



Rethinking WIL for an academic discipline: the model of Work Integrated Political Studies (WIPS)

Laurence Piper, Karl Dahlquist, Fredrik Sunnemark & Per Assmo

To cite this article: Laurence Piper, Karl Dahlquist, Fredrik Sunnemark & Per Assmo (2023) Rethinking WIL for an academic discipline: the model of Work Integrated Political Studies (WIPS), Cogent Education, 10:1, 2191397, DOI: [10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191397](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191397)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191397>



© 2023 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.



Published online: 19 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Received: 19 September 2022
Accepted: 10 March 2023

*Corresponding author: Laurence Piper,
School of Business, Economics & IT,
University West, Gustava Melins gata 2,
SE-461 86, E Trollhättan 461 32,
Sweden
E-mail: laurence.piper@hv.se

Reviewing editor:
John Chiang, Communication and
Media, State University of New York,
Oneonta, United States

Additional information is available at
the end of the article

CURRICULUM & TEACHING STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking WIL for an academic discipline: the model of Work Integrated Political Studies (WIPS)

Laurence Piper^{1*}, Karl Dahlquist¹, Fredrik Sunnemark¹ and Per Assmo¹

Abstract: The article develops a model for how an academic discipline like Political Studies can embrace work-integrated learning (WIL) to the benefit of students, the discipline, and wider society by interpreting WIL in relation to discipline-specific forms of knowledge and knower. The model is of a new Master's in WIL in Political Studies (WIPS) at University West, Sweden, an institution that is experimenting with the idea of WIL as a discipline beyond the mainstream framing of WIL as pedagogy only. In this innovative context, three ideas are central to WIPS. First, the content of WIPS is about research knowledge, rather than Political Studies knowledge. Second, drawing on political philosophy, the important relationship between theory or science (*episteme*) and practice (*techne*) is framed in terms of an additional concept of practical knowledge (*phronesis*) regarding the particulars of political action to equitable ends and wisdom (*sophia*) in regard to the philosophical and ethical nature of those ends. Third, WIPS re-thinks student learning in ontological ways that focus on the capabilities of the political knower. In sum, WIPS frames WIL as “reflective practice on research-intensive political work”, offering a novel and enriched theoretical model of higher education learning of interest to other academic disciplines looking to embrace WIL.

Subjects: Study of Higher Education; Teaching & Learning

Keywords: work-integrated learning; vocational and academic subjects; theory and practice; knowledge and knowers; pedagogy; discipline

1. Introduction

the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how an academic discipline like political studies can embrace work-integrated learning (wil) to the benefit of students and the wider society. The key claim is that this requires interpreting some of the principles of wil in relation to the forms of knowledge and knower valued by political studies to develop a model for a Masters' program. This model is currently being implemented and future empirical research will evaluate the extent to which it achieves its WIL and disciplinary objectives. In this paper however, we undertake a theoretical exercise to overcome some conceptual challenges in applying a pedagogy from vocational and applied disciplines to an academic discipline. As illustrated in the methodology section below, this theory work is framed as bringing the political to WIL as much as bringing WIL to the discipline. It is thus not simply a deductive application of WIL theory to a case, but also the re-interpretation of WIL considering the critical thinking commitments of an academic discipline, the institutional commitment and framing of WIL at a specific University, and the normative commitments of Swedish Universities.

Our model of WIL is developed in reference to an international master's program in WIL with a focus on Political Studies (abbreviated as WIPS), at University West in Sweden. It is also important to understand the context in which WIPS is being developed, as University West has embraced the idea of WIL not just as an approach to learning within disciplines, but as a field and discipline itself with its own pedagogical, research, educational and research status. Furthermore, University West frames the benefits of WIL to the student quite broadly, preferring the notion of WIL as “learning for life” rather than the narrower framing of WIL as enhancing “working readiness” or “employability”. In this environment, and taking forward the broader University West approach, WIPS is experimenting with a framing of WIL as “reflective practice on research-intensive political work”.

