The idea of academia and the real world and its ironic role in the discourse on Work-integrated Learning

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**ABSTRACT**

Work-integrated Learning (WIL) seeks to bridge the gap between ‘scholastic’ training and work. This study explores the ironic fact that the WIL discourse remains formed by the idea of academia and the real world, an idea that in decisive ways creates this gap. A genealogical discourse analysis of how this idea operates in 79 present and past official documents promoting the Cooperative Education (Co-op) WIL model is used to explore this ironic fact. Two accounts of this idea are dominant in both present and past documents – the deficit account, which merely creates the stated gap, and the collaborative account, which both creates and bridges this gap. I emphasise that the Co-op and other standard WIL models embody and (re)produce the stated idea because they locate ‘scholastic’ training outside the ‘real world’. This separation dates back to scholè – the ancient Greek school that aimed to disconnect ‘school’ from ‘work’. Because WIL has the opposite aim, I argue that this separation is in fact counterproductive for WIL. Finally, I argue that locating WIL in a third place outside university and working life can be a way of avoiding the separation that (re)produces the idea of academia and the real world.

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**Introduction**

While on work placements, university students are sometimes told that their on-campus training has no concrete use in the ‘real world’. This instance of the idea of academia and the real world illustrates how this idea encourages students to believe that on-campus training is irrelevant in working life. In so doing, this idea creates a gap between what students ‘study’ on campus and what they ‘do’ at work placements known as the academic-real world gap or the theory-practice gap. This study uses a genealogical discourse analysis to explore a descent of the idea of academia and the real world, which begins with the emergence in 1906 of Cooperative Education (Co-op) at the University of Cincinnati (Sovilla and Varty in Coll and Zegwaard 2011). This emergence was seen as one ‘birth’ of Work-integrated Learning (WIL), a form of higher education that typically embodies this idea because its usual design implies that students go to ‘academia’ to learn ‘theory’ and into the ‘real world’ to learn ‘practice’.

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The academic-real world distinction applied here is the traditional distinction whereby ‘academia’ means the university domain and the ‘real world’ means the working-life sphere existing outside academia. Co-op is a WIL model which since its emergence has typically used a certain version of the usual WIL design, which ensures that students alternate periods of ‘theoretical’ training in academia with periods of ‘paid’ ‘practice’ in the ‘real world’. I define Co-op and other WIL models, which use the usual WIL design, as standard models of WIL. While these models can be very different in terms of how they design the relationship between on-campus training and work placements, they all use the stated WIL design to bridge the academic-real world gap.

This study explores the ironic fact that the discourse on these models remains formed by the idea of academia and the real world. I call this the WIL discourse because its topic covers all standard models of WIL, and the irony I refer to is that this idea in decisive ways creates the very gap that these models seek to bridge. Here, it is important to note that while all accounts of the stated idea create this gap, some are ambivalent because they both create and bridge it. The differences between the ambivalent accounts and the accounts that merely create this gap are explained in the theorisation and analytical approach section.

It is also important to note that I did not assume that the academic-real world gap is merely created by the idea of academia and the real world. Rather, this gap and this idea were understood to be founded on the physical separation between academia and the ‘real world’ that forms the basis for the usual WIL design. This WIL design was assumed to create the gap because it disconnects ‘theory-based’ and ‘practice-based’ training from each other by locating them in different physical domains. However, while I saw this disconnection as a material condition that creates the academic-real world gap, I also assumed that the usual WIL design could bridge this gap because this makes it possible for students to move between and integrate these forms of training.

Furthermore, I assumed that there was, and that there still is, a key reason for the use of the academic-real world distinction to describe university and working life. The reason is that these domains had and still have different defining features and roles in society. Working life outside of academia has long been and remains the domain where most people work; a condition that ensures that this domain has remained essential to peoples’ daily lives and is thereby still seen as the ‘real world’. Academia was historically and remains the place for research and formal education activities, such as reading and writing about theories. Because many occupations outside academia were not and are still not usually focused on these ‘academic’ activities, I argue that this is a key reason for why people distinguish academia from the ‘real world’.

Furthermore, while contemporary research acknowledges that polarisations of university and working life are harmful for WIL, there is limited research into the counterproductive role that the idea of academia and the real world has in the WIL discourse. There is also limited research that emphasises the irony that because standard models of WIL embody this idea, they (re)produce an idea that in decisive ways works against their common aim. Thus, I argue that it is important to explore the stated descent of the idea of academia and the real world.

