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## How Students Learn on Placement: Transitioning Placement Practices in Work-Integrated Learning

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## Abstract

Examining learning in work-integrated learning (WIL) courses is complex. WIL traverses work and university spaces, which can be challenging for the way student learning is conceived, planned, supported, assessed and reported. This study strengthens our understanding of how students learn on placement by going directly to the source and observing learning unfold, in situ. Using an ethnographic methodology, this study adopts Schatzki's (1996, 2010) practice-based lens to illuminate how students learn to embody and accomplish their assigned tasks on WIL placement. Findings suggest that students initially learn through performing an intermediary cluster of practices that enable them to orient, adapt and conform to new configurations of people, things, spaces, tools, bodies and technologies. These temporary transitioning placement practices are distinctive to WIL and take their shape within social practice arrangements. The study offers empirical evidence to ground and theorize learning for WIL curricula and support an emerging, materially-significant and entangled conception of learning on placement.

## Keywords

placement;, learn, students, practices, transitioning, placement, work-integrated, learning

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# How students learn on placement: transitioning placement practices in work-integrated learning

Bonnie Amelia Dean<sup>1</sup> & Christopher Sykes

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## Key words

Ethnography; internships; learning on placement; transitioning placement practices; work-integrated learning.

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## **Introduction**

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a prominent pedagogical strategy in higher education that assembles the formal academic curriculum with experiences of work (Billett 2006, 2009). WIL courses equip students with the required employability skills to effectively operate in work settings (Jackson 2014) provide opportunity to develop professional identities (Trede 2012; Bowden 2016). Designing WIL curricular however is challenging as it bestrides dual sites of learning (Billett 2009). The WIL curriculum connects university and workspaces through a program that imposes academic methods of assessing and measuring learning against outcomes. It is nested within a broader discipline-specific course (unit) of study and adheres to levels of reporting through governing bodies that review subjects for quality assurance purposes. Because of this engrained socio-political context, the risk for educators is to view learning in work placement sites through the same lens as learning in university spaces.

However, student learning in the workplace is markedly not the same as learning at university through the formal curriculum. Over the last two decades or so, scholars in the field of WIL (or related areas such as work-based learning or practice-based learning) have sought to distinguish learning in the workplace from traditional higher education learning (Billett 2009, 2014; Dahlgren, Hult, Dahlgren, Segerstad and Johansson 2006; Eraut 2008a; 2008b; Higgs 2014; Hodge, Wright, Barraket, Scott, Melville and Richardson 2011). Students experiencing learning across both settings agree there is a distinction, yet grapple with learning in the workplace, articulating difficulty in applying theoretical concepts from disciplines studies in their WIL placement (Veillard 2012). For many WIL educators, the workplace and the learning that takes place is elusive, often spoken of and reported upon by students, yet rarely, or never, experienced first-hand. The initial transition into the workplace for placement requires students to respond to the challenges of quickly developing new workplace skills, forming professional relationships and adjusting to new social and material conditions. To date, little research has focused on how students learn during this initial workplace transition. Understanding how the complexities of work and the workplace shape student learning is an area that requires further in-depth exploration.

This paper addresses the identified distinctions of learning across the two sites of learning through adopting a practice-based theoretical lens. It shows that by focusing on student's development of professional practice including transitional practices, the situational distinctions are acknowledged without bifurcating student learning. Performance of workplace practices is then the yardstick of student knowing and learning. Specifically, the aim of the study is to empirically examine student learning on placement through Schatzki's (1996, 2010) practice-based lens, paying attention to the affordances and constraints that shape how students learn in the initial transition into the workplace. It does so by employing an ethnographic methodology that places the researcher in situ, to observe practice as it transpires among related practices, people, technologies and materialities. The paper begins by discussing leading studies that have attended to learning on placement before presenting the practice-based approach, the study and its findings.

## **Learning on placement**

A key feature of any student placement is the expectation that over time in the setting, students will become increasingly confident and competent at the tasks assigned. This notion

of progression is captured by the Dreyfus brothers (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2005) who suggest learning a profession follows a sequence of developmental stages moving from novice to expert. They propose a five-stage model of skill acquisition: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise. The model shows increasing autonomy as the practitioner increases situational recognition and understanding of the norms and routines to the point that they become tacit.

Scholars, however, have explicitly critiqued such developmental learning models for promoting overly linear, rationalised and individualised approaches to learning (Price, Scheeres and Boud 2009; Sawchuk and Taylor 2010). Dall’Alba and Sandberg (2006) for example, maintain that progression doesn’t occur in a stepwise manner, that professionals understand and engage in practice in contrasting ways making a fixed sequence of development unlikely. They instead propose “an embodied understanding of practice, rather than attributes, forms the basis for professional skill and its development” (Dall’Alba & Sandberg 2006, p 390), where understanding is not only a cognitive activity, but demonstrated through knowing and skilful performance in practice. Offering critique from a different angle and examining learning within a broader context, Eraut (2008a, p.4) agrees the Dreyfus progression is both individualistic and conservative, with “scant attention to the increasing occurrence of novel and complex situations” in which work is performed.

