure position to obtain a job, whereas today, a degree serves as a baseline requirement in addition to additional qualifications and skills. A Statistics Canada report highlights significant skill gaps in technical, practical and job-specific skills, particularly in data analysis and problem-solving across Canadian industries, including financial services (Fissuh et al., 2022). Cybersecurity and AI skills are also emphasized as growing needs.

Employers have begun looking for candidates with specific expertise in their respective fields, as well as evidence of soft skills, digital literacy, connectivity and professional networks, and hands-on experience. By equipping themselves with an extensive skill set, students can enhance their opportunities and improve their likelihood of success in the workforce. Work-integrated learning (WIL) and experiential learning have emerged as powerful educational tools to increase students' expertise and competency. Work-integrated education combines academic knowledge and real-world application and provides students with

work experience throughout the academic journey (CEWIL, 2021). Work-integrated learning is a form of the broader notion of experiential learning, where experiential learning is defined as an instructional tool that works to engage learners with various direct experiences (NBCC, 2022). The value of work-integrated and experiential learning rests in its ability to empower students with skills responsive to the growing demands of the workforce, enriching the traditional education experience. Through partnerships with Canadian universities, companies such as IBM Canada, Shopify and Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce have implemented co-op programs that integrate students into roles such as cybersecurity analysts and AI developers. These programs not only provide students with real-world experience but also allow them to address talent gaps by grooming potential employees early. Many students transition seamlessly into full-time positions, bringing both technical skills and organizational familiarity.

Experiential learning techniques can take form in three different ways: foundational awareness, active exploration, and work-integrated learning (NBCC, 2022). Foundational awareness incorporates experiential learning techniques into classroom and program delivery, connecting educational experiences with the curriculum (NBCC, 2022). Labs and technologically equipped learning environments serve as facilitators for this form of learning, and the use of classroom activities or incorporation of guest speakers in a classroom serves as an example of how to employ foundational experiential learning (NBCC, 2022). Active exploration takes a similar approach to foundational awareness techniques, where experiential learning takes place in the classroom. However, active exploration is less general with industry-specific experiences and student engagement in profound reflection and exploration of instructed material (NBCC, 2022). Active exploration is integrated into the classroom through problem-based inquiry, interactive simulations and labs, and opportunities for site visits and job shadowing.

Work-integrated learning is the final classification of experiential learning, which necessitates the engagement of a partner in the industry or community who acts as a supervisor to the student committed to the learning program. Work-integrated learning can be observed in community and industry research or projects, apprenticeships, co-operative education programs, entrepreneurship, field placements, internships, mandatory professional practicum or clinical

placements, service learning, and general work experience (CEWIL, 2021). Experiential learning techniques, including work-integrated learning, embody the fundamental tenets and guiding principles outlined by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU). These tenets state that students must engage in authentic or simulated workplace settings where they take part in problem-solving experiences that are appropriately designed and goal-oriented, strengthening their skill set and increasing employability (George Brown College, 2023). In addition, student assessments are to be completed by the employer, educational institution, and the student themselves (George Brown College, 2023). The completed work is to be officially recognized and accredited by the academic institution with which the student associates and adhere to specified criteria (George Brown College, 2023).

Programs which offer work-integrated learning and other modes of experiential learning have transformed the way in which students learn by diversifying instructional methods, restructuring classroom learning, and providing students with immense outreach and opportunities outside of the classroom. With work-integrated learning programs, students have the opportunity to enhance their academic knowledge in a work-like setting. Students are paired with industry professionals who encourage and expand their understanding of the contributing role they play in their respective fields and the career pathways available to them (Practera, 2021). Work-integrated learning not only develops a student's skill set through practical experiences for employability but also provides a groundwork with which students can adapt and prepare for their future. Proficiency in problem-solving, self-management and teamwork skills is only the beginning of what work-integrated learning can offer a student (Practera, 2021).

Participating in programs that take learning outside of the classroom can help foster professional identity and connect students with industry contacts with which they can access further learning and career opportunities. Providing students with the opportunity to transfer their classroom learning into practice provides them with valuable work experience and workplace skills. Not to mention, work-integrated learning helps students develop unique perspectives on their industry with guidance from industry partners. Those ideas can be nourished and promoted, providing students with a competitive edge in the job market.

