Bridging theory and practice through Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): critical perspectives on the conceptualisations of WIL at a university in Sweden

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Published online: 17 Dec 2023.

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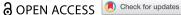
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ABSTRACT

In this article we interrogate how University of Sweden (UoS), the leading Work-integrated learning (WIL) university in Sweden, represents WIL publicly, discussing this in relation to higher education's changing role within an increasingly knowledge-based capitalism, in which knowledge and research become subsumed under demands for market utility and student employability. Through analysis of WIL literature we distil a theory-practice 'gap' with spatial, institutional, epistemological and pedagogical dimensions that WIL as a field of educational practice tries to 'bridge'. We use this conception to deconstruct how (UoS) presents WIL to potential students, partners, employers, and society at large. We find that while the university at the central level presents WIL as a synergistic and multi-dimensional activity that bridges the theory/practice divide to produce 'advanced knowledge' and employable students, the actual educational programs articulate WIL in a manner which privileges practical usability and employability over theoretical knowledge, in line with an academic capitalist focus on utility. Further, there is a significant difference in how vocational and academic programmes implement WIL. Whereas WIL components seem relatively easily integrated into professional programs present, academic programs must undertake advanced discursive manoeuvres to incorporate WIL's principles into what would otherwise be quite theory-focused programs.

1. Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is conventionally conceived as a theoretical and practical field for educational activities based on collaboration between higher education institutions (HEI) and working life (Billett & Smith, 2016; Bowen, 2020; Dorland et al., 2020). WIL is seen as related to forms of practice-based education like work-based learning, 'sandwich' learning, co-operative education, clinical placements, service learning and internships. However, there is more to WIL than a pedagogical approach. As a theoretical and practical field, WIL has given rise to several educational practices. Indeed, as Billett and Valencia-

Forrester (2020) point out, in a higher education context it is more correct to define WIL as a form of learning that students are intended to experience through Work-integrated education (WIE). However, given the common usage of WIL to mean WIE, we use the term WIL in this article to refer to the richer notion of WIE.

When more broadly conceived in this way, WIL includes specific epistemological and pedagogical approaches, whole courses and programs designed to integrate work and university learning, as well as a research field where different types of connections between work and learning are explored. Since WIL is a broad field with various meanings, there is room for researchers, teachers, university administrators and others, as well as for students and employers, to interpret what WIL can mean in practice. It ranges from quite concrete interpretations such as Konstantinou and Miller (2020), who argue that WIL is about getting students work-ready and that its reflective approach is about enhancing the educational experience and thereby creating a foundation for professional identity, or McRae (2015) who points to WIL as a transformative learning made possible by correct institutional requirements and emotional environments. It can also be defined in relation to external demands, as noted by Harmse and Goede (2012). Here, WIL is a way of meeting the needs of society in a broader sense, including both social inclusion and financial contribution. Furthermore, it can also be understood in a more esoteric sense such as proposed by Thång (2004) and Nehls (2010), who speak of WIL as a new figure of thought that makes education and work simultaneous and as taking place in-between academia, working life and society, akin to Eacott and Hodges (2014) who notes the specific *temporality* of WIL.

In this article, we examine how WIL is interpreted into educational practices at an institution of higher education in Sweden, University of Sweden (UoS).[1] The aim is to examine how the relatively large, diffuse, and multifaceted concepts of WIL are defined and translated into concrete meaning, such as pedagogical activities, as they are presented to surrounding society in UoS's communication and marketing, in particular of its educational programmes. Here, we uncover an illustrative contradiction between university-level communication and documents describing individual educational programs: whereas the former articulates WIL as a bridging of theory and practice, thereby producing 'advanced knowledge' and employable students, the latter builds from a more or less exclusive emphasis of the practical usability and economic utility of research and education, thereby privileging practice over theory, the needs and demands of market and state over the university's internal norms, and thus *reinforcing* those binaries that WIL sets itself out to deconstruct: theory/practice, education/working life, academia/'the real world', et cetera.

In addition to investigating WIL discourse, which has become increasingly influential in pedagogical and policy discussions during recent years, this article focuses WIL as an emergent set of discourses and practices which have resulted from the conditions for higher education having transformed during recent years, throughout an era of digitalization, globalization, and increased commodification of knowledge and research – what has been dubbed as the advent of *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). As such, our research contributes with knowledge on academic capitalism's effect on Swedish higher education and Swedish universities' institutional, epistemological, and pedagogical adaptation to the demands of academic capitalism. By viewing how WIL

discourse emerges from a higher educational institution's transformation of its educational practices in response to demands for increased marketization and employability of students, we highlight the university as an institutional space shaped by, and dependent on, the legitimation of outside forces, such as government and market.