The bulk of the empirical material used in this analysis consists of 75 student-oriented documents about Co-op which the University of Cincinnati, USA, the University of Waterloo, Canada and University West, Sweden, distributed between 1928 and 2018.
These are paper- or web-based documents which promote Co-op to inform prospective and enrolled Co-op students about Co-op. Some of them have also been distributed to employers. Four other official documents about Co-op published in 1914, ca. 1930, 1944, and ca. 1960 were also examined.

The genealogical discourse analysis examines the accounts of the idea of academia and the real world that are not only dominant (i.e. often used) in the present and past documents examined here, but that are also established in today’s discourse on all standard models of WIL. I was able to examine such accounts because the selected documents include accounts of the stated idea that are not only common statements about Co-op, but also established statements about all standard models of WIL. The theorisation and analytical approach section explains how such accounts were identified.

Furthermore, the genealogical discourse analysis examines how these accounts are expressed and create the academic-real world gap. It also examines whether the accounts bridge this gap in certain ways and how they mobilise different ranking orders between on-campus training and work placements. The discussion problematises the ironic fact that the idea of academia and the real world remains dominant in the WIL discourse because standard models of WIL have over time (re)produced a discourse that is formed by this idea. It also emphasises that locating WIL in a third place outside university and working life can be a way of avoiding the physical separation between these domains that reproduces the idea of academia and the real world. What a third place-based WIL design (Björck and Johansson 2018) means and how it can avoid reproducing this idea is explained in the discussion.

Certain things need to be clarified before I describe previous research and then describe the present role of Co-op at the three mentioned universities, the empirical material, and the theorisation and analytical approach that was taken.

Co-op emerged during the second industrial revolution, which is generally assumed to have taken place between 1870 and 1914 and which changed US manufacturing from small-scale to large-scale industries (Sovilla and Varty in Coll and Zegwaard 2011). This expansion of industry led to working conditions that created a need for the mass production of educated workers who could work in these industries (Sovilla and Varty in Coll and Zegwaard 2011). Higher education institutions (HEIs) were used as key places for this mass production. A clear indication of this is that HEIs offering degree programmes in engineering were established in the US after the Morill Act of 1862, a grant that supported the institutionalisation of HEIs that offered degree programmes in engineering and science (Jolly 2009).

At the start of the twentieth century, some voices argued that the engineering education provided by HEIs did not give a sufficient preparation for working in the manufacturing industry (Sovilla and Varty in Coll and Zegwaard 2011). The norm at that time was that students of higher education only attended a ‘theoreticum’, and these voices argued that a more ‘practice-based’ engineering education would be more sufficient. One of these voices was Herman Schneider, a Dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Cincinnati (UC) who argued that a mix of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ was needed in order for students to be prepared for this industry. Drawing on this argument, Schneider promoted the idea of using Co-op in UC’s engineering education, and in 1906, Co-op was introduced there as a ‘pragmatic’ complement to the ‘traditional’ form of higher education whereby students generally only attend a ‘theoreticum’. This description clarifies a key component of the
historical context in which Co-op first emerged. However, it is important to note that the voices supporting the emergence of Co-op were not in the majority. Rather, many academicians were sceptical because Co-op involved the ‘real world’ in students’ education (Sovilla and Varty in Coll and Zegwaard 2011).

Furthermore, it should be reiterated that Co-op offered students paid ‘practice’ from the outset. This meant that Co-op ensured that less privileged young men could afford to attend engineering education and become the engineers that the manufacturing industry demanded.

In light of the description of the link between the second industrial revolution and the emergence of Co-op, it should be noted that this study recognises that we are now in the fourth industrial revolution. However, this study only provides a historical description of the second industrial revolution. This is because it was that revolution that provided the scope for the ‘birth’ of the usual WIL design that Co-op and other standard models of WIL still use, and which still ensures that the WIL discourse remains formed by the idea of academia and the real world.

The final thing I need to clarify is that the past and the present discourse on these models is based on the widely used theory-practice terminology (Björck and Johansson 2018), which comprises various ideas such as the one I examine here. This terminology is based on the dualistic ‘order of discourse’ whereby concepts such as theory and practice, and academia and real world, are used as binary oppositions and are thereby given polarised meanings. The stated discursive order uses ‘theory’ as a generic term for on-campus training or for the research-based knowledge acquired there and ‘practice’ as a generic term for work placements or for the activities carried out there (see Björck and Johansson [2018] for a description of this theory-practice distinction). It also uses the academic-real world distinction I described earlier on in the introduction. The theory-practice terminology and the idea of academia and the real world and their link to the usual WIL design are further explained in the theorisation and analytical approach section.