Experiential learning and work-integrated learning not only benefit the students who engage in these approaches but also provide value to educators, industry partners, employers, and the institutions with which these individuals identify. For an educator, the value of work-integrated learning lies in its ability to increase the impact that the provided education has on a student. The incorporation of work-integrated learning into program design serves as a distinguishing feature between institutions and attracts students for enrolment due to the diversity and excess in the opportunities offered to them (Practera, 2021). Furthermore, as a result of the increased chances of employment and success due to the accessibility provided by work-integrated programs, institutions become increasingly desirable with reflected higher chances of post-graduate employment (Practera, 2021). Encouragement of collaborative partnerships with industry professionals helps to ensure that academic institutions and their educators are current in their educational approaches and connected to the present workforce in order to provide students with the best education possible (Practera, 2021). Work-integrated learning not only helps institutions seem attractive to younger generations but allows these institutions to learn alongside their students and reinforce their knowledgeable reputation. For industry partners, participating in work-integrated learning programs provides a unique opportunity for professionals to connect with the broader community and foster creativity within the organization itself (Practera, 2021). Moreover, these programs provide access to the future generation with which industry professionals can hear fresh perspectives, develop and structure innovative ideas, and nurture and promote talent in promising students who have the potential to become future employees (George Brown College, 2023).

Work-integrated learning programs and other forms of experiential learning are becoming increasingly important in education today. To enhance employability and ensure that the demands of the workforce are met, it is important to understand the value of these programs and their ability to enhance success for students, educators, employers, industry professionals and the institutions they populate. In the future, individuals in administrative areas are encouraged to reinforce experiential learning processes and promote work-integrated learning across all sectors in order to ensure accessibility for students across disciplines and institutions.

No matter what choice of experiential learning is being delivered, the basic three core competencies play a huge role in the success of the experience. According to Bowering et al. (2020), the performance characteristics of the experience must contain the basic three domains as illustrated in Figure 1.
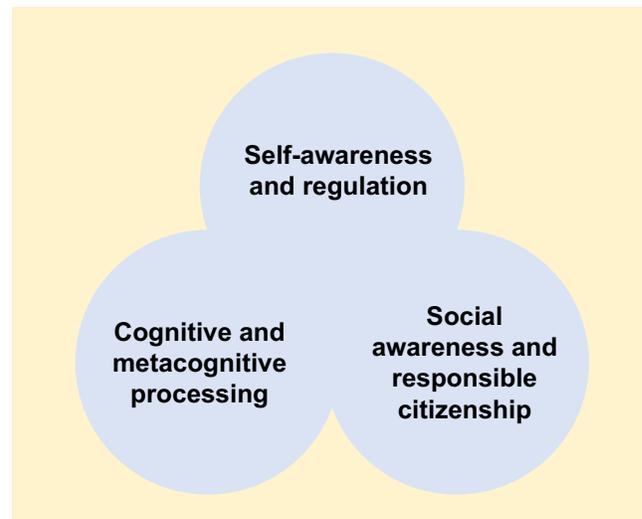

Figure 1. Conceptual model of core competency development through experiential learning.

Mentoring Connection

Another relevant and important organizational process and practice that facilitates knowledge transfer and learning includes mentoring. Mentors serve as vital conduits for various types of knowledge, encompassing both explicit organizational knowledge and implicit insights regarding the organization's expectations and informal dynamics (Wilson & Elman, 1990). Typically, mentors possess expert knowledge in specific domains and are tasked with imparting this expertise to their protégés (Jones et al., 2016).

Organizations that offer mentorship programs enable students to engage with the organizational design and decision-making frameworks. Such access is instrumental for students as they navigate the complexities of the workplace.

Embedding mentorship in WIL creates a dynamic learning environment that not only supports skill development but also fosters a deeper industry connection. Mentorship addresses specific gaps, such as leadership, communication, and technical proficiency, ensuring that students are well-rounded and prepared for the workforce. Moreover, alumni networks offer a unique form of peer mentorship, where

former participants provide guidance to current students, strengthening the learning community. This holistic approach enriches the WIL experience by providing diverse perspectives and ongoing support, ensuring students graduate with the skills and insights needed to thrive in their careers.

Additionally, some organizations implement reverse mentorship, allowing students to tackle problem statements through hypothetical scenarios where they temporarily assume decision-making authority. This approach empowers students to think critically and creatively, generating ideas and solutions while simulating real-world decision-making responsibilities.

The concept of reverse mentorship fosters an inclusive decision-making environment, encouraging students to contribute their perspectives. This practice not only enriches the decision-making process but also enhances networking opportunities across the organization. As students engage with various stakeholders, they gain a broader understanding of the organization and identify areas of interest for potential career growth. Reverse mentorship offers significant benefits for both the mentor and mentee. For the mentee, it provides autonomy, encouraging critical thinking and decision-making while offering fresh perspectives, particularly in areas like technology or social trends. For the mentor, it fosters continuous learning, keeping them attuned to emerging ideas and enhancing leadership effectiveness. This approach breaks down hierarchical barriers, promotes inclusivity, and creates a reciprocal learning environment. By integrating reverse mentorship into WIL programs, organizations encourage a culture of mutual respect, innovation, and growth.

