

Remote Work Integrated Learning (RWIL) Field Placement in Retail Management

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Integrative projects have gained recognition in higher education institutions and the business community by providing valuable experience to students through immersive practice, bridging the gap between education and the business profession. This study provides a detailed analysis of students' experiences in Remote Work Integrated Learning (RWIL) - field placement within the business area of retail management. Given that the study occurs during the COVID-19 pandemic, how remote working supports or hinders the WIL experience is investigated. The findings are extended to propose a framework for the practical implementation of RWIL design. This study offers new perspectives for higher-education professionals, specificity in retail management, and novelty of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count technique for sentiment analysis.

Keywords: field, integrated, learning, placement, remote, retail

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, experiential learning in higher education has gained popularity (David A. Kolb 2014; D. A. Kolb 1984). D. A. Kolb was one of the early researchers who forwarded a framework for experiential learning: Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). ELT can be referred to as the process of knowledge creation through experience transformation, where knowledge results from grasping and transforming experience (D. A. Kolb 1984). As such, D. A. Kolb (1984) suggests that effective learning happens with the interaction of the four stages of experiential learning: reflective observations, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and concrete experience. The benefits of experiential learning have been well documented in prior literature, including increased information retention, adaptability, leadership, financial management, and teamwork (Bobbitt et al. 2000; Lee 2008; Li, Greenberg, and Nicholls 2007).

Experiential learning can take many forms in the management sector, such as case studies, simulations, and international trips (P. R. McCarthy and H. M. McCarthy 2006; Paul and Mukhopadhyay 2004; Saunders 1997). In recent years, new models such as Work Integrated Learning (WIL) started to emerge. WIL refers to the facilitation of students' learning by integrating experiences between the workplace and academia (Billett 2009). WIL experiences are suggested to benefit Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), industry and students (Aprile and Knight 2020; Björck 2020).

The Covid-19 and post-pandemic made it more challenging to allow such experiences for students. While many HEIs coped with the Covid-19 pandemic with some level of success evident in enrolment and retention numbers (Friesen, January 17, 2022), HEIs showed more focus on the medium of learning compared to the type of learning (A. Bashir et al. 2021; Cicha et al. 2021; García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, and Martín-Rojas 2021). Interestingly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations that issue industry-based certificates (IBC) started to provide remote experiential learning opportunities; for instance, Google LLC (2022) provides participants with hands-on projects and simulations coupled with a theoretical component. As such, these approaches continue to advance and challenge the HEIs models. To ensure the quality of higher education (versus mode of education), the researchers view Remote Work Integrated Learning (RWIL) as a key approach that may enhance the quality of learning and address the key pillars of D. A. Kolb (1984) ELT.

This study is positioned in the RWIL field experience category in the Canadian retail management landscape. Students participating in a retail management course at a University in Toronto are placed into teams and paired with a business sponsor in the Greater Toronto Area. The students engage in immersive practice to examine an area concurrently with academic studies. The students develop and apply problem-solving processes to obtain organizational alignment concerning the business case using leadership perspectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zegwaard and Rowe (2019) posit that HEIs have experienced a global trend in implementing WIL designs to produce employable graduates. WIL draws on Kolb's theory, turning the learning experiences into action and development (D. A. Kolb 1984; David A. Kolb 2014) and is described as an "umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al. 2008, 4).

WIL is a key driver in HEIs (Shircore et al. 2013). The placements benefit institutions, students and the community, fostering 'work-readiness' (Björck 2020) by developing knowledge and skills for engaging in practice (Aprile and Knight 2020; Jackson 2015). For example, while students gain real-world experience, sponsors benefit from the knowledge developed in the classroom, and universities gain reputational benefits from the study-work interactions in an industry setting (Patterson 1997). WIL placements are integrated between education on-campus and engagement in practice off-campus (Björck 2020). Jackson (2015) posits that WIL integration enables students to make sense of the responsibility and accountability required about the placement and chosen profession.

