

Re-Engaging Students Returning from International Placements: An Integrative Learning Approach

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to explore how placement students can be effectively re-engaged in their academic studies after a year-long industry placement. Inspired by Barber's (2012) theory of integrative learning, we designed and delivered a final year undergraduate module on an International Business (IB) degree. Using multi-qualitative methods, we collected data to explore which teaching practices helped students (n=44) re-engage effectively with their studies. Our analysis reveals that when particular teaching practices are intentionally deployed to promote connection, application, and synthesis, they have the power to enable returning students to integrate learning across contexts. We illuminate a set of integration-promoting practices which proved successful in enhancing the re-engagement experience of international placement students. We argue that the often-overlooked group of students who return from international placements, need to be recognised as a distinct set of learners who are confronted with unique re-engagement challenges. Our paper offers insights into how IB educators might best support learning integration for students returning from international placements in business school settings.

Keywords: re-engagement, theory of integration of learning, international business students, returning placement students, undergraduates.

1. Introduction

A major challenge with engaging final year business students is ensuring that their learning experiences bridge the gap between academic and industry-based perspectives. Business schools are pushing for an increased focus on developing transferrable skills (Smith 2003), and this is particularly evident in those degree programmes which have integrated industry placements (Wilton 2012). These placements generally involve students working for a year in industry, and one of the main challenges involves exposure to a drastically different experience from that delivered in the classroom (Jones, Green, & Higson 2017). Upon returning to

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the classroom, many students may find it difficult to adjust to their renewed sense of student identity after being situated in a professional context for a prolonged period (Auburn 2007). In particular, repatriating students from an international placement presents significant re-engagement challenges, such as reverse culture shock in the home country, leaving behind friends and colleagues in the foreign country, as well as surrendering a sense of adventure that comes with working abroad (Gaw 2000). In order to garner the full value from their placement experience, Universities need to be more mindful of how these students are 're-engaged' with the academic modules that they undertake in their final year (Anderson & Novakovic 2017).

There is a substantial amount of literature which focuses on the importance of student engagement in the classroom (Wilson, Broghan, & Marselle 2018), as well as work placements (Aamaas, Duesund, & Lauritzen 2019), international exchange programmes (Chak & Makino 2010), and study-abroad programmes more broadly (Peng 2013; Denbo & Eder 2014; Rochford & Borchert 2014; Janda & Janda 2018; Howard & Keller 2009), yet many IB scholars tend to overlook the importance of *re-engaging* placement students who have spent a year working abroad (Conroy & McCarthy 2019). In addressing this shortcoming, our study aims to explore the ways in which returning placement students are meaningfully re-engaged and effectively supported in their integration of learning.

For the purpose of this study, re-engagement is defined as a demonstrated ability to integrate knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in various contexts, by engaging effectively in academic study after a defined period of work placement. The term "integration" can be referred to in two different ways (Barber 2012). First, it refers to the learning *process as an educational outcome*: a process of integration, understood to link not only the disciplinary-specific and cross-disciplinary learning but also the inter-contextual learning which happens in "multiple contexts, life experiences, and identity roles." Second, this term may also be understood as a teaching *practice* which promotes a process of integration. Practices facilitate a process, and in this paper, our focus is on effective re-integration practices. We purposefully design a set of integrative learning practices, so that returning international placement students are able to "synthesise information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts" (Barber 2012 p. 593).

Re-engagement through integrative learning practices may also be relevant for other groups of students, such as those students who have had to temporarily withdraw for a certain period of time due to personal circumstances (Harvey & Szalkowicz 2017). Others have considered the impact of work placements on student exam performance in their final year (Jones *et al.* 2017), as well as their influence on future career progression for business graduates (Wilton 2012). The small number of studies considering re-engagement, do so from an institutional perspective regarding the wider supports and designs in place to re-recruit those students who have withdrawn from University (Harvey & Szalkowicz 2017).