1.1. Case introduction and historical context

UoS is a state-owned university founded in 1990. It employs roughly 700 people and has 13 000 students. WIL has been instrumental for its research, education, and marketing since the early 2000s; currently, it strives to apply WIL through the entirety of its education and research activities and has since 2002 been commissioned by the Swedish government to develop WIL in education and research.

Technically, UoS is not what is known in Sweden as an *universitet* but rather a *högskola* (often translated to 'university college'). Whilst the division between these two institutions was more pronounced in the past, differences in financing, prestige, and profile remain between them: *universitet* are typically more well-funded, research focused and internationally oriented, whilst *högskolor* are typically more education focused, often with one or a few emphases, and more regionally oriented. In many ways, UoS is a typical *högskola*. It retains a regionally focused profile and focuses on undergraduate and vocational education as well as on collaborative research with regional actors. Most of its students, many of them from the local area and without much academic background, take vocational programmes, with teaching and nursing being the most popular.

Whilst UoS's focus on WIL is unique amongst Swedish universities, it can be viewed as the outcome of a process common to all Swedish universities, and especially *högskolor*: increasing political pressure on HEIs to conduct research and education to promote growth, utility, and employment for external actors and institutions. Elsewhere (Sunnemark & Sunnemark, 2004, p. 11–13), some of us name this as an *externalization imperative* and view it as a result of Sweden's integration into global academic capitalism – e.g. what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004, p. 1) define as the process whereby 'groups of actors – faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals – [use] a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy'.

Starting with substantial reform in the 1990s, Swedish higher education has gradually moved from a social democratic model, focused on universalizing higher education and on developing the welfare state, towards an academic capitalist focus on providing an increasingly knowledge-intense capitalist economy with utility-focused research, innovations, and employees (Sunnemark & Sunnemark, 2004, p. 11–13). Concretely, this has meant several things: increased competition between universities over students, researchers, and financing, often prefiguring an emphasis on employability as a way of attracting students; decentralisation of Swedish higher education, making it possible for Swedish HEIs to develop niches and profiles; increased reliance on performance-based funding, privileging prestigious, research focused universities and incentivizing smaller universities to pursue collaborative research and external funding; repeated targeted investments in collaborative and applied research from both private and public actors; an increased curricular emphasis on 'initiative and entrepreneurship' (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019, p. 462).

Collectively, these changes have pressured universities to reorient their operations towards the needs and demands of potential funders, regional collaborators, employers, and political institutions and away from more classical academic values, such as *Bildung*, open pursuit of knowledge, and critical theory (Sunnemark & Sunnemark, 2004, p. 11–13). Arguably, this is especially true for *högskolor*, as these often lack stable access to the kind of economic and prestige capital that would enable a sustained focus on basic research and lesser reliance on external funding. WIL is therefore but one of several approaches applied by Swedish universities – and especially *högskolor* – to conduct such a reorientation. Given UoS's specific profile and contextual situation, it is, of course, a particular approach, with specific inclinations and characteristics, which we discuss in the analysis. In the end, however, it performs a transformation which most, if not all, Swedish HEIs have undergone or seek to undergo. Due to UoS's consistent and heavy emphasis on WIL across all its operations, however, it becomes a particularly apt case for the study of how such transformation is enacted in practice.

2. WIL in the literature: the theory and practice binary

WIL is generally understood as a bridge between education and working life, where the university's knowledge production and learning processes are encouraged to integrate with working life. In the literature on WIL, a binary between the university's *theoretical knowledge* and working life's *practical knowledge* is expressed through a plethora of discourses which describe and construct institutional logics, spatial locations, epistemological assumptions, and pedagogical practices. Within this binary logic, it is asserted that theoretical and practical learning a) takes place in different structural and organizational settings (i.e. university vs. working-life), b) that these settings are located in different physical localities (i.e. on a campus site, university library, or lab setting, vs. workplaces), c) builds from, and constructs, different epistemologies (i.e. theoretical vs. practical knowledge), and d) operates via different pedagogies (i.e. traditional, teacher-led 'banking' model of learning vs. learning-by-doing or similar approaches).

The key idea of WIL is that student learning is enhanced through occurring *both* at the university and in the workplace, given the distinct but complementary knowledge practices in both places. To that end, a dialogue between university and working life is encouraged, to develop education which prepare students for working life and to formulate research with practical relevance for workplaces (Gannaway & Sheppard, 2017, p. 55). WIL then becomes the name both of the 'dialogue' itself and of approaches which aim to establish this dialogue. In relation to this kind of *inter-knowledge* – that is, the integration or dialogue between university (theoretical) and working life (practical) knowledge – WIL is often described in ways similar to interdisciplinary research, as a field where a diversity of disciplinary traditions can meet in order to develop collaboration with working life. A variety of perspectives are in both cases considered to work *additively* – adding something to one another and thus enabling more advanced constellations of knowledge (Sunnemark, 2010).