Looking into research on learning with first year professionals, Eraut and Hirsh (2007) take a socio-cultural perspective to theorise workplace learning as influenced by a number of contextual, capability, performance and formal/informal learning factors. Eraut with Hirsh (Eraut 2008a, 2008b; Eraut and Hirsh 2007) argue that informal learning for novice practitioners is mostly a by-product of everyday work processes and therefore is often not seen as ‘learning’ by a novice. Eraut (2008a) presents a typology of early career learning comprising three work activities: work processes whereby learning is a consequence of doing work (e.g. working alongside others, problem solving, working with clients); learning actions located within work (e.g. asking questions, reflecting, learning from mistakes); and learning processes which are more formal or sought-out opportunities to focus on learning (e.g. being supervised or mentored, conferences, short courses). Eraut (2008a; 2008b) argues that this typology can be used to inform WIL placement learning to increase awareness of the range of learning modes available in the workplace and to make students aware of how to access these learning opportunities. He encourages students to: actively ask questions and seek information; develop effective relationships; listen, observe and reflect; and, seek feedback both in-the-moment and after work is performed. His summary of placement learning is similar to his previous research with early career professionals, in suggesting that learning is most likely to occur on placement from appropriately challenging work, building relationships and developing agentic capabilities, as these build confidence and proactive behaviour.

Eraut and Hirsh’s work (Eraut 2008a; 2008b; Eraut and Hirsh 2007) is helpful for understanding learning on placement, however is limited in one key way: the research was not conducted on with students on WIL placements. While both cohorts, early career professionals and student interns, share similarities in their entry to a new workplace and need to competently perform assigned tasks, they diverge in several important respects. First, a new employee’s temporal commitment to the role is such that they are committed to performing the role for a contract period or ongoing equivalent with the expectation of staying in the role. Student interns, on the other hand, perform tasks in order to gain practical

experience, cognisant that their time in this workplace is regulated and bounded. Second, interns are not paid employees and therefore are not entitled to the range of benefits, rules and regulations as paid staff. Although work may be the result of a successful placement, it is not the intended purpose of the WIL curriculum. Therefore, before being deemed to hold the graduate qualifications for employment, once the agreed upon time in the workplace is complete, interns resume studies as students in higher education. Third, although in the workplace, interns are learning through a particular higher education framework and pedagogy with pre-specified learning outcomes, compulsory assessments, university curriculum, university and workplace supervisors, policies and programs.

Turning to studies closer to illuminating student learning on placement, Billett's (2001; 2002) extensive work on workplace pedagogic practice and learning as a social and situated enterprise, has more recently translated into insights for framing learning in WIL (Billett 2009; 2014; 2018). Accepting an inseparability of work and learning, Billett (2002) argues against deficit framings of informal learning at work, to instead propose learning as arising through participation in related social practices. This learning does not emanate from individuals but instead arises through practices that have generated from historical, cultural and situational sources and the way individuals inter-psychologically relate to these practices. These factors shape activities and interactions and how individuals learn through them. In arguing for the effectiveness of WIL workplace experiences, Billett (2014) claims that placement learning goes beyond linking theory to practice and instead argues that learning is shaped by socio-personal factors as students use and reconcile what has been experienced in distinct social and physical settings to build and extend their knowledge.

Billett's (2009; 2014; 2018) work is important to our understanding of how students learn on placement, advocating for the importance of practice-based learning in higher education and for drawing attention to how the situational, social, historical and cultural factors shape learning. For placement learning, Billett (2014) delineates between the formal curriculum, enacted curriculum (what students do) and experienced curriculum (reconciliation and learning transfer across boundaries) as three distinct functions and experiences of learning for students. Billett (2014) prioritises learning at the stage of translating and meaning making from experiences, that is the third category the 'experienced curriculum' and claims that placement learning arises from both the mediation of the social and the mediating acts of the personal, and the immediate and ongoing consequences of that learning.

Building on these various perspectives and ways of framing learning on placement, this study takes one step back, to the source and origin of the practice itself to investigate what Billett (2014) calls the 'enacted curriculum'. While Billett and Eraut's work conceptualising learning comes closest to helping us understand how students learn in WIL, neither are based on empirical evidence with students as they engage in placements and work spaces. If we are to better understand learning on placement, then theoretical and methodological approaches must permit access to and examination of student engagement at the place of practice (Dean, Sykes and Turbill 2018; Dean 2019) to illuminate those in-the-moment actions that emerge as students transition into workplaces and learn to perform work practices.

