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Work-integrated Learning within the bachelor's program in pedagogy

1. Introduction

In higher education, the focus on workforce relevance has been highlighted as central and important for developing high-quality study programs. It is about preparing students for their future careers. At the same time, ensuring workforce relevance is challenging in disciplinary programs, such as the Bachelor's program in Pedagogy, as these programs are more academic and lack strong workplace connections (Meld. St. 16 (2020–2021)). This challenge is also evident in our study program.

For several years, students attending the disciplinary study program "Bachelor in Pedagogy" at the University of Agder have expressed a desire for stronger connections to the workforce. Until now, the study program has not included work-integrated learning (WIL) at all. To address this, a project group has been established, consisting of the program leader, two subject teachers, and two students from the program (one from year 1 and one from year 3). The project is funded by the university and runs from June 2024 to December 2025.

The primary goal of the project is to integrate WIL activities into the majority of the study program, making them an intentional part of both the curriculum and individual subjects. The program consists of 12 subjects in addition to the bachelor's thesis. Eight of these subjects, along with the bachelor's thesis, have the potential for work-integrated activities. So far, the project group has implemented work-related activities in five out of the twelve subjects, which will be elaborated on in Chapter 3

2. Theoretical framework

Knowledge separated from practice is problematic for several reasons, particularly in relation to the creation of meaning. Meaning-making is essential for students' interpretation of life and the world they live in (Aasen, 2012; Habermas, 1999). This is crucial in the context of internalization processes and, consequently, the transfer of knowledge in a broad sense. With this in mind, these perspectives, together with the teaching process, have the potential to be relevant both in students' everyday lives and in their future working lives (Tobiassen & Døving, 2006). Separating theory and practice is also problematic from a pedagogical perspective, as pedagogical knowledge is characterized by theorized practice, where theory and practice are combined (Althusser, 1975; Hauglid & Nydahl, 2024). It is therefore essential that theory and practice are closely connected in a pedagogical education.

In Stortingsmelding 16 – Culture for Quality in Higher Education (2016–2017), in-depth learning is highlighted, and a prerequisite for this is active learning methods. Memorization of facts leads to a lack of understanding. Achieving higher levels of understanding and developing critical thinking require a connection between theory and practice (Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)).

In alignment with the theory of Work-Integrated Learning, we aim to achieve: “An educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum” (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023, p.). In light of this, over the past year, we have worked toward fulfilling key elements such as: integration of theory and practice intentionally within the curriculum, authenticity in the learning context, meaningful practice of work-focused tasks related to study and career direction, and the involvement of external partners (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). Finally, the integration

of theory and practice is a central part of the formation process: “The subject’s quality stimulates the whole personality” (Aasen, 2012, p. 89). Thus, student formation is the overall aim of the curriculum

3. Description of practice

As outlined, we aim to view the study program as a whole while also working systematically on a course-by-course basis. The following section presents some of the implemented activities that have been incorporated into eight different courses in various ways, serving as examples of our practice-oriented approach to work-integrated learning. Our approach is largely based on the definitions provided by Zegwaard & Pretti (2023).

1. Direct contact with the workforce through conversations and observations in the second and third semesters (as part of course requirements).

As part of the coursework in two courses, students must engage with a workplace context of their choice and interview a professional about different aspects of (pedagogical) practice. This requirement is revisited in the third semester, where students retrieve their initial assignment from the first semester, repeat the same process, and conduct a comparative analysis. In the second year, students must also observe the professional in their practical work before conducting the interview. Through these activities, we align with the principles of integrating theory and practice, creating authentic learning contexts, establishing a connection to future career paths, providing students with insight into meaningful tasks, and involving an external partner (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

2. Direct contact with the workforce through guest lectures and seminars led by external professionals.

In most of the courses included in this initiative, we have incorporated external lecturers who represent relevant career fields for students after graduation.

3. Direct contact with the workforce through the use of real-world case assignments (often following lectures).

External professionals are invited to outline various cases or scenarios from their field, which are then used as student activities during seminar sessions. In some cases, these professionals participate in the seminars and lead the activities.