In addition to being conceptualized as a cross-institutional site where higher education and working life meet, WIL is often considered to have deeper theoretical and pedagogical implications across higher education and learning in general. This, then, impacts actual educational designs and implies a pedagogical approach. Proponents of

WIL oppose a university they portray as an isolated place for teaching abstract, theoretical knowledge; instead, they envision collaboration with the needs and interests of working life in allowing students to develop as persons through a form of learning that combines theory and practice (Gellerstedt et al., 2015, p. 38; Rook & Sloan, 2021, p. 42; Thång, 2004, p. 31). Rather than seeing theory and practice as separate, they are presented as part of an iterative or synergistic process. Theoretical knowledge, as well as the learning of it, is understood as dependent on being practiced. Practical activity is similarly understood as dependent on theoretical knowledge, through which practical problems can be understood and solved. This understanding of learning is named in a number of different ways in framing this process – for example lifelong learning (Antonacopoulou et al., 2006), outcome based learning implemented by constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999), learning from experience (Boud et al., 1993), learning through experience (Gibson et al., 2002), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975), practice based learning (Higgs, 2011, 2012; Orrell & Higgs, 2012), situated learning (Olsson, 2004), learning by doing and reflecting practitioners (Mårdén, 2007; Mårdén & Theliander, 2004), cognitive and social learning (Schuetze & Sweet, 2003), and praxis learning (Thång, 2004). By basing education on such understandings, students are considered to be provided with a set of skills and characteristics that enable practical application of theoretical knowledge as well as theoretical reflection on practical professional activity. Such skills and attributes are often articulated as being on a metacognitive or alternatively, with Barnett (2004), an ontological level, and often includes critical thinking, self-reflexivity, creativity, and entrepreneurship.

With this broad view of WIL, it becomes possible to identify a set of terms that are important for understanding the field's knowledge production and self-understanding. These terms appear as a cluster of binary opposites, including 'university' vs. 'work life', 'academy' vs. 'real world', 'explicit' vs. 'implicit' knowledge, 'teacher-' vs. 'student centred education', 'epistemological' vs. 'ontological' learning or skills, 'classroom' vs. 'internship', 'unemployable/unemployed' vs. 'employable/employed', which all relate to the central dichotomy between *theory* and *practice* (Björck, 2020; Björck & Johansson, 2019).

The theory/practice dichotomy is recurring in the WIL literature and is something that the field is constantly trying to address and bridge. There are many examples on how this can be done. In an integrative literature review, Berndtsson et al. (2020) state the three most common approaches to bridging theory and practice as being supervisor support, variety of modalities for teaching, and collaboration between academic lecturers and working life supervisors. Such techniques are also suggested by Billett (2013, 2015), describing how university teachers need to advance capabilities, from understandings to procedures, to effectively integrate experience of practice with theory. How this can and should be performed is described by Cooper et al. (2010), who provide a guide to theory-practice integration. Two of the examples they put forth are the method of shadow box scenarios, and the act of 'noticing', which means actively absorbing actions and interactions at a workplace, leading to theory-practice integration through introspection. This is similar to what Martin et al. (2010) discuss when arguing that the theory-practice gap should be handled by reflection-on-action and reflection-on-assessment, more related to personal growth than critical reflection on theory. The theory-practice gap can also be defined as a *schism*, that can, for example, be resolved through a humanising curriculum developed in dialogic spaces (Zinn et al., 2014). But for the bridging to be possible and to

prepare students to be able to perform it, many, as for example Cunningham and Sherman (2008), argue that the right kind of educational structures and educational leadership must be present as must intermediate links between academia and workplaces. At the other end of the spectrum, there are more philosophical reflections on the relation between theory and practice. One example is Hill and Morf (2000), who refute the position that theory and practice are incommensurable, stating that all problem solving is both theoretical and practical by nature. In doing so, they attempt to deconstruct the dichotomy and establish a third way of knowing which they dub 'knowing from within'.

