

Article classification: Teaching Contribution

Implementing Work-Integrated Learning: A Student-Run Café Initiative

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The article is peer-reviewed and part of the Special Issue of SITE:
Future-oriented pedagogies in practice: Innovation and agency

Published April 2026

Abstract

This case narrative shares the journey of implementing a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program through a student-run café kiosk at a Malaysian University. Drawing from personal experience, observations, and student reflections, the case captures what it truly means to learn by doing. Managing the kiosk gave students a taste of real-world challenges such as handling operations, making decisions under pressure, and balancing academic responsibilities. It also fostered entrepreneurial thinking, teamwork, and confidence. The case offers pedagogical insights alongside the challenges encountered. It concludes with practical implications for enhancing future implementations.

Introduction

Rapid technological changes, labour market shift and societal challenges have made higher education to rethink how learning is designed (OECD, 2018). In response, the OECD Education 2030 framework emphasizes on learner-centred pedagogies that empowers students to actively take ownership of their learning. Similarly, employers increasingly expect graduates not only to possess discipline knowledge but also demonstrate soft skills and entrepreneurial mindset. In Malaysia, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are urged to instil an entrepreneurship mindset and equip students with essential soft skills to enhance their employability (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) emerges as an important pedagogical approach that connects academic learning with authentic workplace experiences through collaboration of industry partners (Alford et al., 2025; Chopra, 2025). WIL is “an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces” (Council on Higher Education, 2011, p.78). WIL approaches such as internship, industry-projects and start-up incubation programs offer a practical means by embedding students in real-world, industry-relevant tasks while allowing reflection and skill development. These approaches equipped graduates with future-ready skills and employability (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023; Jackson, 2025).

Responding to the growing needs for authentic, experience-based learning, this paper presents a practical-based case of Work-integrated Learning (WIL) at a Malaysian University, specifically on a student-run café kiosk as an authentic learning environment. The paper aims to share pedagogies insights that may inform WIL practice in HEIs.

Context and Implementation

The student-run kiosk was established as a campus-based enterprise managed by students from undergraduate business programme. The kiosk was run by eight undergraduate students for two months on a voluntary basis with no credit-bearing in a university in Malaysia. To ensure effective management of the kiosk, students took specific roles to ensure effective management. Responsibilities included inventory control, budgeting, supplier negotiations, promotional planning and social media management. Other responsibilities were operational coordination, team coordination alongside customer engagement and coffee preparation. The faculty mentor provided guidance but allowed students autonomy in decision-making.

The kiosk was supported by Nescafé Youth Entrepreneurship Program. This partnership provided professional equipment, product support and start-up capital. It also provided branding resources, standard operation procedures, training and mentorship to enhance authenticity and industry relevance. Sustainability practices were embedded through an ecobrick programme. Students were required to collect used coffee sachets and compacting them into repurposed plastic bottles to create eco-friendly bricks. This initiative encouraged a sustainability mindset. Nescafé, as industry partner actively contributed to the project by guiding marketing ideas, providing feedback on inventory control and sales reporting. Meanwhile, students were given opportunity to create new drinks flavour and design custom coffee cup for branding.

Basic performance indicators were tracked such as sales volume, cost and revenue as well as customer feedback. Weekly debrief reflection were facilitated by the academic mentor. The reflection process provided space for self-awareness by prompting students to critically examine their decisions, behaviours and areas for improvement.

Reflective Analysis

Managing a kiosk on campus for two months provided students with an opportunity to turn theory into practice while developing essential soft skills. On the first few weeks, students faced real challenges such as low sales and customer complaints due to long waiting time. These experiences become important discussion points during weekly reflection session with

mentor. Things changed after several rounds of reflection and brainstorming. Students streamlined coffee preparation, launched better marketing campaigns, and focused on improving service quality. “We started posting on social media and it really worked,” said one student. Another reflected that “Creating of marketing ideas pushed me to think outside the box”. By Week 4, sales targets were consistently achieved. Students tackled supply delays and improve service speed quality. However, time management was a recurring challenge, students found that it was hard to balance studies and work especially during the assignment deadlines and exam periods. Industry supervisors’ feedback on students’ marketing strategies offered practical insights. However, in some weeks, delays in receiving feedback made it harder to make timely improvements.