While WIL is not limited to placement experience, the different approaches consist of a) co-op alternating and co-op internship, b) entrepreneurship, c) field placement, d) internships, e) practicum/clinical, f) service-learning, and g) work experience. All models encourage students to authentically immerse in practice (CEWIL Canada 2022) within the context of the real-world experience (Patrick et al. 2008) and the area of studies (Smith 2012). Compared to other forms of practical experience, students perceive more value from WIL engagements for developing skills and future performance (Kramer, Usher, and Higher Education Strategy Associates 2010). Dressler and Keeling (2004) argue that WIL enhances employability and competencies demanded by the industry (Schonell and Macklin 2019) through integrative learning characteristics (Smith and Worsfold 2015). As such, Aprile and Knight (2020) posit that a critical inquiry focus is to document student perspectives on the experiences. This enables self-reflection and understanding of the impact of actions and decisions that extend beyond the skills performed in the WIL setting (Trede and McEwen 2016).

While preparing students for the workforce is a joint responsibility between HEIs, and industry members, Tomlinson (2017) argues that industry and government perceive that HEIs have failed to fulfill the outcomes that WIL ought to achieve by offering disconnected experiences between student education and practice. Suleman (2017) argues that the industry exerts pressures on HEIs to produce work-ready resources, while G. Crisp, J. Higgs, and W. Letts (2019) argue that the interpretation of responsibility ignores that alongside work-readiness, WIL opportunities should also provide challenges and change within

the profession. A process often side-lined by members focusing on ‘work-readiness’ and ignoring the learning that extends beyond skills with immersive practice.

Learning from the immersive experience should provide feedback loops for improving the process of WIL design in the future. Hence, Smith and Worsfold (2015) suggest that more evidence on WIL placements and the activities that produce integrative learning outcomes is required. Furthermore, while the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected remote working in the last few years, Pretti, Etmansi, and Durston (2020) suggest that more in-depth qualitative research is required on the impacts of WIL experience for students that captures general thoughts and feelings. C. Wang et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2020) note that the COVID-19 pandemic has created adverse effects for individuals, particularly affecting the well-being of women and students. Thus, this study aims to extend WIL to RWIL where we implement a RWIL, analyze students’ feedback, and propose a RWIL model for educators in HEIs.

Concerning the RWIL immersive experience, this study seeks to a) explore the students’ views from the RWIL experience on the learning acquired and the impacts of remote working experiences, b) propose a framework for practical and effective implementation of RWIL in higher education. Thus, the authors propose the following research questions:

RQ1: *In what ways do students make sense of the RWIL learning experience?*

RQ2: *How can educators effectively implement RWIL program in their institutions?*

Remote Work Integrated Learning Design

We refer to Remote Work Integrated Learning (RWIL) as the integration of academia, practice, and technology, where institutional and organizational partnerships between participants and facilitators enable problem-solving processes with a focus on pedagogy, experience, assessment, and reflection of the engagement in a virtual manner.

RWIL supports academic initiatives with emergent technological trends in a didactic relationship with industry practice. The didactic relationship formed by faculty and industry practitioners enables an enhanced learning experience for students. Kali, McKenney, and Sagy (2015) and Voogt et al. (2015) have found that co-designing is very effective in similar learning models enhanced by technology. Interestingly, Kampylis, Brečko, and Punie (2013) conducted a systematic investigation on technology-enabled learning cases and their research found that it is important to obtain alignment at various levels of the education ecosystem. In this study, the RWIL experience satisfies that a) is appropriate to the field of the retail management program, b) has articulated, appropriate learning outcomes listed on the course outline, c) is supervised by both a faculty and an industry member who collaborates to evaluate the student performance, and d) provides opportunities and structure for student reflection on the learning outcomes in relationship to the WIL experience(s).

How and To Whom Is It Applied?

This study focuses on retail operations through a RWIL experience categorized under ‘Field Experience’; whereby students were required to complete a defined number of hours that take place concurrently with the sponsoring organization and the academic studies. Learners developed and applied problem-solving processes with the sponsoring organization while the engagement process was facilitated alongside faculty. Students examined an area relevant to retail management in the current state of Canadian business with perspectives on sustainable development and relevance to managerial retail practices.

The RWIL initiative engaged community partners through a sponsor and student team relationship. This enabled students to engage with real business problems while at the same time allowing an opportunity for sponsors to receive recommendations on operational and capacity dimensions that dealt with the specific business case of the organization.

Why Is It Applied?