## A practice-based approach to learning on placement

Practice-based approaches (see Schatzki's 1996; 2002; 2010) place *practices* as the central social phenomena, positing that the social world is made intelligible by the 'hanging together' of a complex nexus of social practice arrangements. According to Schatzki (1996), a practice is characterised as:

*... a temporally and spatially dispersed set of doings and sayings that are linked in certain ways. Through: understandings of what to do and say, explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions, and teleoaffective structures of ends, projects, tasks, purposes and beliefs, emotions and moods (pp. 89-90).*

For Schatzki, practices are organised (in the sense there is some degree of predictability, routine and order to what we do), open-ended (yet what we do is always subject to change) and spatio-temporal (taking place in a specific time and place that has wide implications for what we can and can't do). Every practice is intrinsically interlaced with and in other 'practice-arrangement meshes', for example, human resource practices link and overlap with nexuses of activity across the organisation including management, cleaning and information technology practices.

However, it's not only practices that are connected to one another, practices are deeply bound to the social (human) and material (non-human) configurations in which they are performed (Orlikowski 2007). Schatzki's (2010, p.123) position on practice theory accentuates the role of materiality by discursively affording materials equivalent importance with other practice-based elements, claiming materiality as "an ingredient of social phenomena". He describes practices as 'materially mediated' and therefore 'intrinsically connected', 'interwoven', and 'locked in a variety of contingent and tight ways' (Schatzki 2002, pp. 106-109). This materially significant connection espouses a relational ontology, in which "everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things" (Langley and Tsoukas 2010, p. 3).

Within this relational ontology, Schatzki (1996) defines two key types of inter-related practices: dispersed and integrative practices. Dispersed practices are those found spread across different areas of social life, characterised as nexuses of doings and sayings linked to the practice they express. Examples of dispersed practices are 'to question', 'to follow', 'to confirm', and 'to interrogate'. Dispersed practices are to be considered in relation to one another, such as 'to question' in relation to 'to interview'. Integrative practices, on the other hand, represent particular sectors of social life and are composed of dispersed practices. It is these integrative practices that Schatzki (1996) refers to when he says practices are composed of understandings of what to do and say, rules and teleoaffective structures. Examples of integrative practices may include medical practices, accounting practices, religious practices and cooking practices. Human resources practices, for example are integrative practices that might comprise various dispersed practices of 'to listen', 'to evaluate', 'to question' and 'to report'.

These practice-based sensibilities – as central to social life, connected to other practices, that transpire within material contexts and comprise dispersed and integrative types – are useful analytical elements to investigate learning on placement as they open up new ways to investigate this space. This perspective is closer to Dall'Alba and Sandberg's (2006) focus of learning as situated in embodied understandings of practice and moves away from

conceptions of learning as produced in sequence or stages (e.g. Dreyfus & Dreyfus 2005), or as occurring after practice during cognitive meaning making processes (e.g. Billett 2014). Instead, it frames learning as an embodied performance that includes cognitive, affective and physical actions in socio-material settings (Gherardi, 2019) where knowing is produced and reproduced through practice and impacted by a range of situational, social and material determinants.

### *Methodology*

*To make explicit the meaning, the significance, of everyday practices in any kind of truly explanatory manner requires going beneath the surface to those messy spaces of our lives where we commonly don't explain why we do what we do (Pader, 2006, p. 174).*

Researching students' practices on placement requires a methodological approach commensurable with practice theory that makes visible students situated performance of practices. Because much of everyday practice is commonplace, it is easily overlooked, difficult to articulate and even misreported (Barley and Kunda 2001). Therefore, as Pader (2006) describes, in order to investigate practice, we must venture "beneath the surface". An ethnographic research approach was adopted in order to combine contextual, extended periods of field work with other questioning methods to describe *and* explain things students do. In a broad sense, ethnography is a form of *inquiry* and *writing* that produces descriptions and experiential accounts of both researcher and participants (Denzin 1997). Ethnographic research approaches and practice theory are synergistic, while practice theory highlights *theoretically* the everyday-ness of what people do, then *methodologically* it makes sense to not overlook the mundane, routine and ordinariness of this everyday life world (Hopwood 2010). For studies in WIL, "ethnography has rich potential for unpacking the complexities of a range of placement practices that are not yet adequately understood or explained" (Dean, Sykes and Turbill 2018, p.4).

Multiple methods were employed to combine contextual and temporal observations with the more perceptual and in-depth probing gathered from interviews (Dawson 1997). Five methods included observation/ participation; reflexive participant interviews; accessing, collecting and copying artefacts (including assessment items); field notes and photographs; and, reflexive writing. In interviews, photographs served as representations of practice and material configurations and stimulated discussion around meaning. This positioning helped reflect on what was going on and assist students to make meaning on why they were doing or not doing certain things.