The program concluded with reflections on growth and achievement. Students consistently reported increased confidence, creativity, communication and analytical thinking. This aligns with Chopra (2025) who found that WIL enhances higher-order cognitive skills and interpersonal abilities. Overtime, reflection revealed growth in team collaboration and entrepreneurial mindset.

Pedagogies Insights and Challenges

This WIL program is different from traditionally internships. Instead of sending student to companies, students manage a real-business in a campus-based WIL environment. Many off-campus internships present challenges for students with disabilities and those less experience with workplace norms and professionalism. Additional costs such as transport and work attire create financial pressure and limit the ability to participate in WIL opportunities, particularly for students from low socio-economic background (Brooks & Timms, 2023; Jackson, 2023). This may limit their abilities to participate in WIL opportunities. On-campus WIL program provides a safe and supportive space for students to make decisions, solve problems and learn from mistakes, Weekly debrief reflection helped to transform daily operational tasks into learning experiences that develop soft skills and entrepreneurial mindset.

One key challenge of this WIL program was the reflection quality during weekly debrief reflection sessions. Some students engaged deeply, connecting their experience with personal growth whereas others provided surface-level response. This inconsistency highlighted that simply putting students in a WIL activity does not necessarily result in meaningful learning. WIL activities alone do not ensure active engagement, critical thinking and skills development (Sadler, 2009). Linking reflection to theory is essential for deeper learning (Diaz et al., 2025; Jackson, 2025). According to Diaz et al (2025), WIL programs should be purposefully designed to ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Implications for WIL Programs

This case shows that an effective WIL experience is not just giving student a kiosk and letting them run it. It required a purposefully designed with meaningful theory-practice connections. Grounded in Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984) foundational work, experiential learning is effective when experiences involve problem solving, reflection and educator guidance. Therefore, reflection is a core element of quality WIL experiences that boost students’ employability (Ferns, Russell & Smith, 2015; Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2019). One of the challenges faced in this WIL case was the quality of the students’ reflection. To address this, the WIL program could include more structured reflection with scaffolded prompts. A

structured scaffolded reflection prompts encourage consistent and deeper engagement (Woodley & Beattie, 2010). Structured prompts such as “What theory informed your choices?” and “What would you do differently next time?” guide students to critically review the experience (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993), integrating theoretical concepts with practical application and planning future actions (Fleming & Martin, 2007). This approach ensures depth and consistency in reflection and learning (Woodley & Beattie, 2010; Dean, Agostinho & Clements, 2012)

This case also highlighted the need of involving key stakeholders, particularly academic mentors and industry supervisors. A successful WIL program depends on both parties reaching an agreement on WIL learning outcomes and performance criteria. In other words, it is important that industry supervisor understanding of WIL objectives and learning outcomes is crucial. Ongoing communication is strongly encouraged to maintain regular dialogue and constructive feedback given. Importantly, careful attention is needed in how feedback is provided, especially for students who are unfamiliar with professional workplace settings, to help them adjust, build confidence, and learn effectively. providing orientation sessions for industry supervisors before the project begins to ensure clarity of roles, expectations, and timely feedback.

Conclusion

The purpose of the student-run café on campus is to promote WIL where students apply what they have learnt in an authentic workplace setting. With better scaffolding and stronger industry links, this WIL program can be impactful. By sharing both successes and challenges, this case contributes practical implications for implementing WIL program in higher education. While WIL program offers authentic, hands-on learning experiences, its full potential depends on purposeful design, structured reflection, and strong collaboration with industry partners.

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