4. Game development in collaboration

The faculty (as developers), students (both as testers and as creators of pedagogical programs), and industry professionals (an external game developer with pedagogical expertise) is involved in lectures and student activities to bridge the gap between pedagogy and digital learning tools.

5. Establishment of a 15-credit internship course starting in fall 2025.

In this course, students will complete a total of 12 weeks of internship, working two days per week (7.5 hours per day). This course is scheduled for the final year of the program, ensuring that students have developed sufficient academic competence after two years of studying pedagogy. Additionally, this timing aligns well with students' job search processes post-graduation, allowing them to use their internship site as a reference. Finally, the internship will provide students with hands-on experience of applying theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting, while also fostering a sense of identification with the professional field. By incorporating internships, all aspects of work-integrated learning will be addressed in various ways and to varying degrees

4. Discussion

Unlike pedagogy in teacher education programs, the Bachelor's program in Pedagogy is a disciplinary study that does not train students for a specific profession or concrete job. Instead, it is designed for individuals aiming to work in both the public and private sectors. Some graduates pursue careers within social services, while others find positions more closely related to business and industry. This presents a challenge in terms of workforce relevance, as what is considered relevant is both broad and diverse. At the same time, this underscores the need to clarify for students how they develop skills and knowledge that are applicable to the future job market. Like other disciplinary programs, our study program at the University of Agder scores relatively low in terms of workforce relevance, as indicated by the Study Barometer (2024), although slightly above the national average. This is problematic, given that pedagogical knowledge involves the ability to combine theory and practice (Althusser, 1975; Hauglid & Nydahl, 2024). For this reason, it has been both important and necessary to ensure that the integration of WIL activities is diverse and enables students to establish connections to various potential career

paths. In doing so, we contribute to students experiencing "meaningful practice of work-focused tasks and integration of theory and practice," which are key to achieving WIL (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

Pedagogical and psychological theories also emphasize that motivation and learning are strongly influenced by whether learners—in this case, students—perceive the study content as relevant (Prenzel, 1993). Additionally, learning in social practices is crucial (Vygotsky, 1982; Säljö, 2000). The integration of theory through practice is therefore essential for meaning-making, internalization, and knowledge transfer in a broad sense (Tobiassen & Døving, 2006). These elements have been the focus areas in the WIL activities integrated into the study program, ensuring that students perceive the content as relevant, meaningful, and transferable across multiple contexts.

One of the challenges of work-integrated learning in this program is making the learning activities as authentic as possible—allowing students to experience what it would be like to work in a specific role after graduation. While the context is authentic, the tasks performed may still feel like student activities. We hope that the internship course in particular will enhance authenticity, as it spans a longer period and takes place in the students' final year of study. This allows students to connect with their existing knowledge base and apply it in a real-world context.

There has long been a demand for an internship course within the Bachelor's program in Pedagogy. To provide graduates with a broader foundation for entering the job market, we have designed the new internship course with two distinct pathways: a therapeutic/social work track and a business-oriented track. It is already somewhat recognized that individuals with a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy can work in therapeutic roles. However, pedagogy graduates often face competition from professionals in other disciplines, such as social workers and special education teachers. The internship course is an effort to strengthen the recognition of pedagogy graduates' competencies on par with those of other disciplines. Another focus area is the local business sector, particularly organizations involved in employee training and development. We have prioritized increasing the visibility of pedagogical competencies within the local business community, as we believe these skills are currently under-communicated. In developing the internship course, we have engaged in dialogue with external stakeholders representing the business sector to gather input on how to best present the potential roles and responsibilities of pedagogy students during their internships.

5. Conclusion

After a year of systematic work with WIL, we see that it has been met with great enthusiasm by our students. Most students highlight the integration of theory and practice as particularly important for meaning-making, as the theories associated with different courses gain concrete significance when applied to various authentic contexts. This facilitates internalization and broad transfer of knowledge.

The learning activities have been diverse and aligned with theories of work-integrated learning, particularly as outlined by Zegwaard & Pretti (2023). This has provided the initiative with a clear and structured focus, which we intend to maintain moving forward. However, we also recognize several challenges in developing WIL activities within a disciplinary study program. We continue to work towards addressing these challenges in the best possible way so that our students can develop into future pedagogues who are well-prepared for the workforce.

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