Data analysis comprised writing thick descriptions (Geertz 1973), open coding (Lee 1999) and comparative analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to examine the data for thematic connections or linkages both within and between participant cases. This inductive process allowed for an open, flexible interrogation of unexpected concepts and patterns emerging from the data and is consistent with a systematic, iterative and reflexive approach to analysis (van der Waal 2009). Furthermore, the data collection and analysis processes were scrutinized under Schwartz-Shea's (2006) evaluative criteria for trustworthiness of qualitative research.



### *The researcher and participants*

Participants in the study were students in an internship program at the University of Wollongong, Australia. The program is an elective subject, open to all business students, whereby students are competitively recruited for internship positions offered by local host organisations. The internship is conducted over one semester (13 weeks) during which time students participate in the 16 days at the work site and complete assessment tasks. Three students volunteered as participants for the study. The first was Mari, a third-year female student studying human resources who was placed in a local hotel of an international company in the human resources division. The second was Lee, a third-year international finance and marketing male student, also placed at the same hotel however in the finance and accounting division. The third was Sara, a final-year marketing and public relations female student who was placed at a regional not-for-profit organisation.

The sequencing of the 16 day placement was negotiated with each industry partner based on their needs and availabilities, as well as with the student's study and other employment engagements. Given that the internship was conducted inside a semester and was embedded into a subject, that also required several face-to-face classes, students needed to balance their placement commitments alongside attending three other subjects simultaneously. This resulted in highly flexible and variable timing of placements, for example, they could be completed in a block or over several weeks. Therefore, to accommodate this flexibility during data gathering, the researchers elected to intentionally space observations across each of the student's 16 day placements, so that work days could be observed at the beginning, midway through and during the final days to capture changes and patterns in learning over the 16 days. On the days that researcher was absent, other methods (student's photographs, reflections, assessments, work artefacts and interviews) were drawn upon. In total, the researcher participated in equivalent of 13 full days, observed 67 hours of practice, handwrote 79 pages of notes and conducted 17 hours of interviews with students and supervisors. The researcher attended the work day as experienced by the student, which occasionally included half-days (due to supervisor's absence or student attending a class, assessment or exam on campus) or breaks between days (due to organisation's seasonal fluctuations or student/supervisor taking holidays).

### **An intermediary bundle of practices**

Through observing, recording, reflecting on and questioning students' practices on placement and drawing on a practice-based lens (Schatzki, 1996; 2002; 2010) the data analysis examined the social, contextual and material affordances productive of their learning. As well as highlighting discipline-based knowing in practice, the analysis made visible an intermediary bundle of practices distinctive to the way students transitioned into their work placement. These practices took their shape within practice arrangement meshes (Schatzki, 2002), where, through learning work practices, students were initially learning to work in new configurations of people, things, spaces, tools, bodies and technologies. In clustering these practices, the analysis identified three dimensions (or domains) of practices that students performed in their transitioning. These were termed *orienting* that we define as aligning with standards and rules of practice, *conforming* that we define as fitting in with acceptable social and affective conventions *adapting* that we define as adjusting bodily to new socio-material conditions.

## *Orienting*

At the outset, it was crucial for students to be ‘oriented’ to the organisational standards, priorities and rules that provided the structure and context for professional practices. This was not always straight forward, as even though each student was inducted formally, students weren’t always presented with consistency in their roles or tasks across the 16 days of placement. This led students to adopt a pattern of iterative organising and re-organising of their work and actions, as they adjusted to the requirements and expectations of new roles and tasks. For example, it wasn’t until placement day 8, that Lee was assigned a stable task in accounts receivable, that he could start and accomplish each day with the material support of a to-do-list. While this repetition led to a degree of confidence in his performance of the role, it was observed that even over time practising, Lee continued to rely on regular checks with his supervisor to affirm and approve his activities:

*After grabbing a coffee, Lee refers to his to-do-list but hesitates, so he gets himself organised by turning on the computer. He has been working off the same list for several days and has started each morning by doing the day bags. Diego [supervisor] walks into the office. He calls out to Diego, ‘do you want me to start with calling clients or day bags?’ Diego replies ‘I think start with the day bags’ (Field notes, Lee, Day 13)*

Lee wrote lists to structure and order his work according to the guidelines and standards given by Diego. Questioning and writing things down supported the development of an alignment with Diego’s and the organisation’s priorities. These simple subsidiary or ‘dispersed practices’ (Schatzki, 1996) as patterns of action were observed in the actions of other students as well as they learned an assigned task. Students were observed checking, note-taking and following instructions to learn the standards, norms and rules of their work.