The purpose of engaging a RWIL allows students to gain field experience while at the same time leveraging common interests across all stakeholders (e.g., faculty, sponsor, students). This is possible by defining the number of hours that are allocated between the academic and industry sponsor requirements while concurrently immersing students in practice. The sponsor and team of students agree an issue to be investigated that allows for problem-solving and provides alignment to the organization. For example, students may agree with the sponsor to investigate a sustainability issue such as biodegradable packaging and contribute to sustainable development goals.

The RWIL engagement has two main objectives: to consolidate current and prior learning on the study program. This is done by mobilizing and integrating ideas from the topics addressed in the learning journey and applying the learning in practice effectively; and second, to address the issue of effective teamwork. Specifically, students should focus on the dynamics within the team during all phases of the RWIL engagement and, in particular, the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and insights that students experience and the learning acquired within the team. The RWIL engagement uses a blended learning approach, incorporating synchronous and asynchronous resources (such as, faculty and sponsor guidance and supplemental resources that support the engagement process). Throughout the course, students are supported by the immersion in practice with the sponsor and by faculty providing consulting-style clinics enabling extensive academic support.

By the end of the RWIL engagement, students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the challenges and the strategies on how to support the sponsor, including the learning outcomes of:

- Examine retail leadership practices and processes, including those that:
 - Model leadership behaviours
 - Establish a compelling vision
 - Encourage challenging goals
 - Support individual input and development
 - Enable team accomplishment
- Develop skills focused on leading self, others and the business
 - Show the relationship and interdependencies that exist between organizations and their suppliers and customers and the impacts of decisions taken;
 - Demonstrate initiative in searching out sources and establishing contacts in the research phase of the course;
 - Evaluate strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunity of operational capacity and capability processes observed in site visits and other forms of information gathering;
 - Identify possible operational capacity and capability process improvements, analyse and evaluate various alternatives, and make recommendations supported by appropriate data;
 - Manage a business case project independently and within a team environment, with advisory support from a faculty member and the sponsor.
 - Demonstrate professionalism in appropriate conduct, language, and dress in all contact with the business community;
 - Manage time in setting intermediate timelines, in arriving at appointments with outside contacts and faculty on time, and in allocating the appropriate amount of effort to each phase; and
 - Demonstrate effective presentation skills and use of technology to enhance comprehension on the part of the audience, both for oral and written presentations.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study aims to provide a new perspective for higher-education professionals concerning RWIL design, a contribution to the field of retail management concerning integrative projects,

and a methodological contribution using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) and Leximancer (i.e., text analysis software) to analyze qualitative data. While a universally accepted framework or method for conducting qualitative research does not exist, the importance lies in theoretical coherence and consistency (The University of Auckland 2022) using: a) frameworks and methods matching the researcher's inquiry, b) acknowledgment of decisions and c) recognition of decisions (Braun and Clarke 2006). This study has received ethics approval from the Toronto Metropolitan University institutional review board, REB file number (2022-027).

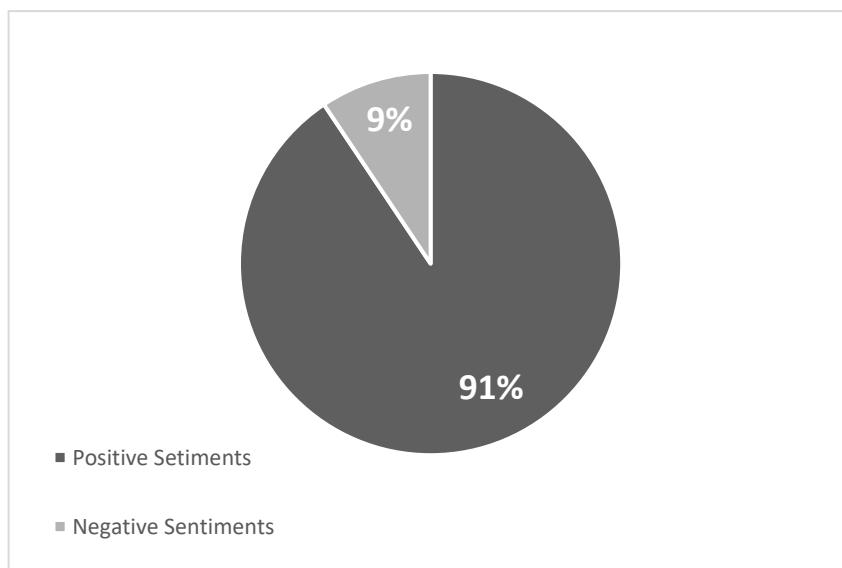
After implementing the RWIL program, we conducted a survey to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences and examine the key benefits and challenges of the program. The data was collected from 54 students, with 34 valid responses due to incomplete and/or missing answers. We collected qualitative students' reflections on their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the RWIL program. Data collection consists of primary qualitative data from participating students in the classroom. Students are provided with the opportunity to provide an open written reflection. In WIL research, reflexive opportunities provide deeper or different perspectives on issues, theories or findings (Schaffer 2006; Thorpe 2004) and can be conducted before, during and/or after placements to question, elicit insight or prompt deeper thinking around student's or supervisor's expectations, perceptions and experiences (Dean 2019).