**Previous research**

The topic of how to bridge the academic-real world gap is discussed in contemporary WIL research (see e.g. Anderson and Freebody 2012; Álvarez 2015) and universities use WIL to bridge this gap. Furthermore, this research accentuates that WIL bridges this gap by integrating on-campus training with ‘real world experience’. This accentuation implies that this experience is gained in working life rather than on campus, and this implication is important to note because it suggests that on-campus training is not realistic enough.

Contemporary research also conceptualises WIL as a partnership (Choy and Delahaye 2011; McRae 2014) or marriage (Gellerstedt, Johansson, and Winman 2015) between academia and working life. In this connection, much research emphasises that WIL is based on the ideas that ‘theory-based’ and ‘practice-based’ learning enrich each other and are of equal value to the education of professionals (see e.g. Groenewald et al. in Coll and Zegwaard [2011], who emphasise this).

There is also research about WIL and related topics that emphasises the value of and/or favours ‘practice-based’ learning, which is also referred to as ‘workplace’, ‘real world’, or ‘experiential’ learning. Kruger, Kruger, and Suzuki (2015) emphasise that experiential
learning is valuable because it facilitates the possibility of making classroom learning applicable in the ‘real world’. Discussing the difference between learning in a classroom setting and learning in workplaces, Raelin (2016) argues that real world learning, and not classroom learning, is the best preparation for management work.

There is also a key feature of contemporary research that I need to reiterate here. While such research recognises that polarisations of university and working life are harmful for WIL, there are few studies about the counterproductive role that the idea of academia and the real world has in the WIL discourse. Andrew et al. (2010) provide one such a study. They studied teachers in a nursing degree programme whose role on campus is to inform students about the ‘real world’ of nursing. The authors state that because these teachers call themselves experts from the ‘real world’, and thus imply that academia is not the ‘real world’, they may well widen rather than bridge the academic-real world gap (Andrew et al. 2010).

Another example of research that problematises the discourse produced by the traditional academic-real world distinction is that of Orr (in Naples and Bojar 2002). She emphasises that this distinction creates a polarised discourse that embraces gaps between academia and other spheres of society. In this connection, I argue that historical studies of the idea of academia and the real world are useful for problematising and understanding our current tendency to use the stated distinction. Because there is a lack of such studies, I also argue that this study is needed.

Co-op today and its role at the University of Cincinnati, the University of Waterloo, and University West

In some countries such as Canada, Australia, and Thailand, Co-op is used at several universities, while in others Co-op is only used at certain universities. Some universities use Co-op as an overall educational strategy, which means that they use Co-op for many degree programmes, while other universities only use Co-op in some degree programmes. The University of Cincinnati (UC) and the University of Waterloo use Co-op as an overall educational strategy. In recent years, UC has annually had more than 32,000 full-time students and about 4000 Co-op students (M.B. Reilly, personal communication, November 20, 2017), and the University of Waterloo has annually had over 36,000 full-time students and more than 19,000 Co-op students (M. Drysdale, personal communication, October 25, 2017). At University West, WIL is the overall educational strategy (University West’s website 2018). This means that University West uses different WIL models in different degree programmes, and Co-op is only used in degree programmes in engineering, economics, and information science. In recent years, University West has annually had about 5000 full-time students and about 150 Co-op students (University West’s annual report from 2017).

Empirical material

Both the student-oriented documents distributed by these universities and the other four documents about Co-op were selected because they have an important feature in common. They promote Co-op by using the theory-practice terminology and its key ideas that permeate all standard models of WIL. Thus, these documents include instances of the
idea of academia and the real world, and I argue that this common denominator ensures that these documents together form a body of empirical material that suits this study. Before a more detailed description of the empirical material is provided, I want to clarify one thing. Because I took a genealogical approach and wanted to trace the idea of academia and the real world from the current time back to the early discourse on Co-op, I selected documents used at different dates during the time frame in which Co-op has existed.