Further, WIL should not be viewed as an isolated occurrence. It is rather related to four decades of fundamental change in the relationship between knowledge, research, economy, and work throughout global society (Castells, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lauder et al., 2012; Sennett, 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In contemporary capitalism, where economic activities to a large extent function from digitized and technologized production and logistics processes, as well as by encircling and profiting from knowledge production and information flows, an epistemological division between theoretical knowledge and practical, technical refining processes is increasingly deemed as problematic. Within this conjuncture, the state's and HEIs' monopoly on theoretical knowledge has become seen as ineffective. As such, demands for academic capitalism are introduced (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), with states, powerful economic actors, and leading academic institutions seeking to link the knowledge production and education of the university with the circuits, demands, and needs of the wider, global economy; producing knowledges to be patented, copyrighted, and sold as commodities; providing corporations and public bodies with innovation, entrepreneurship, and technology; educating employable, in-demand student competencies; creating new networks and meeting spaces where university professionals, students, and corporate representatives can communicate and work together. Here, it becomes up to the HEI to seek connections and collaborations outside of its traditional institutional and epistemological confinement to ensure that its knowledge production functions in an economically useful manner. This often amounts to the type of theory-practice bridging discussed above; it requires the university to allow its traditional theoretical knowledge to circulate and work in a practical-productive manner, whilst it can simultaneously assist in the 'theorization' or 'knowledge-ification' of the larger, practical-productive capabilities of contemporary capitalism. Here, WIL as a field represents a diverse set of initiatives for a redefinition of, and bridging between, theory and practice which essentially serves this pre-eminent measure of increased utility of knowledge and employability of students.

3. Analysing texts to deconstruct the theory-practice divide

In what follows, we deconstruct the *institutional, spatial, epistemological*, and *pedagogical* dimensions of WIL's theory/practice dichotomy by analysing UoS's externally aimed material. More specifically, we analyse these texts, deploying the notions of *institutional, spatial, epistemological*, and *pedagogical* contrasts, key to WIL discourse, as *analytical categories*, structuring our analysis of the different ways in which the relationship between theory and practice is articulated in these texts.

This approach is informed by the notion of hierarchical 'othering' as central to binary thinking as expressed, for instance, by Derrida (1997) who argues that concepts only

form a totality of meaning in pairs of opposites. Hence, the meaning of a term is only discernible in relation to its opposite, as differentially, mutually exclusive, or negatively defined in relation to 'the other'. 'Theory' is spoken of as something other than 'practice' at the same time as 'practice' is spoken of as something other than 'Theory'. And as pointed out above, under contemporary capitalism practice is privileged over theory as 'practical-productivity', 'utility', 'applicability', and so on, while the previous dominance of theory within the university has become increasingly challenged.

Whereas Derrida resisted the description of deconstruction as a methodology, our concrete methodological approach for unpacking WIL discourse as grounded in a theory-practice dichotomy consists of *qualitative text analysis*. The material analyzed was gathered from UoS 's website (UoS) and consists of 1) The totality of the university's external communication on WIL as its overarching profile, including descriptions of related educational and pedagogical practices and research agendas, in addition to descriptions of the concept as such. This information is primarily communicated under the heading of 'Work integrated learning', which is one of the of the five main headings on the university's website, in addition to 'Education', 'Research', 'Collaboration', and 'About us'. Under the heading of 'Work-integrated learning', the sub-headings 'This is WIL', 'To study with WIL', 'WIL and collaboration', 'WIL and research' promulgate general descriptions of WIL and the central role the concept plays for the university's overarching profile. 2) The university's catalogue of educational programs, which is communicated on different pages on the university's webpage, all of which are gathered and findable through an index under the headline of 'Education'. As all the university's educational programs are formulated from the outlook of WIL as the university's overarching profile, it is primarily here we find concrete definitions of WIL in relation to educational content and activity.

Through these texts two interlinked levels of WIL as actually implemented educational activity can be captured: first, the manner in which the university on a general level conceptualizes WIL in relation to its institutional profile, as well as its educational and research activities, and second, the manner in which WIL as overarching profile becomes re-articulated, delineated, and specified in relation to different disciplinary and professional identities, cultural and economic conditions, et cetera, as it is related to the actual educational activities of the university, within the framework of its individual educational programs. The total amount of text gathered from these sources amounts to approximately 300 pages and includes information on 52 different educational programs on both the bachelor and master level.

Our tangible method of analysis can be described as follows: We initially subjected the texts to cursory readings, to gain an overarching image of their general *foci* and directions. Then we submitted the texts to a process of qualitative coding, building from the pre-determined theoretical codes of 'theory', 'practice', 'work-integrated learning', and the elements of 'institutions', 'spaces', 'epistemologies', and 'pedagogies', which we present in our theoretical section as constitutive for conceptions of theory and practice in WIL (cf. Marshall & Rossman, 2016, pp. 218–221). Concretely, this entailed noting signifiers associated with each code and arriving at general descriptions of the differential meanings provided to the signifiers associated with each code. Repeated rounds of coding were made; when new conceptions of theory, practice, or WIL were uncovered in one text, the remainder of the texts were scanned for similar or contrasting conceptions.