To analyze the dataset, we utilized LIWC and Leximancer. LIWC is an advanced software technique (Pennebaker et al. 2015) initially developed to understand language and discourse. Leximancer is an AI-driven text analysis software that is gaining popularity in management research (Khan, S. Rana, and Goel 2022; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, and Le 2014; Wilk et al. 2021). LIWC provides support to analyze large sets of data hierarchically organizing words by using dictionaries such as emotions and feelings (Pennebaker et al. 2015). LIWC provided us with a) the frequency of keywords and b) an overview of students' sentiments. Leximancer utilizes the word occurrence and co-occurrence to generate thematic and relational maps.

FINDINGS

First, we examined the students' sentiments through LIWC; we utilized the pre-developed LIWC dictionary to limit bias (Pennebaker et al. 2015). We found 91% of the students to have positive sentiments regarding the RWIL, and 9% have negative sentiments (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
STUDENTS SENTIMENTS



To dive deeper and provide additional context, we examined word occurrence. We found the top words mentioned to be team (118 times), group (98 times), time (72 times), retail (63 times), sustainable (46 times), future (40 times) and leadership (38 times). This aligns with Jackson (2015), who found WIL to enhance key employability skills such as teamwork, time management, leadership, and industry expertise. Figure 2 outlines the most frequently mentioned keywords. In addition, we map the findings on a word cloud to showcase the key related concepts (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 2

MOST FREQUENT KEYWORDS

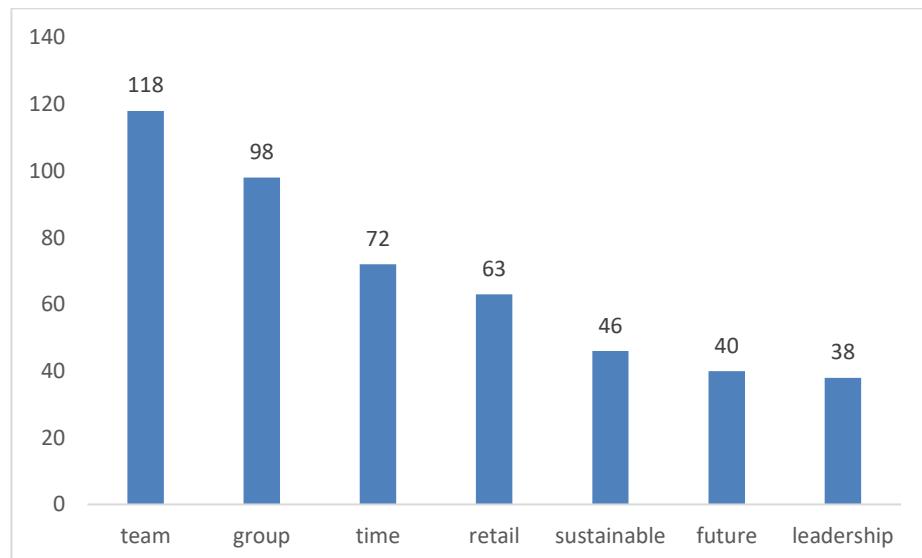


FIGURE 3 WORD CLOUD



Following, we conducted a Leximancer analysis to examine the key themes in students' reflections. We removed all the filler words through the stop list feature on Leximancer and removed irrelevant words such as "and/or/if". We found the top three concepts to be business (263 occurrences), sponsor (201 occurrences), time (148 occurrences). Figures 4 and 5 highlight the key themes and showcase the relational association.