Equally, studies have explored the importance of preparing students prior to going on a work placement (Dunlap & Mapp 2017), as well as supporting them while they are on that placement (Aamaas *et al.* 2019). Some studies have considered the broader ways in which students can be supported in returning from a placement, but empirical work, even in specialised literature on *teaching IB* (e.g. Denbo & Elder 2014; Rochford & Borchert 2014), overlooks the experiences of retuning students, and the challenge of re-engaging them in the classroom.

Our findings contribute to the growing body of literature on *teaching IB*, by presenting an empirically driven framework of pedagogic practices which could be used by IB educators for re-engaging returning placement students. We argue that those students returning from an international placement to the final year of their study need to be recognised as a distinct and valuable group, where integrative learning is enhanced through the purposeful application of particular teaching practices. We identify and conceptualise re-engagement as a unique approach to ensuring that returning placement students effectively assimilate to their final year of study. In attempting to conceptualise the process of re-engagement and how it might unfold, we drew inspiration from Barber's theory of integration of learning (2012; 2014a; 2014b). According to this theory, students engage in three distinct categories of integrative learning, namely by (1) establishing a *connection* between two different but related contexts, based on the similarities the contexts have; (2) *application* of knowledge learned in one context to another, and (3) *synthesis* of ideas to arrive at new knowledge and understanding. Our study reveals how a set of theory-driven pedagogic practices that are aimed at developing skills for connection, application and synthesis help returning students to integrate their learning. It is anticipated that this study will provide the foundations for future work on the importance of meaningful re-engagement as a way to augment the student experience after a prolonged absence.

The next section introduces the theory of integration of learning which helped frame and structure the development of our pedagogic practices.

2. Theoretical Grounding - An Integration of Learning Approach

Students who undertake an international work placement as part of their degree face significant challenges throughout the process. Studies have identified the broader cultural, professional and personal challenges as well as the support available at different stages in the placement journey (Conroy & McCarthy 2019). Indeed, it is appropriate to acknowledge that more work is needed on the 'scaffolding' supports which Universities have in place for placement students (Aamaas *et al.* 2019). One of the specific challenges facing Universities is ensuring that these students effectively assimilate into their final year of studies

after a lengthy period of absence from the classroom (Auburn 2007). There is a need to explore further how teaching approaches are adapted and adjusted to cater for the unique hurdles these students face in re-engaging in their final year of study (Anderson & Novakovic 2017). We suggest that Barber's (2012; 2014a; 2014b) theory of integration of learning provides a theoretical lens to enhance our understanding of the kinds of pedagogic practices needed to develop the integrative learning capacity of these students.

2.1. The "Integration of Learning"

Barber (2012) developed a grounded theory which explains *how* students make connections among life experiences, experiential knowledge and academic studies. The integration of learning focuses on the *processes* of integration, rather than on the *content* of learning. According to this theory, students engage in three distinct categories of integrative learning: connection, application and synthesis.

The first category – *establishing a connection* – refers to students discovering a similarity between ideas which for them remain distinctive. In this category, students make connections at a single point in time in a single context. For example, they recognise that the new framework introduced in class is similar to what is already known. Thus, establishing “a link which associates two or more ideas” becomes a defining characteristic of this category (p. 603). In the second category, *application across contexts*, students use knowledge from one context in another context. In this category – a relatively more complex process than the first - students take a more active role in applying ideas or skills in a different context. For example, students intentionally apply skills learned in a strategic decision-making class to a real-life organisational context. The mobility of knowledge across contexts and the active role of the student in this mobility are the two characteristics that distinguish this category. *Synthesis of a new whole* is the third category of integration and it is the most complex form as students combine two or more ideas, insights or perspectives and create new knowledge. They compare and contrast ideas and take their thinking further in order to synthesise them. Barber notes that this can happen both within an individual and in a collaborative context. In essence, “the fusion of two or more ideas, perspectives, or items...for a creation of something greater than the sum of its parts” distinguishes this category. The inter-contextual nature of integration, in that integration can happen in and across multiple contexts simultaneously, is a distinctive quality at this stage.

Integration of learning is defined as “the demonstrated ability to connect, apply, and/or synthesise information coherently from disparate contexts and perspectives, and make use of these new insights in multiple contexts. This includes the ability to connect the domain of ideas and philosophies to everyday