Regarding the student-oriented documents, it is important to note how and why they were selected from the three universities. At University West, where I work and where Co-op has been used since 1989, I had observed that such documents were formed by the idea of academia and the real world. To be able to trace this idea all the way back to Co-op’s emergence, there was a need to not only select documents from University West. Because Co-op emerged in the US and has existed in Canada since the late 1950s, I also selected documents from the universities that first used Co-op in these countries. The University of Cincinnati began to use Co-op in 1906, and the University of Waterloo started to use Co-op in 1957. With the assistance of archivists at the three universities, I found about 200 student-oriented documents about Co-op distributed from 2018 and dating back to 1928. All of these documents promote Co-op by informing prospective and enrolled Co-op students about Co-op. After reading them carefully, I determined that they were all very similar in the way in which they promote Co-op. On this basis, 75 such documents, which were distributed at different dates during the stated time period, and which include several explicit and/or implicit instances of the idea I examine, were selected.

The other four selected documents were published in 1914, ca. 1930, 1944, and ca. 1960. The oldest document is a transcript of Herman Schneider’s 1914 hearing about Cooperative and Vocational Education before the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Education. The document from ca. 1930 is a newspaper article about Co-op at UC called A university based on a new idea. The document from 1944 is a UC pamphlet called Is Higher Education obsolete? – University of Cincinnati Co-operative Plan bridges gap between industry and college classrooms. This pamphlet includes six articles originally published in various US newspapers. These articles promote Co-op as a useful educational strategy. The document from ca. 1960 is called Excerpts from Writings and Speeches on Co-operative Education, and is written by H.C. Messinger, a former director of the Department of Co-ordination and Placement at the University of Cincinnati. This document comprises past statements promoting Co-op, some of which were voiced by Schneider between ca. 1900 and 1935.

Theorisation and analytical approach

The genealogical discourse analysis is based on a Foucault-inspired reading of discourse and power. This section starts by explaining this reading and how it was used to explain the theory-practice terminology, the idea of academia and the real world, and their links to WIL. Thereafter, I describe genealogy as an analytical approach and how the stated reading formed the genealogical discourse analysis.

Foucault used various readings of the concept of discourse, and I have applied some of these here. One is that a discourse is ‘a group of statements’ that address the same topic (Foucault 1972), and this study reviews past and present statements about Co-op. I
have also assumed that a discourse comprises various ‘orders of discourse’ (Foucault 2002). These regulate how the topic of a discourse is, and can be, spoken of, and in doing so they ensure that a discourse includes some statements about this topic while also excluding others (Foucault 2002). The past and the present discourse about Co-op was, just like the discourse on all standard models of WIL, assumed to be based on the theory-practice terminology and its dualistic order of discourse. This terminology uses binary oppositions, such as the academic-real world binary, that create the academic-real world gap because they polarise on-campus training and work placements.

The same terminology also comprises various ideas, such as the one I examine, that are based on these binary oppositions and thereby create this gap as well. Many of these ideas comprise both antagonistic accounts, which merely create the stated gap, and harmonious accounts that are ambivalent because they both create and bridge it. If we take the idea of academia and the real world as an example, then antagonistic accounts of this idea only create the academic-real world gap because they pit academia and the ‘real world’ against each other, for instance, by accusing one of these ‘worlds’ and their specific form of training as being insufficient. Harmonious accounts of the stated idea argue for a partnership between academia and the ‘real world’ that gives students a bridge between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. These accounts bridge the stated gap because they encourage students to find connections between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. They also create the gap because they use the academic-real world distinction or other binary oppositions that encourage students to believe that university and working life are different worlds and to focus on the gaps between them.

Furthermore, drawing on the view that discourse forms and is also embedded in and (re)produced by our institutions and practices (Foucault 1990), I made an assumption about how Co-op and other standard models of WIL are linked to the theory-practice terminology and its ideas. These models were assumed to be based on, and therefore also to embody and reproduce, this terminology and these ideas. For instance, the stated models were assumed to embody and reproduce the idea I examine because they imply that students go to ‘academia’ to learn ‘theory’ and into the ‘real world’ to learn ‘practice’.

A Foucault-inspired view of power was also used to understand the theory-practice terminology and the idea of academia and the real world. Stating that power operates through discourse and that discourse is embedded in our institutions and practices, Foucault (1990) concludes that power exists ‘everywhere’. He also emphasises that power is a relational and productive force. The former means that power is a force that exists in the different networks of relationships on which our institutional practices are based, rather than a force that a person or an institution can possess. The latter means that power produces and organises these relationships, and power is also assumed to be a force that can take different forms (Foucault 1990). I study the idea of academia and the real world, which is a force that creates specific relationships between university and working life.