Some of the top concept co-occurrences for the business theme were sustainability and challenge. For instance, one of the students highlighted the importance of a sustainable approach:

"We learned of the issues that they are especially dealing with because of the pandemic and as a result have had to alter their business model. We have also been able to come up with other potential solutions to issues they are having internally with a sustainability approach."

In terms of challenge, some students indicate the ambiguity of the business environment to be a key challenge:

"I was excited for the semester-long project where students had the creative freedom to tackle a particular business problem in partnership with a small business. Although excited, I was scared of the challenge of ambiguity."

**FIGURE 4
THEMATIC MAP**

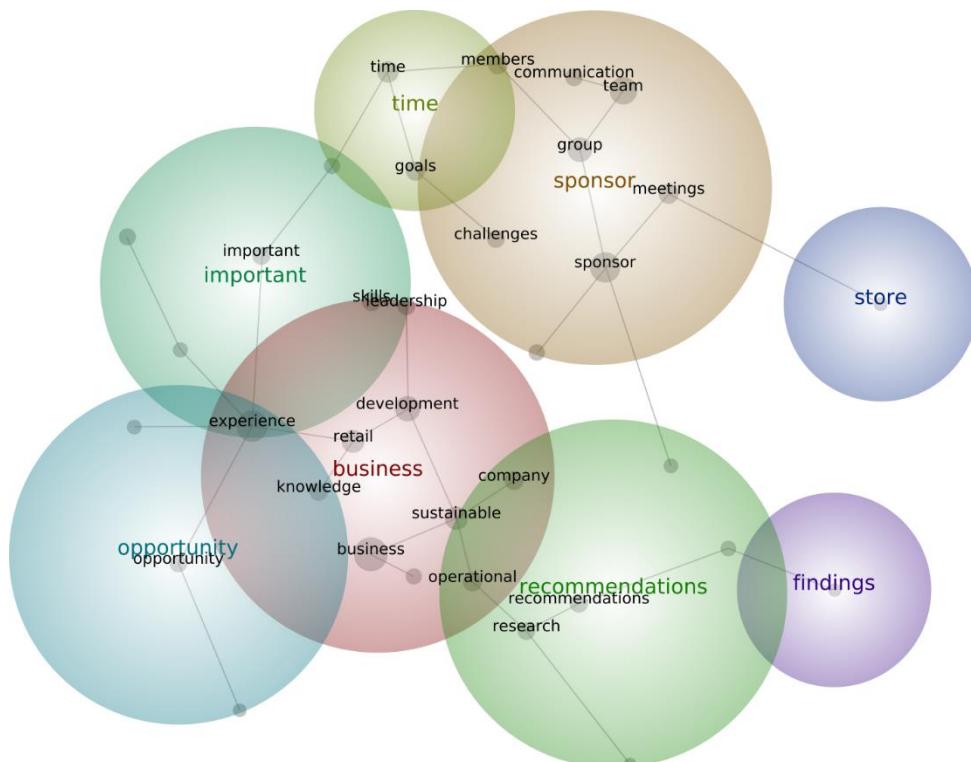
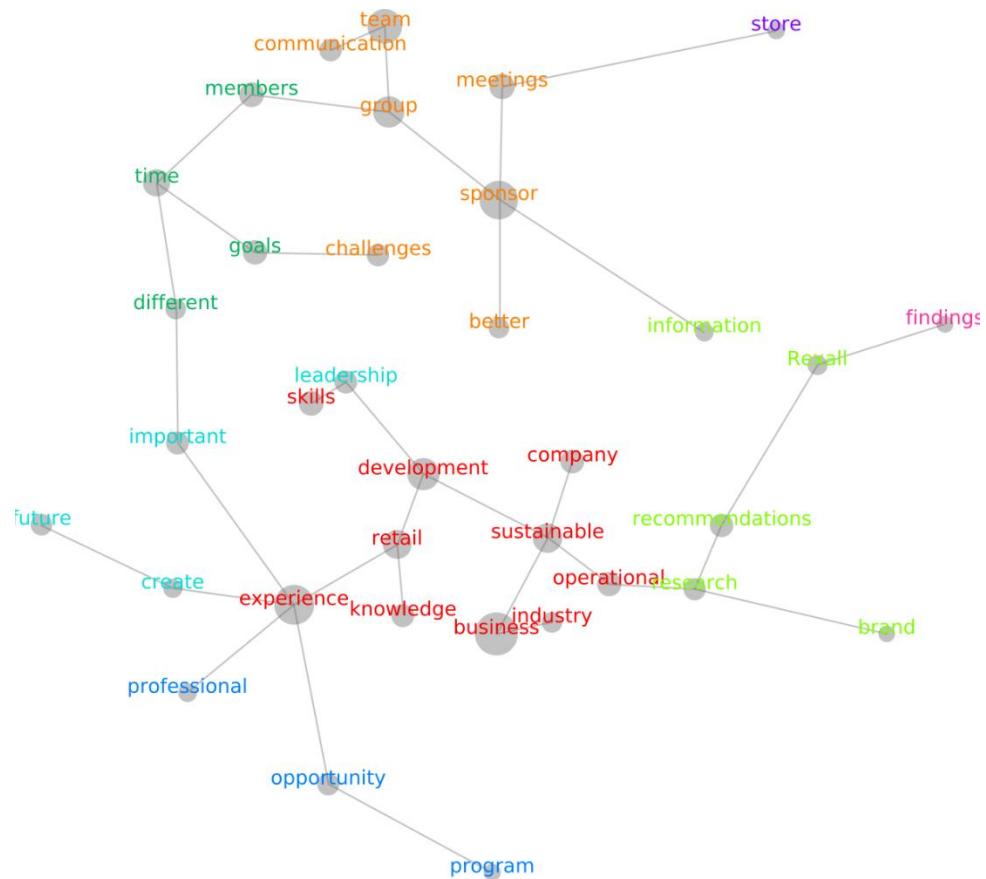