This process of coding can be viewed as a concrete instantiation of that task 'to locate and "take apart" those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought' (Allison, 1973, p. xxxii) – i.e. in our case, the fundamental categories of *theory* and *practice*, and the institutional, spatial, epistemological, and pedagogical logics associated with them. The process of coding as such enabled us to 'locate' these concepts, while the analysis of the concepts as contingent, variable, and contextually dependent allowed for a process of 'taking them apart', subjecting them to deconstructive readings. After this coding process, we arrived at descriptions of the differing and, occasionally, rivalling manners in which each code was defined in different portions of our *corpus*. These were summarized in analytical memos (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, pp. 222–224). These descriptions were subsequently turned into those thematic descriptions which form the backbone of the analysis below.

4. WIL at UoS: advanced knowledge, vocational education, and academic identities

We begin by discussing definitions of WIL that appear in the university's overall external communication on WIL. Then follows a discussion of the approaches that the various programs say they use to practically implement WIL.

4.1. WIL as bridging theory and practice to produce advanced knowledge

According to a text outlining WIL as UoS's overarching profile, the university's activities are described as focused on bringing the university and working life closer together in different ways. In this regard, WIL is presented as a matter of creating spaces for merging places/institutions primarily associated with the first order definition of theory, meaning the university, with places/institutions associated with practice, primarily workplaces. This bridging between theory and practice, university and workplace, is assumed to produce new and better forms of knowledge and as a result is presumed to have an additive effect. This can be seen in UoS's overarching formulation on WIL:

> From our perspective, academia does by no means hold a monopoly on the creation of knowledge. Accordingly, it is the meeting between academia, business, and the surrounding society which is the *best provider* for insights, solutions, and mutual development, and thus engenders the necessary prerequisites for encountering the challenges that society faces (UoS, 2021, italics added).[2]

The synergetic relation between the university and outside society is defined from its productivity and utility for the whole social field. For this purpose, neither pure, abstract theory, nor unreflected technical practice, is enough. Rather, it is the combination of the two that is perceived as better for servicing market, state, and society at large. This idea of such a greater benefit resulting from bridging workplace and university is in turn conceived to improve students' 'employability' – which is a recurrent point in the material. The university's overall WIL discourse revolves around various attempts to bridge institutional, spatial, epistemological, and pedagogical divides between *theory* and *practice* to produce advanced knowledge and students better prepared for working life.

In this regard, the recurring term 'advanced knowledge' is an important signifier that is employed to bridge the gap and equalize theory and practice. It is presented as going beyond traditional theoretical and practical knowledge as situated at the university and workplace respectively, fusing theory and practice by decisively disavowing the 'monopoly' held by the university on scientific knowledge production and encouraging its intermingling with the more practical knowledge forms associated with other spheres of society. This is, in the end, what allows for the creation of 'advanced knowledge', knowledge presumably better suited for tackling problems within contemporary working life and society, thus consolidating an additive perspective on knowledge:

> Our outlook on WIL is based on the idea that advanced knowledge is created within a multitude of spheres in society, and that theoretical and practical knowledge are equally important. (UoS, 2021)

This formulation denotes a fusion of theory and practice through *equalization* of the two binary terms. 'Advanced knowledge' is developed when the solutions to the problems of working life are allowed to be deepened by the means of scientific methods and perspectives, at the same time as such a connection makes it possible for teachers and students to root theoretical reflections in actual working life practice:

> From our perspective, advanced knowledge is created at many locations in society, not in the least where people are practicing their occupations on a daily basis. When practical knowledge is integrated with theoretical, then new knowledge and new learning is created. (UoS, 2021)

By describing such a fusion as 'advanced', i.e. understood as more qualified than 'pure' theoretical or 'pure' practical knowledge, an additive perspective that mirrors the discourse around multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity becomes replicated.

In the aforementioned quotes, the term 'advanced knowledge' is described in exclusively positive terms. A presumption behind the usage of the term, grounding its positive evaluation, is that knowledge is to be evaluated on the basis of its utility and productivity for society as a whole. Insofar as 'bridging' theory and practice is considered to facilitate such utility as it places knowledge in relation to work life and market, what we in the above have described as an 'additive view on knowledge' becomes consolidated.

To gain a better understanding of how WIL is explained to the surrounding society as an actual educational practice, we now move to the specific constructions of theory and practice in the educational programs of UoS.