Mari experienced several shifts in her role and positioning during her internship, which required her to re-organise herself towards new tasks, due to the disruption resulting from a resignation and subsequent recruitment of a HR coordinator (the role designated as her placement supervisor). Mari often found herself working independently and without explicit direction, and therefore relied on observation of her supervisors and taking notes of discussions to remember how to do a set of tasks. These seemingly obvious subsidiary practices were crucial in enabling her to perform her assigned tasks independently when a supervisor was inaccessible. Prior to her first supervisor leaving, Mari was taken briefly through some of the daily activities, rules and standards that would be useful for recruitment practices. She reflects:

*I tried to write as many notes down as possible before she left so that I could refer to those. So she sort of did it step by step, like so when she said you have to draw contracts up of people who we recruit, she said like, “this is what’s in the starters pack, this is what needs to be added to the starters pack, this is where you can find what needs to be added” and I sort of tried to write it down as much as possible so that I could have that there. (Post-placement interview, Mari,)*

Later in her internship however, Mari becomes less reliant on her notes or others when checking or questioning an aspect of her task as she had learned to enact her supervisor’s standards. For example, on day thirteen of Mari’s internship, placement field notes describe

the fluency of her actions when looking for the standard wage per hour for an employment contract she is drafting:

*Mari is typing an email. She stops, goes to a cupboard above, takes out a folder, flicks it open to a file, pulls it out and places it next to her and keeps on typing referring to the new document. It is a seamless movement, a knowing of where this information is, in which folder, in which cupboard (Field notes, Mari, Day 13).*

Similarly, Sara beginning her work in marketing, depended on watching and taking hand-written notes 'to learn' procedural requirements. She expressed preference for using these subsidiary practices when a workplace colleague, John, shows her how to use the website management system:

*John*                      *How do you want to learn? Do you want to watch and write notes, or wing it or just do it?*

*Sara*                      *Watch and write notes*

*John*                      *Next time I come down then you will do it by yourself. Grab your notebook then (Field notes, Sara, Day 3).*

Practices that assist students to learn to enact standards, procedures and rules in to accomplish their professional practices included observing, note-taking, self-regulating mistakes, checking and confirming activities and following instruction. The researcher noticed how students were progressively learning to monitor and move their bodies and self-assess their own performances to perform the work that had been assigned.

### *Conforming*

As well as becoming oriented to the requisite work standards associated with their work practices and roles, students also adjusted the performance of social actions to conform to organisational norms. In what was seen and heard, students went to great efforts to conform socially in various ways: to fit in, show their appreciation and respect, to build relationships and to deal with expectations and affect in themselves and others. All students fitted in in various ways throughout their internships. For example, Sara enacted respect as she physically positioned herself away from core business discussions and operations, and in the way she appeared to minimise her physical space, noise and impact. She says to the researcher: "I'm sort of thankful for them having me... I didn't want to impose on his business and disturb him [supervisor]" (Post-placement interview, Sara). Working in close proximity with Sara, the researcher watched how she positioned her body and work documents to take up minimal space and even speak very little during the times she was working.

Over the course of the three observed internships, students demonstrated and verbalised appreciation for assigned work roles and tasks. Even when Mari was surprisingly 'promoted' due to the resignation of her supervisor the HR Coordinator dealt with her anxiety and stepped up. She was given just two days of job shadowing and handover (Days 5 & 6) before independently taking on the tasks associated with acting as HR Coordinator (Days 7 -13), requiring her to draft employment contracts and perform workplace orientations for work experience students. This role has high levels of responsibility that surprisingly, Mari tackles independently and resolutely on her first day in the role,:

*Today I was in the office on my own as [previous HR Coordinator] has transferred and [HR Manger] was in Sydney! It was slightly daunting, but I had a big list of 'things to do' so I was happy to put my head down and get it done (eLog, Mari, Day 7).*

However, on day 14 of placement, Mari is required to step out of the acting HR Coordinator role while the new coordinator is being inducted. By the afternoon of this day, Mari waits to find out what she will be doing and who will be delegating to her. The researcher writes how Mari displays a kind of obsequiousness when allocated smaller tasks:

*Jessica (HR Manager) asks Julie (the personal assistant to the General Manager) to delegate some tasks to Mari. As Jessica leaves, Julie asks Mari if she would open the mail – to my surprise Mari accepts this job with gratitude “Sure thing! No problem” she says (Field notes, Mari, Day 14).*

As organisational practices shift and people come in and out of the space, roles and tasks are allocated and taken away, yet the student remains socially and affectively engaged. Mari, Lee and Sara all spoke about the way they ‘just did things’. For example, after acting as the HR Coordinator role over seven placement days, Mari found herself in her last days out of place as a new HR Coordinator was inducted. Mari now found herself performing basic, one-off jobs or administrative activities such as collecting and sorting mail. She reflects on this change of role and responsibility:

*I kind of felt like as a student going into an organisation you just do what you're told, they're helping you out so you get tasks and you just do them. And I wouldn't want to undermine [the new HR Coordinator] in anyway by saying 'no that's not relevant at all'... But, I don't know I guess I just had to do it. I just sort of went along with it yeah. It happened pretty late on in my internship as well so I just sort of figured I've only got a couple of, you know scheduled days left (Post-placement interview, Mari).*

This excerpt demonstrates how Mari grappled with and conceded to the change produced late in her internship, in so far that it produced appreciative, respectful and almost obsequious thoughts, attitudes and behaviours.