Three examples of utilizing reverse mentoring techniques in the industry are listed below. Each one of these examples was seen to be revolutionary in its approach and set a new standard for generational inputs into solving modern-day issues.

General Electric (GE): In the late 1990s, General Electric pioneered reverse mentorship under the leadership of then-CEO Jack Welch. This initiative paired senior executives with younger employees to provide mentorship on internet technologies and emerging digital trends. This program not only accelerated technology adoption but also fostered cross-generational learning within the organization.

Procter & Gamble (P&G): Procter & Gamble implemented a reverse mentorship program designed to enhance senior leaders' understanding of online consumer behaviour and diversity-focused workplace strategies. Notably, younger employees mentored senior leaders on how digital platforms influence purchasing decisions and contributed insights on disability inclusion, thereby enabling more inclusive business practices.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC): At PwC, reverse mentorship programs were formalized to address issues such as work-life balance and mental health priorities, areas where younger employees' insights proved invaluable. Junior employees mentored senior leaders on these topics, leading to institutional changes such as flexible work policies and enhanced mental health benefits tailored to the needs of younger generations.

Conclusion

In summary, mentoring and reverse mentorship are pivotal processes that facilitate knowledge transfer, foster critical thinking, and create inclusive environments, ultimately supporting students in their professional development and career exploration. The power of a linkage between mentorship and a student's educational practicum/ work-integrated learning opportunity should be a hallmark of a new paradigm when one speaks about applied learning.

A learning opportunity can last for only a term, while a mentorship relationship can last for life. In order to safeguard this relationship and to have a quality assurance audit in designing these superior learning experiences, it is incumbent on the organizer of these special opportunities to follow a quick checklist to ensure the integrity of the learning event.

1. Perform a thorough survey of the employers' needs every 2-3 years in order to match learning outcomes and the industry's needs.
2. Incorporate a commitment to a mentorship model early in the process.
3. Bring back students and alumni to translate the experience to future students.
4. Create a spot audit team to assess the learning experience and make recommendations for any remediations.
5. At the end of the learning opportunity, conduct a 360 type of evaluation focusing on the strengths,

weaknesses and opportunities in order to reimagine the learning for the future.

Given that the new paradigm of linking mentorship to the field experience is more sophisticated than the old field experience model, the ability to reshape the learning experience with a mentorship accent will be the differentiator between an average learning moment and a superb educational experience.

Note on Contributors

Dr. Cory Ross, *BA, MSc, DC, DPH(cc), CSM(Oxon), MBA, DSc, FRCP(Edin)* is the CEO of Bioresearch Management Systems Inc. Retired Provost, George Brown College, Bethune Laureate and Senator Victor Oh Legacy Award Recipient.

Dr. Rajeev Chib, *DBA, MBA, B.Sc (Hons)* is a seasoned capital markets professional. Worked and developed expertise through financial institutions in Hong Kong, New York, and Toronto. Currently, he holds the position of Senior Business Manager/COO, Capital Markets Technology at CIBC.

Isabelle Callahan-Nasser, *BA (Hons) Sociology*, Research Analyst, George Brown College.

References

Bowering, E., Frigault, C., & Yue, A. R. (2020). Preparing Undergraduate Students for Tomorrow's Workplace: Core Competency Development Through Experiential Learning Opportunities. *Canadian Journal of Career Development, 19*(1), 56–68.

Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada. (2021). *What is Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)?* https://cewilcanada.ca/CEWIL/CEWIL/About-Us/Work-Integrated-Learning.aspx

Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada. (2021). *Benefits of Joining a Work-Integrated Program.* https://cewilcanada.ca/CEWIL/CEWIL/Resources/Students/Benefits-of-Joining-a-WIL-Program.aspx

Fissuh,E., Gbenyo, K., & Ogilvie, A. (2022). *Determinants of skill gaps in the workplace and recruitment difficulties in Canada*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/18-001-x/18-001-x2022002-eng.htm

George Brown College. (2023). *Experiential Learning at George Brown College*. https://www.georgebrown.ca/why-george-brown/experiential-learning

Jones, R. J., Woods, S. A., & Guillaume, Y. R. (2016). The effectiveness of workplace coaching: A meta-analysis of learning and performance outcomes from coaching. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 89*(2), 249-277.

New Brunswick Community College (NBCC). (2022, January 27). *Experiential Learning - Work Integrated Learning*. https://documents.nbcc.ca/FileCSSearch.ashx?Id=1119

Practera. (2021, August 21). *How Work-Integrated Learning Benefits Educators and Employers*. https://practera.com/work-integrated-learning-benefits/

Wilson, J. A., & Elman, N. S. (1990). Organizational benefits of mentoring. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 4*(4), 88-94.