This section will now describe genealogy, which is an analytical approach that uses history to problematise a currently dominant figure (e.g. an idea) and its role today (Foucault 1984). A basis for this approach is that this figure does not have one origin but various descents, and the genealogist problematises the figure’s current role by exploring one or more of these descents (Beronius 1991). The modus operandi is to first examine how an idea etc. is currently expressed and operates. Thereafter, its past forms of expression and modes of operation are examined (Beronius 1991).
The genealogist must also explore a descent that actually problematises an idea’s present role. Tracing an evolutionary descent, which shows how an idea has gradually become more advanced over time, is not the way to proceed. Instead, a genealogist explores a descent that shows how this idea’s emergence and current role in a discourse is ironic. What Foucault (1984) means by an ironic descent is clarified in this quotation about the ‘birth’ of the things we cherish today:

We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning … But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation. (Foucault 1984, 79)

I explore the ironic role that the idea of academia and the real world still has in the WIL discourse by examining how this idea operates in present and past documents about Co-op.

A more detailed explanation of the genealogical discourse analysis is now outlined. The starting point for this analysis was to identify the accounts of the idea of academia and the real world that are common in the present documents on Co-op that I examined and that are established in today’s WIL discourse. To identify these accounts, I searched for accounts that are not only common in the present documents, but that are also established in contemporary WIL research. Two such accounts were identified, and their forms of expression and modes of operation were analysed. The analysis of forms of expression focused on the explicit and implicit ways of talking that these accounts comprise. This analysis determined that one is an antagonistic account and the other is a harmonious account. They were respectively called the deficit account and the collaborative account.

The analysis of modes of operation focused on how these accounts create the academic-real world gap and how the harmony-based collaborative account also bridges this gap. Furthermore, this analysis identified the different ranking orders between on-campus training and work placements that these accounts mobilise and their effects.

After examining the present documents, I proceeded to the past documents. The focus was to determine whether the deficit account and the collaborative account are common in the past documents and/or whether different accounts of the idea of academia and the real world are common there. It was concluded that these accounts were also the accounts that are common in the past documents. Quotations illustrating the deficit account and the collaborative account are now analysed.

**Results**

This section uses six main quotations to clarify the forms of expression and modes of operations that are specific to these accounts in both the present and the past. To develop the analysis further, I also use some complementary quotations. The first three main quotations illustrate the deficit account, and the remaining three illustrate the collaborative account. Each account is first described by a present quotation and thereafter by past quotations.

**The deficit account**

The first quotation is from a student-oriented brochure called CO-OP published by University West in 2014. Here, a student praises work placements:
It is there that I learn how you work as an engineer. I have to test what I’ve read about, and develop enormously. For with all respect to theory, the work periods give me a more complete and reality-based knowledge. (CO-OP 2014, 7)

By claiming that it is work placements rather than the ‘theory’ learnt on campus that gives her reality-based knowledge, the student uses the deficit account. This is an antagonistic account that accuses ‘academia’ in general, and on-campus training and ‘theory’ in particular, of lacking a proper connection to the ‘real world’. Thus, this account identifies on-campus training and ‘theory’ as deficient in this regard, while also forming academia as something other than the ‘real world’. It is also by emphasising this lack, and thereby encouraging students to believe that on-campus training has no concrete use in working life, that the deficit account creates the academic-real world gap.

Furthermore, in this quotation this account is expressed rather clearly by the statement that it is work placements rather than ‘theory’ that ensures that the student acquires ‘reality-based’ knowledge. However, in both the present and the past, the deficit account alternates between being expressed on a more implicit and a more explicit level. Thus, some past and present instances of this account imply that on-campus training and ‘theory’ lack a proper ‘real world’ connection, while others state this explicitly. Furthermore, the deficit account’s message that on-campus training lacks this connection is generally implied by contemporary WIL research. This is because this research accentuates that WIL bridges the academic-real world gap by integrating on-campus training with ‘real world experience’, an accentuation that implies that on-campus training is not realistic enough to bridge this gap. This indicates that the deficit account is not specific to statements on Co-op, but is established in today’s general WIL discourse.