For Mari, Lee and Sara adapting placement practices are performed at various times as the social and material workplace arrangements, and changes or shifts within those arrangements, forced them to change and respond. In Sara's case for example, she needed to adapt to the organisation's flexible and seasonal working hours, by working from home or not working at all during off-peak times. Sara explained that working from home was also driven by her feelings of inadequacy with her productivity in the workplace: “I would feel bad and then go home and get it done. I'd stay up working on it” (Post-placement interview, Sara). Although Sara struggled at times with adapting to seasonal working arrangements, she persisted with her placement whether that meant working in her home or at the organisation, to complete the work she had been assigned.

These observations highlight how students accommodate what they do and how they sound to conform to organisational norms and behaviours. For example, students were observed performing conforming practices by mimicking the look and sound of other employees, such as what they say when they respond to or make a phone call. Conforming relates to a tacit understanding of what is ‘normal’ and acceptable behaviour within this context. Over time and with opportunity to practise, student's pick-up on implicit social norms in the workplace and adopt these as a way to appropriately perform the practice. Competency in enacting

cultural and organisational norms grows as the student learns to fit in and stay engaged, enact respect in relationships.

### *Adapting*

As well as becoming oriented to organisational standards and conforming their work performance with social norms, students needed to adapt their performance of work routines in new and changing conditions. By day twelve, Lee has had the opportunity to work in an accounts receivable role for four straight placement days. Following the to-do-list initially set out by his workplace supervisor, Lee becomes more confident and competent in his day-to-day work practices. On this day, Lee comments: “I guess that now, since I know what to do, it’s just become more of a routine job, allowing me to do multiple tasks with confidence” (eLog, Lee, Day 12). Mari is also given the opportunity to practice for several days in the HR Coordinator role. On day 9, a conversation is recorded between Mari and the HR Manager that demonstrates her growing competency in the role:

*Jessica*            *Mari can I get you to do a contract?*  
*Mari*                *Yup. When is she starting? (having overheard the conversation outside the office and stopping what she was doing to now taking notes on a recycled piece of paper)*  
*Jessica*            *(goes into office and comes back out looking at a document) Monday*  
*Mari*                *Does she need to be organised for induction?*  
*Jessica*            *No, she has worked here before*  
*Mari*                *OK, does she need a starter pack?*  
*Jessica*            *Um... no, don't worry about it*  
*Mari*                *OK. Also, Mark (from another division) had one like that before (Field notes, Mari, Day 9).*

Mari uses direct questioning to show that she understands what is required in this process. This competence is similarly shown on the same day as she inducts two new work experience students from local high schools to the organisation:

*First, she takes them through the confidentiality agreement, explaining what this means in plain language. Next she gives an overview of the organisation and the management structure. In doing this she is looking both girls in the eyes and does not refer to any notes. As she talks about each level manager she gestures to where they sit, which level they are on or where their office is located. From this she moves into the emergency procedures and recalls the number to call in case of emergency. She also goes through the sounds they may hear if there is an emergency in the building. She has not yet referred to any notes. Her instructions are to 'stay close to the department head and follow instructions' and locates the area outside as a meeting point (Field notes, Mari, Day 14).*

Student’s learning was made visible in their bodily enactments of complex routines. Moreover, they not only had to deal with complex routines but also temporal rhythms that were sometimes fast paced and hectic and at other times slow and boring. Sara, like Mari and Lee, experienced instances where opportunities to practise were limited. In this passive time/space, Sara was observed checking the news online or Facebook, Lee chatted with his

colleges or the researcher, and Mari looked on her phone or went on social media. This ‘dead time’ is unproductive and limits learning, as Sara explained “I remember one afternoon I sat there for a while because I’d done everything...” (Post-placement interview, Sara). However, Mari, Lee and Sara never complained about this unproductive time nor reported it in their assessments. On Mari’s final day of placement, field notes capture her search to fill in time while awaiting an assigned task:

*Mari mucks around on the computer and looks for something to do. “I need something to do” she says to me. “I’ll wait till they (workplace employees) finish talking and then I’ll ask”. Mari goes to the tray with the work experience students’ resumes. “I thought I would go through and see if any of them need to be entered” she comments to me. She is showing initiative but also looking for something to occupy her time. This demonstrates knowledge of role. The mail bag arrives. After struggling with the tie, she gets around to sorting it through. I can hear (the workplace employees) laughing in an adjoining office. I feel Mari has been forgotten in this moment. Mari goes through the mail, knowing how it has to be sorted. She finishes that and goes back to play with her phone (Field notes, Mari, Day 16).*

After her placement, Mari reflects on this passage on her final day in an interview: “I was probably going through personal messages just trying to occupy time until someone came back and told me what to do” (Post-placement interview, Mari). Further, she reflects on what support she wished she had received on this last day “I guess if they had tasks for me then I could have been doing more but, yeah I did sort of feel that my last couple of days weren’t as productive as they had been. Yeah, but it was still good... not being negative about it” (Post-placement interview, Mari). Mari shows her ability to conform to the shifts in the social and material arrangements by being appreciative, fitting in and doing the best she can in the given situation.

## **Transitioning placement practices**

This study set out to investigate how students learn on placement during the initial transition into the workplace through gathering a range of data including observational data from placements. To analyse this data, Schatzki’s (1996) dispersed and integrative practice-orders was employed to illuminate learning practices as they emerged and were analogous across the observed placements. The data was systemically and iteratively analysed looking for details of ‘what students did’, that is, looking at the dispersed practices, before examining these dispersed practices as possible markers of wider integrative practices. The data suggested learning practices nested within three key integrative transitioning placement practices: *orienting placement practices*; *conforming placement practices* and *adapting placement practices*.

Table 1 outlines these three transitioning placement practices and the observed dispersed practices constituting their composition. This table is useful for naming transitioning practices yet is limited by way of representing the way these transitioning practices overlap and integrate. Transitioning placement practices are intrinsically interlaced and dependent on the effects of material configurations and other practice-arrangement meshes. As such each student will draw on different arrangements of activities in the moment in order to get to know and learn professional workplace practices.

Table 1: Transitioning placement practices

Integrative practice	<b>Orienting practices</b> <i>Aligning with standards and rules of practice</i>	<b>Conforming practices</b> <i>Fitting in with acceptable social and affective conventions</i>	<b>Adapting practices</b> <i>Bodily adjustment to socio-material conditions</i>
Dispersed practices	Observing Note-taking Questioning, checking and confirming Self-regulating mistakes Following instruction Demonstrating the rules of the practice Listening for feedback Working independently Using organisational artefacts	Fitting in Showing appreciation Showing respect Building collegial relationships Managing emotions and expectations Demonstrating competence	Routine performances Improvising in uncertainty Occupying dead time Working with distractions Working unaccompanied Making judgements Being flexible Prioritising Adapting to significant change

Examination of the data reveals insights into learning on placement that has been veiled in previous research. To an extent, *orienting practices* are consistent with Eraut’s (2008a, 2008b) ‘learning actions’ in his typology of learning on placement whereby novice employees enact certain doings and sayings to better understand or perform a task. Given that Eraut’s (2008a, 2008b) model was not derived from empirical data in WIL, but instead newcomers to work, it is interesting to see that this orienting practice somewhat aligns with his work. What sets this insight apart from Eraut’s learning actions though, is that the focus is not altogether on the performance of gaining skills to perform a task, but instead on learning to perform any task within prefigured rules and standards in a social-material setting. Students were constantly calibrating their actions and seeking or recording information to better understand the norms and rules, in order to perform their assigned tasks effectively. These practices resemble the *conforming practices* in Clark and Zukas’ (2016) Bourdieusian study whereby individuals in successful placements learn to ‘play the game’. This study highlights however that during this initial transition into work, student learning was imbued with affective responses as they sought to fit in with acceptable social and affective conventions.

Quiet times emerged as an interesting phenomena that stalled students’ embodied performances in the space, restricting observations of knowing and doing. These quiet times are described here as ‘dead time’, a provisional time/space that limited opportunities to practise that often came about in new configurations or in an absence of delegated tasks. For example, if an student had a question or concern or relied on activities to be delegated, the moments awaiting that response produced passive bodies in the context. That is, dead time limited bodily movement; it produced a pause on practising. Lee performing an accounts receivable practice, Mari briefly performing a HR coordinator practice and Sara performing a marketing practice, are examples of how a work practice is being developed through routines and repetition, socially and intelligibly – through opportunities to *practise*. In this study, it was found that these opportunities to practise were not stable. Several times as a practice was becoming routinised in bodily performances, it was paused, changed, re-

directed, or abandoned. Mari's opportunity to practise in a HR Coordinator position, for example, was opened up and taken away by changes in practice-arrangement, as employees left and entered the space. 'Dead time' is an intriguing phenomena in WIL learning that has yet to be fully understood or explored, yet the impact on student learning when practise is stalled is significant.