FIGURE 5
RELATIONAL MAP



For the sponsor theme, we found leadership and communication to be among the top co-occurring concepts. For instance, one of the students indicated the enhancement in their leadership skills while working with sponsors from the industry:

“Working with the sponsor is also a chance for me to model some leadership behaviours as well as I can walk in the shoe of the business owner and can see how they think”

Another student highlighted the importance of having an open line of communication with their industry sponsor:

“The main thing I learned was the importance of communication. The sponsor is there to help so we should always ask for clarification and suggestions to help the team stay on the right track.”

For the time theme, we found skills and goals among the top co-occurring concepts. For instance, one of the students indicated the benefits they encountered with having effective time management skills:

“I learned from this challenge that having good time management skills will benefit you in many ways, which in this case helped us accomplish the tasks that was required in assignment. However, this promoted my team and I to maintained good time management skills to help mitigate any obstacles or challenges that may be faced in the future of the project”

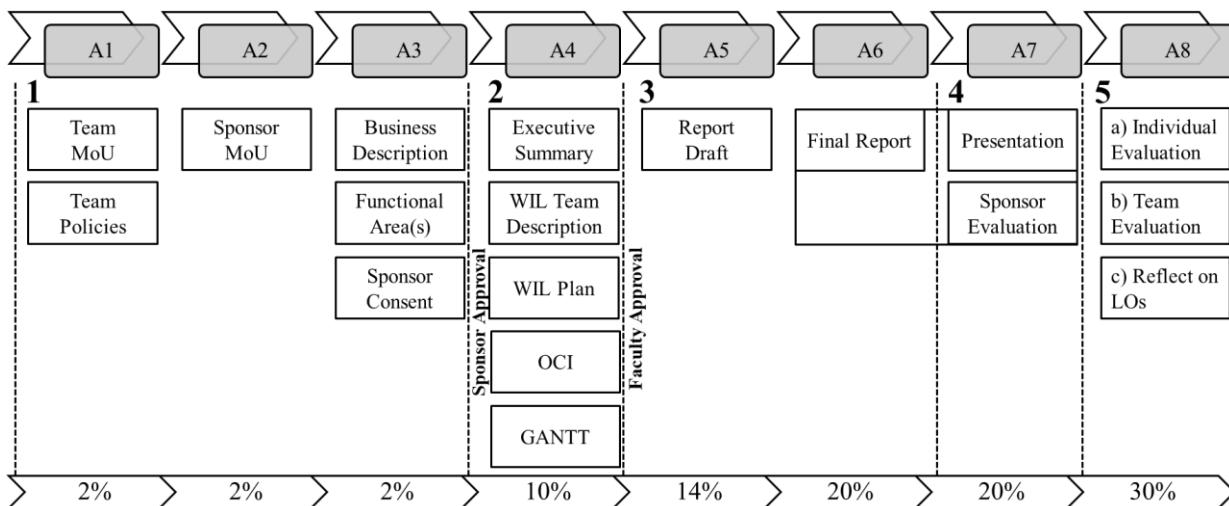
Another student indicated the importance of time management and clear goal setting as key benefits of the RWIL.