The next quotation is from a document called Gear UP, a Undergraduate Admissions Handbook that the University of Waterloo used in the autumn of 1990 to promote Co-op ahead of the 1991 spring term. Here, a student states:

The Co-op challenge is definitely rewarding, both academically and financially. Applied Studies provides excellent practical experience, not to mention a healthy dose of reality and break during your academic career. (GEAR UP, 1990, 10)

The deficit account is here implied by the statement that you get ‘a healthy dose of reality’ when you attend work placements. This statement implies that on-campus training lacks a proper ‘real world connection’ and that you need to leave the campus in order to get a ‘real world experience’. Statements that imply this need to leave the campus are common in the present and past documents that were reviewed. One appears in a chapter of a 1967/1968 University of Waterloo Undergraduate Calendar that discusses engineering education. Here, it is stated that Co-op introduces students to ‘full-scale engineering projects and installations, far beyond the scope of any university laboratory’ (University of Waterloo Undergraduate Calendar, 1967, 48), a statement implying that students need to leave the campus in order to meet the ‘real world’ of engineering.

A feature of the results that has not yet been fully clarified is that the deficit account devalues on-campus training for being ‘unrealistic’, while also idealising work placement-based training for being ‘realistic’. Thus, this account mobilises an asymmetrical ranking order between the former and the latter forms of training. This is further discussed in connection to the third quotation that appears in a newspaper article from ca. 1930.
This article is called *A university based on a new idea* and identifies Co-op as more useful than the ‘traditional’ form of higher education:

Men active in practical work outside the academic field have known for many years that something is amiss with our regular college training. Too much of the information, too many of the theories imparted at college have proven inapplicable to life outside. Too many college graduates have learned, on plunging into the business of earning a living, that their particular period of university training was merely an expensive investment in theoretical culture. Too much of their academic knowledge has run of the roof. (A university based on a new idea, ca. 1930, 82)

Here, the deficit account is expressed rather clearly in the statement that many of the theories learnt on campus are ‘inapplicable to life outside’. This quotation also shows that this account can operate through conceptual binaries that refer to the academic-real world distinction. In other words, the deficit account can operate even though the concepts of academia and real world are not used explicitly. In the present and past documents that were reviewed, this account often operates through the theory-practice or the study-work binary. In this quotation, it is, for instance, operating through the binary distinction between ‘college training’ and ‘life outside’.

Furthermore, as stated, the deficit account mobilises an asymmetrical ranking order that devalues on-campus training for being ‘unrealistic’ and idealises work placements for being ‘realistic’. This ranking order tacitly assumes that it is the placements provided by the ‘real world’, rather than the academic training done on campus, that teaches students a profession. In other words, the stated ranking order tacitly assumes that working life rather than university is the best place for learning a profession. Research, such as that by Raelin (2016), which emphasises that ‘real world learning’, and not classroom learning, represents the best preparation for management work, mobilises the deficit account and its ranking order.

By spreading the message that academia cannot provide the ‘real world experience’ that teaches students a profession, this account also requests an education of professionals that is more realistic. Furthermore, by mobilising this request, the deficit account supports working-life’s interest in challenging academia’s influence on how this education is designed. This account is also a call for Co-op and other standard models of WIL that respond to the stated request by offering students a ‘balanced’ education that includes both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.

The metaphor of a balanced education can also be used to portray the collaborative account. This account was voiced by Schneider in 1914 when he emphasised that Co-op is about integrating ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in a reciprocal manner (Hearing about Cooperative and Vocational Education before the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Education 1914, 5).

**The collaborative account**

The first quotation is from a Cooperative Education Student Handbook that was published by the University of Cincinnati (UC) in 2014, and that was still available on UC’s website in March 2018 (https://www.uc.edu/careereducation/experience-based-learning/co-op/student-resources/handbook.html):
Through cooperative education, the professional world partners with the university to integrate theory and practice ... cooperative education extends student learning beyond the classroom providing an enhanced educational experience which includes paid, discipline-related work experience to further students’ career preparation. While students are gaining practical experience in their chosen field, they acquire an understanding of the world of work, integrate theory and practice, and have the opportunity to further develop professional and interpersonal skills. (University of Cincinnati Cooperative Education Student Handbook 2014, 5)

This quotation expresses the collaborative account, which in the present and past documents emphasises that academia and the ‘real world’ should be combined to give students a mix of and a bridge between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. The collaborative account assumes that the combination of these ‘worlds’ is perfect because it means that students can integrate theory and practice.

In contrast to the antagonistic deficit account, this account does not criticise theory for being ‘unrealistic’. Instead, it is a harmony-based account that idealises the partnership between academia and the ‘real world’ and the mix of theory and practice. Contemporary WIL research’s tendency to argue that university and working life are partners, and to idealise this mix, indicates that the collaborative account is not specific to statements on Co-op but is established in the general WIL discourse. This account idealises this partnership because it assumes that this union gives added value to students’ learning in both academia and in the ‘real world’. The stated account also assumes that without having both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ students would not have sufficient knowledge of how to apply theory in the ‘real world’ nor have a sufficient ‘theoretical’ understanding of their future work. These two assumptions typify why the collaborative account praises the mix of theory and practice.