This study contributes to unpacking the complexity of learning on placement, as it bestrides dual learning contexts, to make sense of how students know what to do as they transition into a new place of practice and learning. The work of Eraut (2004) and Billett (2009; 2014; 2018) have been influential to the research as it contributes to a broader understanding of how students learn in WIL. In making transitional placement practices visible, the study shows how the 'learning actions' identified in Eraut's (2008a) tripartite typology are essential for interns and their learning while on placement. The ways students use 'learning actions' is made clear in the observations of the intern's 'doings and sayings'. Simple actions such as questioning, note-taking are so often overlooked, yet interns showed that using these simple dispersed practices (Schatzki, 1996) is how they effectively learn to position themselves in their 'knowing in practice' (Gherardi, 2007).

Building on Billett's (2014) practice-based distinctions between the formal, enacted and experienced curriculum, the findings in this study illuminate practice into the 'enacted curriculum' (what students do). Billett (2014, p.7) argues that the experienced curriculum is the "most important of curriculum concepts" which assumes that value for learning is placed in the sense-making process, outside or as a result of the practice itself. While we agree that what learners come to construe and reflect is vital for learning on placement, it diminishes the value and inseparability of knowing and practice. This study therefore offers empirical evidence to unpack the enacted curriculum (Billett, 2014) and suggests that learning as meaning making, occurring after the experience, is not the only way of framing learning in WIL. Instead, we offer an emerging, materially-significant and entangled conception of learning on placement, where knowing is surfaced through practice.

## **Implications of findings for WIL curriculum**

Understanding how these transitioning placement practices transpire can inform how we conceive of student learning within WIL pedagogy and curriculum and highlight the importance of being attuned to the 'enacted curriculum'. For example, by recognising the importance of social, contextual and material relations we can see how when assigned tasks are stalled, re-directed or taken away, practising stops – through dead time – and learning work practices are limited. This suggests for WIL educators and workplace supervisors to consider maximising relevant time to practise by, for example, early in the placement discussing or outlining tasks students could do when they are uncertain what to do next or by identifying other employees who can delegate tasks if the supervisor is inaccessible. This will help to recognise the impact of other practice-arrangement meshes on the opportunity to practise.

Further, WIL educators may encourage students to enquire into the physical, material and social elements of their placement, to gain a clearer picture of their opportunities for practising discipline knowledge. Any kind of reporting of placement learning must take into account that a placement in a certain work context may not directly translate into applications of theory due to material conditions and pre-figured organisational practices and changes



within workspaces, which are outside the student's control. Instead, encouraging students to describe how they oriented, conformed and adapted to the workplace may assist to bring to the fore transitioning placement practices which will be crucial knowledge and skills when transitioning into their next workspace.

## **Conclusion**

Within organisational practice arrangement meshes, practices are sustained, abandoned or remade depending on who is there, what needs to get done, what tools are available, what time (day, season, year) it is, what practices have prefigured it, and practices that will come. Drawing on Schatzki's (2002) practice-based lens, a new, intermediary bundle of practices unique to WIL has been identified. Transitioning placement practices comprise a bundle of three practices - orienting, adapting and conforming practices - that are distinctive to the way students learn on placement. This bundle of practices emerged through paying attention to students' actions, bodies, use of tools, spatial arrangements, emotive responses, social relations, and sayings in the workplace during the period of an internship placement. Transitioning placement practices unfold when a student steps into the workspace and starts to do things: to observe, listen, take notes, question, adjust their bodies, follow someone, imitate, use objects, sit somewhere, eat their food and make conversation. The discovery of these transitioning practices contributes new insights into how students learn in WIL in order to conceptualise more broadly how student's development professional work practices.

This study is contextually located in Australia and in the business discipline, and therefore the findings are necessarily situated. It is limited in that it engaged three students, yet is rich by way of the depth of discovery into learning through observational methodology. Direct observations of student learning on placement is limited in WIL studies (Dean, 2019), yet the importance of WIL for student outcomes is exponentially growing and increasing embedded into University strategic priorities. Further observational research is necessary into a range of disciplines or placement settings to explore, for example, how students transition into community service organisations or clinical environments. Additionally, this study identified a concerning phenomenon that impacts student's ability to learn on placement and named it as 'dead time'. Further research and educational interventions need to investigate this passive and provisional time/space including ways in can be addressed through educator, supervisor and student perspectives.

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### ***Conflicts of interest/ Competing interests***

Nothing to declare.

### ***Ethics approval***

Ethics approval was approved by the Human Research Ethics Council at the University of Wollongong. Approval Number: HE11/349

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