4.2. Building WIL bridges through new spatial and institutional flows

In the university's online program descriptions, a host of approaches are presented as WIL elements used in education: cooperative education (Co-op), work based education (WBE), student employment, course projects and degree projects, mentorship, field studies, study visits, guest lecturers, simulations and laboratory work, industry contacts, and in-class pedagogical elements viewed as having emphasized WIL character. The approaches provide epistemological and pedagogical concretizations of the notion of 'advanced knowledge' within the framework of actual educational settings. This concretization is primarily done by establishing spatial and communicative flows between

institutional spaces traditionally associated with theoretical knowledge and institutional spaces traditionally associated with practical knowledge.

These flows establish connections between different institutional spaces and allow for knowledges traditionally associated with the academic disciplines to assume instrumental and value producing capacities in relation to a non-academic field, whilst simultaneously facilitating vocational knowledges traditionally associated with the concept of practice to become elaborated through scientific/theoretical methods, concepts, and perspectives. This can for example be seen in these two descriptions from the IT and Business Development program and the Elementary School Program for Work in Preschool Classes & Years 1–3:

> With us, you will obtain an academic degree while simultaneously encountering working life during your student period. Work-integrated learning is a natural part of the program which provides you with the opportunity to apply knowledge on to practical skills. The education includes work-placed project assignments which are conducted in collaboration with businesses and the public sector. (UoS, 2021)

> The purpose of the program is for the students to acquire the knowledge, through theoretical and experience-based studies, that is necessary to practice the teacher profession. The program takes departure from contemporary and relevant research, in close collaboration with contemporary and proven professional experience. (UoS, 2021)

Concepts such as communication, translation, re-articulation and application thus become central to WIL as an actual educational activity – such concepts allow for a transformation of the knowledge associated with the university as a specific institution and enables such knowledge to deepen special attitudes and actions in working life. Such formulations are also found at the Social Work Program and the Human Resources Program:

> The focus is, amongst other things, on issues concerning changed conditions for the organization of operations and work-place development, where collaboration between the surrounding society and research is a central point of departure for our programs. Through WIL, the prerequisites for transgressive meetings and knowledge development are engendered. (UoS, 2021)

> With us, you will obtain an academic degree while simultaneously encountering working life already during your time as a student, which provides you with a substantial advantage in your pursuit of the dream job. You will encounter WIL through the exchange of experiences that takes place between the university and the businesses of the region where assignments and the thesis work are conducted. (UoS, 2021)

What is discussed in these quotes – 'collaboration' between society and research, 'transgressive meetings and knowledge development', 'thesis work' being derived from 'experiences that takes place between the yúniversity and the businesses of the region' – is a decisive orientation of knowledge production and education to serve the interests and needs of an outside field – what could be viewed as more theoretical or scientific work (research or thesis work) is constantly legitimized by being placed in relation to the interests or needs of outside institutions and actors.

The existence of a specific pedagogical or curricular approach within a program does not, however, necessarily say anything about how the program reinterprets WIL's overall principles. It may give an indication, but it is above all by analysing the ways in which the

approach is integrated into the overall goals of the program, and by paying attention to the education's discipline-specific theories, methods, norms and traditions, that the articulation of WIL in relation to theory and practice can be understood on a practical and concrete level

4.3. *Vocational WIL as strengthening the existing bridge with more practice*

Initially, it can be said that the bridging of the gap between theory and practice as well as the mutual flows ('exchanges of experience') between university and 'real world' is presented as occurring without much friction in vocational programs. When the program clearly aims to prepare the student for a given professional activity, WIL primarily means that actual workplaces (and associated activities) gain an increased presence in the educational program, enabling a 'practification' of theoretical knowledge to become established. In this sense, WIL functions as a way of marketing the vocational educations from the outset as *especially* vocational. This can be exemplified with these formulations from the Pre-School Teacher and Machine Engineering programs:

> With us, you will obtain an academic degree while simultaneously encountering working life already during your time as a student, which provides you with a substantial advantage in your pursuit of the dream job. Every teacher education is a vocational education. The purpose of the program is for the students to acquire the knowledge, through theoretical and experience-based studies, that is necessary in order to practice the teacher profession. (UoS, 2021)

> With us, you will obtain an academic degree while simultaneously encountering working life already during your time as a student, which provides you with a substantial advantage in your pursuit of the dream job. You will encounter working life in several ways throughout your education. For example, several of the syllabi are designed as project courses where all work is being conducted at a workplace. You will also conduct many projects in close collaboration with the industry, where you will try out the engineering vocation. (UoS, 2021)

WIL is here mainly presented to further strengthen the connection to a given professional identity and to name and categorize a set of pedagogical and educational forms that aim to further root theoretical education into vocational practice – either by spatially combining education and practice through co-op, WBE, and so on, or by investigating working life-related issues in the university's world of knowledge through reports, project work, and degree projects. They thus operate within the first order definition of WIL's theory-practice binary, university vs. workplace, in which activities at the latter is privileged in order to bridge the gap, i.e. in one way or another bring work-life into the university. Hence, WIL is not something completely new here – in these programs there is a one-way flow between theory and practice in line with the program's historical focus and meaning, its close connection to specific professional identities, and its consequent clear and given idea of what working life entails and what tasks are performed therein.