“This will help me in my own personal life as I learned how to properly manage my time and set realistic expectations and goals.”

RWIL Framework Implementation

To provide educators with the appropriate implementation tools of such approach, we have developed RWIL framework where engagement is applied in five-phases. Figure 6 showcase the RWIL framework.

**FIGURE 6
RWIL FRAMEWORK**



Phase 1

In the first phase, students organize themselves in teams and each team is partnered with a sponsor from the business community. The students and sponsor formalize the RWIL engagement, learn about the purpose of the engagement based on the learning objectives and with the sponsor, identify and approve an operational capacity area for improvement (such as, merchandising options). Phase one is completed by submitting three small assignments having a total course weight of six percent.

In the first assignment (A1), teams develop a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that deals with the commitment of each member to meet the agreed team expectations. The MoU serves to enact a procedure that outlines controls for managing the behavior of team members and any associated dispute resolution. The MoU outlines a set of steps that need to be followed. If a deviation occurs, a mechanism to manage the deviation and resolve emergent issues should be included. Elements to consider include, inappropriate behavior, unacceptable performance, and mediocre attitude. These elements can have devastating results for the team performance, project success, course completion, and institution-wide implications. The MoU should be developed logically and sequentially. Teams are encouraged to include feedback loops. Actions need to be made explicit to address the consequences that follow, progressively. Records of actions, including monitoring and measurement of performance, must be maintained during the RWIL engagement process. Faculty either approves or ask the team members to revise the MoU by using the feedback provided. The designated team leader must sign-off on the document. A passing grade by the faculty approves and enacts the document.

In the second assignment (A2), a sponsor organization is identified by the team of students. The sponsor and team of students are introduced. A pre-formatted sponsor MoU is provided to the students for

presentation to the sponsor. The sponsor MoU enables formalizing the relationship between the students, faculty, and the participating organization. The pre-formatted MoU provides basic expectations and details, such as faculty contact information. The sponsor and the team of students should review the MoU to ensure the conditions are agreeable and that acknowledgment for the sponsor to withdraw from the engagement at any time is understood. A signed copy of the sponsor MoU is submitted with the third assignment.

In the third assignment (A3), the team of students describe the business, such as the organization, the sponsor, and any other stakeholders that are involved in the WIL engagement, a brief description of the operational capacity initiative (OCI) by describing the functional area and the objectives to be accomplished.

Phase 2

Next, in the second phase students prepare an assignment plan (A4) having a total course weight of ten per cent and consists of an executive summary, the envisioned contributions by each team member, a description of the operational capacity improvement identified in phase one, a realistic timeline to complete the RWIL project and foreseeable risk management actions to be taken. The plan is then submitted for faculty evaluation and approval.

Phase 3

In phase three, and once faculty approval is received, students actively engage with the sponsor to gather the necessary information by working closely with the sponsor to meet the agreed objectives identified in phase one and two. The ongoing engagement process in phase three leads to the generation of a draft report that is reviewed and commented by faculty, which subsequently leads to a final report that is prepared in consultation with the sponsor and submitted to faculty for evaluation and feedback, having a total course weight of twenty-four percent. The draft report (A5) should contain elements of the final written document. Teams should reference guidance provided by faculty including lectures, field notes, and any conversations that the team had with faculty and the sponsor. The draft report should cover the principal elements of the Final Report. The draft report should be crafted reasonably and structured to demonstrate the RWIL engagement progress to date. Teams are expected to research and make connections to the broader literature areas.

