A growing interest in work integrated, work based, or work integrated learning (WIL) has highlighted a range of assessment challenges, many of which are addressed in this recent paper from Mantz Yorke.


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**Abstract**

Student engagement with the world of work or voluntary service has become increasingly prominent in higher education curricula as nations and states seek competitive advantage for their economies. Developments in assessment have lagged behind developments in curricula. It is argued that the incorporation of work-engaged learning into curricula requires a paradigm shift in assessment methodology. Even without such a paradigm shift, work-engaged learning poses some significant challenges for the assurance of quality and standards.

**Keywords**

summative assessment; work-based learning; standards; employability; assessor expertise; employer engagement

**Introduction**

Yorke’s paper develops a case for a shift in assessment practice related to work-engaged learning in order for this form of learning to be acknowledged as a legitimate component of contemporary higher education and to allow grading through a coherent combination of work-engaged and academic outcomes. For this change to come about will require a paradigm shift in many areas and also a need to address some formidable questions regarding quality and standards.

**Theory, practice and the assessment problem**

The intimate connection between theory and practice should be reflected in summative assessment practices involving work-engaged learning. Though work-engaged elements are treated differently in different disciplines - for example as integral parts of the curriculum in teaching and nursing but separate from and parallel to the academic program in other disciplines - all programs experience some common assessment issues.

**Employability and its assessment**

A key challenge in assessing work-engaged learning is the quality of the intended learning outcomes that are referenced. If they are too finely drawn or rigid they will not be applicable across all the different work contexts or opportunities students may experience. However, if learning outcomes are too general they may be so vague as to be of little practical use (p. 121).
A further assessment challenge is making judgements about the quality of student responses to problems that occur in the world of work as these often:

- arise unpredictably
- are multidisciplinary in nature
- are messy in that they are relatively less bounded than academic assignments
- have to be dealt with on the basis of incomplete information
- require the engagement of others.

There are three broad categories of achievement that can be assessed with respect to work-related learning.

1. Actual on-the-job performance
2. A record of on-the-job performance, such as a diary
3. Learning, as revealed through reflective commentary and analysis (p. 122).

**Some examples of assessment tasks**

- setting up a website so generated sales were measured
- actual performance in the workplace and utilisation of workplace produced products (x-rays) as well as observational assessment of clinical performance and social skills
- group creation of a new chocolate product and its marketing. The task, deriving from collaboration between the University and a chocolate manufacturer, was assessed via a portfolio comprising:
  - a personal reflective learning log indicating:
    - the key problem is the group had to solve as a team
    - what research the team decided to carry out
    - the individual’s role and personal research they undertook, with references
    - the experience of the activity
    - what they learned from the activity
  - a copy of the team presentation and team-agreed product plan
- a 1000 word research report and a 1500 word reflective log describing the work-based experience, how it improved student skills and helped them become aware of areas in need of improvement (p. 123).

**Assessment challenges and issues**

**Diaries and portfolios**

These forms of assessment raise ethical issues (to whom does the work belong and what rights do assessors have regarding access to them?) and also raise practical issues in that they often require lengthy attention and are not always easy to relate to assessment criteria. Reflective commentary is suggested as having more practical value.

**Employer engagement in assessment**

A reluctance of employers to grade other than pass fail is an issue but addressing this through training is not always practicable because of the time involved and lack of perceived benefits for the employer.

**Assessor expertise**

While many assessors are comfortable in assessing students’ academic offerings by applying well-established norms to responses to traditional and well-understood disciplinary tasks, many are unlikely to be comfortable or skilful in assessing the more ‘generic’ capabilities associated with work-engaged learning.

**The tension between realist and relativistic standpoints**
The realist view - objectivity in the defining of standards, application of explicit criteria, denial of the influence of values or performance context, measurements as true and reliable representations of student achievement – can be politically attractive. The relativist position however recognises the influence of values in the development of standards and the determination of the assessment process, the need for flexibility if criteria are to accommodate the variability in student responses, the influence of context and that achievements can be broadly judged but not measured. The many variables in play in work-engaged learning mean it is not susceptible to the realist's desire for standardisation (p. 126).

**Shifting the paradigm**

Currently assessment of work engage learning is restricted by the persistence of a number of beliefs and practices which are considered ‘normal’. Novel approaches to assessment, though often better suited to the assessment of work-engaged learning, are often suppressed because they tend not to conform to establish norms. Yorke therefore argues for assessment of work engaged learning that is:

- more relativist than realist
- works with broad rather than fine discriminations in recognition of the variability of student contexts and responses
- acknowledged as having parity with the with the assessment of academic achievements
- based on judgement rather than measurements.

**Some challenges related to quality and standards when assessing work engaged learning**

- the engagement of inexperienced or untrained employers in the assessment process
- a tension when workplace mentors double up as workplace assessors
- the difficulty in specifying standards appropriate to work-engaged learning
- the application of standardised instruments and processes to work-engaged learning which is characterised by variability
- the need for a broad rather than a fine-grained categories of achievement in some circumstances
- the need for institutional quality assurance procedures that are flexible enough to allow work-engaged learning to flourish while avoiding the trap of ‘anything goes’ (p. 129).

The paper finishes by acknowledging that the challenges outlined are formidable there are no ‘quick fixes’ to be applied.

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*This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. “UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS” of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.*

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