In programs where the professional identity is perceived as especially clear and given – the teacher programs stand as the most obvious examples – the inclusion of WBE periods are viewed as sufficient for the educational program to be viewed as based on WIL. A typical presentation from these programs reads as follows:

> We are Sweden's leading university in work-integrated learning, (WIL). With us, you will obtain an academic degree while simultaneously encountering working life already during your time as a student, which provides you with a substantial advantage in your pursuit of the dream job. Already during your first semester, you will try out the teacher vocation at an elementary school. This takes place in accordance with the work-based education (WBE) under the supervision of a practicing teacher. During the WBE, you will develop your capacity for overseeing, and implementing, teaching. (UoS, 2021)

In other words, not much translation work needs to be performed in these programs, to make them 'work-integrated'. The knowledge taught is already well-established as usable and 'practical' given the programs' historically established vocational identity. As such, a simple mentioning of periods of actual presence at workplaces suffices to view the education as work integrated. Hence, when it comes to the externally directed presentations of these programs, the presumed synergic flow of knowledge between the university and the workplace is presented as relatively frictionless.

4.4. Academic WIL as building a new bridge from theory to practice

The same friction free bridging between theory and practice cannot be found in programs primarily defined by academic disciplinary identities. Historically, these programs have focused on learning and developing scientific, and sometimes critical, knowledge, understandable within the framework of a given academic discipline, rather than on the knowledge necessary to directly support a given vocational practice or professional identity. Therefore, a determined and transformational re-articulation process is necessary in order for the empirical and theoretical knowledge to be given practical significance in working life – in other words, it becomes necessary to apply additional effort (institutional, spatial, epistemological, pedagogical) in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice and arrive at 'advanced knowledge' and new ways of learning that enhance student employability. This is how the Political Science program phrases such a re-articulation:

> You will encounter work-integrated learning, WIL, during your education through projects and investigative assignments. In this way you will practice your knowledge and social skills in collaboration with the surrounding society. There is also a possibility to do an internship within the confines of the program. IPPE has a well-established network within which our students can be given the opportunity for credit-giving internships at embassies, businesses, and international organizations in Sweden and abroad. (UoS, 2021)

To put it another way, in, for example, political science, economics, psychology, child and youth studies, and pedagogy, there are no similar obvious connections to knowledge production that is directly relevant to specific workplaces and professional identities. The flow from theory to practice is not given by the historical focus and meaning of a program but must be consciously constructed – with the consequence that the meaning of the 'original' scientific or theoretical knowledge must be redefined. This process makes it more difficult to concretize WIL by simply implementing models such as co-op and WBE, as it is not that obvious from the outset which workplaces are relevant to the subject in question. More generally, the transfer from theory to practice is thus a less tangible and given process in these programs.

All in all, this leads to more advanced and cumbersome manoeuvres for the programs to be made comprehensible as work-integrated: continually listing and exemplifying concrete possible workplaces (further demonstrating that connections to vocations are not given from the outset), more advanced combinations of WIL approaches in program and course syllabi, a clearer emphasis on application and communication of research results, and so on. This is on display in the presentation of the master's program in work-integrated political studies:

> The master's program in work-integrated political studies is a new and unique 2-year program that provides you with both theoretical and practical knowledge in order to prepare you for work within a variety of politico-economic environments at local, national, and international levels. Taking departure from a work-integrated learning perspective, the studies include focus-areas such as; development issues and sustainability, gender and equality, political economy, migration, segregation and integration, cultural diversity, human rights, communication, political entrepreneurship, strategy, policy and organizational development. Throughout the second year you will write the master thesis, which includes research in cooperation with a host organization from civil society, public or private organizations, where different types of research-, evaluation-, analyses-, and project development assignments are included. (UoS, 2021)

In the academic programs, concretizing WIL becomes a more complex exercise. The epistemic, theoretical and scientific knowledge of the disciplinary tradition has its historical basis in the universities' specialized methods and forms of knowledge and thus appear as partially separated from given, non-university, professions. Here, WIL therefore becomes the name applied to a set of approaches implemented for the translation, reinterpretation and relocation of such theoretical knowledge so that it becomes relevant for, and connected to, different parts of working life – as said, this is a process that is more naturally occurring in vocational programs. In other words; to make the academic programs appear as WIL-compatible, their disciplinary and theoretical traditions need to be constantly re-worked and re-articulated in relation to a practical sphere of application and concrete workplaces. Compatibility with practice thus becomes the only relevant evaluation criterion for theoretically inclined disciplines; this ultimately privileges practice over theory and, subsequently, reinforces the theory-practice binary.