The final report (A6) should include analysis and build on appropriate theory covered in the lessons and broader reading and research. Elements of the report (such as, fieldwork, analysis, criteria selection, recommendations) should also include a broad range of reference material as applicable, including industry reports. The final report should be shared with the sponsor and RWIL teams should incorporate feedback prior to submission.

Phase 4

Next, in phase four, the team of students develops and delivers a presentation containing the highlights of the engagement and obtains feedback from faculty and other classmates that are not part of the presenting RWIL engagement team. Obtaining feedback from academic peers allows the RWIL teams to incorporate suggestions and improve the presentation before presenting to the sponsor. Within a reasonable timeframe, the sponsor should submit an evaluation of the RWIL team directly to faculty and in relation to the engagement experience. The two tasks have a course weight of twenty per cent.

The information should be corroborated with the sponsor upon completion of the Final Report. Following, a team presentation (A7) for the class and faculty should be developed. After receiving feedback from the class presentation, the team should improve the presentation by incorporating the recommendations as applicable and present to the sponsor. The sponsor will then provide an evaluation of the work presented by emailing the Sponsor Evaluation Form directly to faculty as indicated in the Sponsor MoU.

Phase 5

Next in phase five, in addition to the evaluation received from the sponsor in phase four, further evaluations are conducted to assess the intra-team dynamics, inter-team presentations, and the students'

individual experiences by reflecting on the learning outcomes of the RWIL engagement. The previously mentioned evaluations are divided into three tasks (A8a to A8c) having a total course weight of thirty percent. The RWIL team should have an open discussion on the contribution of each member. The team-agreed assessment should be constructive and focus on improvement areas and rewards for the specific team members. Evaluation of team members (A8a) is discussed within the team and agreed upon. Team members that go above and beyond their assigned tasks should be rewarded. Team members that slack should not be ‘carried’ by other team members. An honest and constructive conversation among the team members is expected. Each student should complete an evaluation (A8b) of pre-assigned team presentations (e.g., two or three presentations per student). Each student is provided with a Likert scale rubric to evaluate confidence, passion, knowledge, naturalness, organization, time sensitivity and clarity. Students should submit the evaluation from the team presentations. The data is processed and assessed by faculty as a peer-reviewed activity. Comments are extracted and provided to the individual teams.

Lastly, each student should complete a reflection assignment on the learning outcomes (A8c). The expectation is for students to consider the learning outcomes provided by faculty at the start of the RWIL engagement and reflect upon them. Students should write in their own words. Students may use notes from journaling activities and comments from the people that students have engaged with in the RWIL process (e.g., faculty, sponsor, classmates). The focus of the reflective assignment should be on how the learning benefited the student and are encouraged to argue, justify a position, and/or use the learning to cast into the future.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We note several limitations to our study. First, the data collected is limited to one HEI in a sector-focused degree (i.e., retail management). We suggest implementing the framework in different HEIs and in different business specializations. Additionally, we utilized AI-driven software to limit researcher bias and enhance the trustworthiness of the data analysis. However, we acknowledge that such tools may have certain limitations, such as the lack of providing context to concept occurrences and co-occurrences.

Moreover, our research was conducted in a north American university which may limit the generalizability of our findings. We suggest future research expand beyond north America and examine the framework across different countries and cultures. Lastly, we collected self-reported data, which may be impacted by social desirability bias. For example, students participating in the study may have felt the need to enhance their self-image and focus more on the positives of their experience to avoid negative perceptions. While we have taken active steps to ensure participants that the responses are anonymous without impacting their grades or their relationship with the course instructor, we still acknowledge the possibility of social desirability bias.

IMPLICATIONS

This research makes a theoretical contribution by expanding and enhancing the understanding of work-integrated learning experiences. We examine students’ perceptions of such experiences and highlight the key areas of learning, including opportunities and challenges. Additionally, we provide practical contributions through the development of the RWIL framework. The framework may aid educators in different business areas deliver effective experiential experiences, narrow the gap between academia and industry, and engage HEIs with the community.

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