This account also shares a specific feature with the deficit account. This is that they both assume that there is an academia and a ‘real world’. Thus, the former account is, just as the latter, forming academia as something other than the ‘real world’. Another link between the two accounts is that the collaborative account idealises the mix of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, which the deficit account requests by emphasising that on-campus training is ‘unrealistic’. This link shows that these accounts are in one way compatible.

However, they are also incompatible because the collaborative account does not, like the deficit account does, value the ‘real world’ and work placements more than academia and on-campus training. Instead, the collaborative account assumes that the former and the latter domains and their forms of training are equally important to the education of professionals. This assumption is not articulated in this quotation, but is rather tacitly assumed. Many of the past and the present instances of the collaborative account identified in this study merely imply this assumption. However, some are more explicit. For instance, in a 1960s student information leaflet about the University of Cincinnati’s Cooperative Program, it is stated that the work placement assignments ‘are as much a part of the educational program as the academic training’ (Cooperative Program Student Information leaflet 1960s, 1). This illustrates that the collaborative account is, just like the deficit account, a force that in both the present and the past alternates between being expressed on a more implicit and a more explicit level.

The quotation that follows is used to further describe the collaborative account. This quotation is from a University of Cincinnati brochure that was used ca. 1945 and is called ‘Co-operative Training for Women – In Business – Applied Arts – Engineering’:
The student in the co-operative course alternates weeks of practical work on paid jobs with periods of learning on the campus. On her job, the student comes in contact with the realities about which the textbooks are written. She sees how theory is translated into practice. Experience in industry thus gives meaning and value to classroom discussions. (Co-operative Training for Women - In Business - Applied Arts - Engineering, ca. 1945, 1)

One can see here how the collaborative account was also in the past expressed by statements that praise how Co-op provides a bridge between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. A key feature of this account is that it spreads an ambivalent message that both creates and bridges the academic-real world gap. The collaborative account’s message is on the one hand that academia and the ‘real world’ and theory and practice should be united rather than separated. This message bridges the stated gap because it encourages students to unite these ‘worlds’ by integrating theory and practice. The stated account’s message is, on the other hand, implying that university and working life are different ‘worlds’. This message creates the gap in question because it encourages students to see and focus on gulfs between these two domains. Andrew et al. (2010) argue similarly that the message that academia and working life are different worlds might widen the stated gap for students.

In connection to the description of the collaborative account’s ambivalent message, it is important to emphasise that a key difference between this account and the deficit account is that the latter only creates this gap. The fact that the deficit account only has this counterproductive effect becomes clear when you consider that its message is that on-campus training has no concrete use in working life.

Furthermore, as stated, the deficit account and the collaborative account are in one way compatible and in another way incompatible. They are compatible because the former’s message that on-campus training lacks a proper ‘real world’ connection is a call for the mix of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ that the latter account praises. They are incompatible because the deficit account’s ranking order values work placements more than on-campus training while the collaborative account’s ranking order values these forms of training equally.

A third quotation is now used to further clarify the collaborative account and its ranking order and how these are connected to the deficit account and its ranking order. This quotation about how Co-op is designed in engineering education is from Schneider’s 1914 hearing about Cooperative and Vocational Education before the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Education:

The practical work is just as carefully arranged as the college curriculum … Every detail of the practical course is carefully arranged and practice and theory are knit together in a uniform scheme through a carefully devised system of coordination. (Hearing about Cooperative and Vocational Education before the US House of Representatives’ Committee on Education 1914, 5)

Here, the collaborative account is expressed by the statement that ‘the practical work is just as carefully arranged as the college curriculum’, a statement that is rather explicit about this account’s symmetrical ranking order between on-campus training and work placements. This ranking order assumes that academia and the ‘real world’ offer different learning settings that are equally important to the education of professionals. Thus, this ranking is different from the deficit account’s ranking order, which assumes that the learning
setting provided by the ‘real world’ is the most important one. By mobilising a ranking order that assumes that academia and the ‘real world’ offer equally valid learning settings, the collaborative account supports both worlds’ interests in having an influence on how the education of professionals is designed.