It is here that we note an illustrative contradiction between the university-level communication and the documents describing individual education programs. Insofar as the latter strives to instantiate and legitimize a privilege of practice over theory, it is not in line with the explicit pedagogical philosophy found in UoS's overarching formulations, where theoretical and practical knowledge are understood as *equally* dependent on each other, as reoccurring on equal levels within both university and working life, which grounds the notion of 'advanced knowledge'. This is a contradiction brought about by WIL's situation in academic capitalism. As knowledge-intense capitalism produces demands for the production and circulation of new knowledges, technologies, and employable students, it becomes necessary for individual HEIs to, *on the one hand*, create interstitial spaces, incentives, and, ultimately, epistemological and pedagogical approaches which link the university's knowledge production with the circuits, actors, and interests of knowledge capitalism (thereby bridging the theory-practice divide, as in the university level communication), *on the*

other, re-articulate the priorities of the university's remaining vestiges of theoretical or critical knowledge production so that they are in congruence with a regime that ultimately evaluates knowledge and education on basis of its utility and employability (thereby privileging theory over practice, as in the documents describing individual education programs).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have discerned that both at the institutional and programme level, UoS operates with a notion of WIL that is underwritten by a dichotomy between theory and practice. Furthermore, as revealed by textual analysis, this binary is articulated across the four dimensions of space, institutions, epistemology and pedagogy with the tacit assumption that this gap between theory and practice should be bridged. In the theory section, we situate this assumption in relation to demands for utility and productivity placed upon the university under the current regime of academic capitalism. In the analysis, we argue that the university's framing of WIL affirms productive or applied knowledge over traditional understandings of theory, despite being heavily committed to the understanding that such a 'bridging' can only be achieved by *equalizing* the two terms of the dichotomy. At the central level, UoS presents WIL as a synergetic relation between theory and practice, whose combination leads to more 'advanced' and 'useful' knowledge production. The education programs are directed more at the learning dimensions and design the curriculum to make education more like work-life, and thus to produce 'more employable' students. Where the education programs differ from each other, however, is over how and with what means this gap is bridged and what the role of traditional theory is in such an approach.

We argue that how the different programs design such bridging depends on whether the program in question is primarily aimed at a given vocational identity or at an academic disciplinary identity. If there is from the beginning a primary focus on vocational identity, WIL is implemented relatively frictionless in the textual profile of the programs, without major change in the 'original' content of the education. In programs that are primarily defined by an academic disciplinary identity, relatively advanced discursive and institutional manoeuvres are required/on display to build a bridge to the world of work.

These complicated and ambivalent discursive operations which ground and concretize WIL into actual educational practice, occurring on different discursive levels (institutional, departmental, et cetera) at the university, demonstrate the complexity with which universities as institutions and knowledge-producing bodies relate to, and respond to the demands of, outside powers and institutions, such as state power and capitalism. On the one hand, our analysis demonstrates how marketization and employability emerge as central imperatives for the transformation of education, aligning it with the interests of knowledge capitalism, as demonstrated by Ashwin (2020) and the literature on academic capitalism (Slaughter & Barrett, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). On the other hand, our analysis also demonstrates how the traditional role and historical peculiarity of the university as an institution, somewhat isolated from outside developments, have introduced values, norms, disciplinary identities and theoretical traditions that are not simply erased and replaced by a pure instrumental and capitalist rationality. The emergence of

WIL, and its variegated concrete implementation in UoS's educational programs, rather demonstrates how such transformation processes must be conceived of as a form of *confrontation* – sometimes conflictual, sometimes dialogical, always uneven in terms of power – in which the university is only able to partially maintain and reproduce some of its traditional tasks, *foci*, and priorities by rearticulating them in line with the demands of outside forces. In fact, we argue that this uneven meeting field that emerges when academia is demanded to produce employable students and marketable, 'usable' knowledge is the primary background context against which the emergence of WIL should be viewed and analysed. In our analysis, this context of emergence becomes most readily observable when friction becomes apparent; namely, in educational programs defined from academic or disciplinary identities, insofar as these lack a strong connection to specific vocations and usability structures and are thus required to perform a more apparent task of re-articulation and adjustment to meet the demands of marketization and employability.

Notes

1. This is a pseudonym – the name of the university is, in actuality, something else.
2. All quotes from UoS's webpage have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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