Furthermore, this account is, just like the deficit account, a call for a mix of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’. However, while the call of the collaborative account arises from the assumption that this mix gives added value to academia and to the ‘real world’ with regards to students’ learning, the deficit account’s request arises from the criticism that academia is ‘unrealistic’. Thus, these accounts request the same thing but have different starting points for doing so.

The third quotation also shows that the collaborative account, just like the deficit account, operates through conceptual binaries that allude to the traditional academic-real world distinction. Here, the former account is for instance operating through the distinction between ‘college curriculum’ and ‘practical work’. These accounts’ abilities to operate through such conceptual binaries makes them influential because this means that they can spread their effects through many different labels. Having the means to operate through several labels other than academia and the ‘real world’ also ensures that these accounts can operate in silence and hide their activities and effects. The two accounts have this ability because they belong to the idea of academia and the real world, an idea that in general has the means to operate in silence.

Before the discussion begins, I want to clarify that the documents I have reviewed reject two traditional ‘academic’ views that polarise on-campus training and work placements and that might still be dominant in academia and instilled in students while they are on campus. One view is that academia should be isolated from the ‘real world’, and the other is that academic training, rather than ‘real world experience’, forms the basis for learning a profession. These views are not promoted by the stated documents because these documents emphasise that academia and the ‘real world’ should be partners and that academic training and ‘real world experience’ are equally important.

However, while the examined documents do not emphasise these two academic views, they often use the deficit account that takes the working-life view that higher education should be more ‘realistic’ and that the ‘real world’ is the best place for learning a profession. In that sense, the reviewed documents promote a working-life rather than a traditional academic perspective on the relationship between university and working life.

Discussion

This study has argued that the fact that the WIL discourse remains formed by the idea of academia and the real world is ironic because this idea in decisive ways creates the very gap that WIL seeks to bridge. One way to problematise this irony is to discuss the material condition that ensures that the stated idea remains dominant in this discourse. The condition in question is that the Co-op and other standard models of WIL have continuously embodied this idea, and thereby continued to (re)produce it. These models have continued to do this because they have kept on applying the usual WIL design that physically disconnects ‘scholastic’ training from the ‘real world’.

It is important to note that the stated models still apply this WIL design because it represents an institutionalisation of the idea of academia and the real world, and this can clarify why this idea works against WIL’s aim. What I am referring to here is that the
usual WIL design is based on the physical separation between the ‘scholastic’ domain and working life, which dates back to *scholè*. This ancient Greek school used this separation to create a place for *vita contemplativa*; i.e. ‘free’ studies that were completely disconnected from working life and fostered people’s self-cultivation and personal development (Masschelein and Simons 2013). This separation is perfect for vita contemplativa. However, it is counterproductive for WIL because it disconnects academic training from working life, whereas WIL seeks to do the opposite. In that sense, the usual WIL design is ironically founded on the physical separation that creates the gap that in turn needs to be bridged.

Because both this gap and the idea that I have argued creates it are produced by this separation, I emphasise that it is possible to create a *third place-based* WIL design that avoids the physical separation that reproduces this idea. By this, I mean a WIL design that ensures that students can go to a single (physical) place outside university and working life where they, along with professors and professionals from working life, can learn how theories (ideas, principles, etc.) are embedded in a specific line of work (for more information about a third place-based WIL design see Björck and Johansson [2018] who for instance discuss how it can be funded). Such a WIL design would not imply or (re)produce the idea that students move between academia and the ‘real world’. Instead, it could embody how theory and practice coexist in professional work and thereby encourage students to see that theories are not impractical and disconnected from this work but are embedded in it. Thus, I finally argue that a third place-based WIL design could avoid creating the academic-real world gap.

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**Notes**

1. To ensure a more readable text, I will hereinafter only use the term academic-real world gap. This applies regardless of whether the research I refer to uses this or other terms.
2. The emergence of Co-op was seen as one birth of WIL because it was an attempt to mix ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in higher education, which occurred at a time when the norm was that university students only attended a ‘theoreticum’.
3. This study does not seek to determine the meaning of the concept real world nor does it assume that academia is ‘unrealistic’ and that the working-life sphere located outside academia is the ‘real world’. Rather, the study problematises the traditional academic-real world distinction. Hereinafter, when the concepts ‘real world’ and working life are used, I mean the working-life sphere located outside academia.
4. Because this idea is traced back over 100 years, I decided that the documents used between 2000 and 2018 constituted present documents.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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