In making this case, the article begins by setting out broadly what WIL is, how University West has interpreted WIL, and the challenges this posed for the academic discipline of Political Studies. First, like most academic disciplines, Political Studies does not have one obvious vocational outlet as the disciplinary content covers a myriad of political professions. Second, our students are taught how to conduct research, make arguments and reflect on practice, rather than other skills connected to practice in a political workplace. Third, the framing of WIL, especially in the Swedish context, establishes a set of binaries around theory and practice that also overlays traditional divides between academic and vocational disciplines.

The article then moves on to outline the WIPS program, and how it has attempted to meet these challenges. Key claims are, first, that the new Master's Program in WIL with a focus on Political Studies (WIPS) requires that students learn research theory and practice. This substantive knowledge focus is important in reducing the epistemological gap between the WIPS program and the many political workplaces. In addition, research experience, skills and capacity are the value-add that postgraduate students can bring to all host organizations. Second, drawing on political philosophy, the relationship between theory (*episteme*) and practice (*techne*) that runs through WIL is outlined in terms of an additional concept of practical wisdom or judgment (*phronesis*). Here the emphasis is on ongoing and iterative reflection of theory in respect of practice and the normative or equitable ends of practice, and vice versa, to achieve *phronesis*. Third, WIPS re-thinks student learning in ontological ways that focus on the capabilities of the *political* knower. In addition to the “ontological shift” to personal qualities like resilience and moral characteristics, WIPS adds the importance of reflection on public ends or goods like sustainability and democracy, alongside learning the instrumental means to these ends.

2. The challenge of WIL for political studies

To understand the significance of WIPS, this section starts with a general definition of WIL, before moving to outline the various ways WIL is framed at University West, and then outlining the challenges this posed for the discipline of Political Studies.

2.1. What is WIL?

While the notion of WIL is increasingly complicated by an explosion of new forms and cases and practices (Ferns et al., 2022; Kay et al., 2019), at the heart of the idea of WIL are ideas about both the best way that students learn, and also the need for better preparedness for work and life after university. Hence, according to *The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, WIL is defined as (IJWIL International Journal of Work Integrated Learning, 2021):

... an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach require that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related tasks, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace/community.

It continues,

Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

While for IJWIL, the defining elements of WIL are the involvement of an external host that defines real work tasks for the learner, a key objective of WIL remains to increase the employability or work readiness of graduates, although this concept has been expanded and modified in recent years to include “learning through work” rather than just “learning for work” (Billett, 2022). Indeed, as noted above, like many institutions University West has embraced a broader conception of the learning outcomes of WIL that extends beyond employability to one of “learning for life”. This granted, there can be little doubt about the importance of WIL as a method for integrating graduates into life after higher education, however framed. Thus, Ferns et al. (2022, p. 1) begin their edited collection noting:

With increasing attention on employability outcomes, and with governments seeking direct links between higher education and employability, many higher education institutions are expanding their work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes . . . This expansion is part of the wider international movement in higher education where universities are becoming increasingly focused on the development of graduates equipped to respond to a dynamic and rapidly changing workplaces (sic).

Higgs et al. (2019, p. 5) note that “incorporating WIL into more education is one way in which universities try to make their graduates more employable”, or as Jackson (2018, p. 23) puts it, increase their career-readiness. Indeed, WIL can be seen as a response to a new working life characterized by the need for employees to be flexible and adaptable to swift changes in an economy promoting competences such as knowledge creation and communication. It is not however, the only framing of the role that WIL plays, as illustrated in some recent studies (Jung, 2022; Rice et al., 2016), a view shared by the authors, arguing for a conception of WIL that entails a broader and more political framing of preparing graduates for life after university.

2.2. WIL at the university

Founded in 1990, University West is a relatively young tertiary institution in Sweden. In 1999, the University Board of Directors branded the university as the first and only WIL educational and research institution of higher education in Sweden, or simply “the University of WIL”. In 2002, the University was given exclusive responsibility by the government to develop WIL, and University West currently describes WIL as its “overall profile and values for learning, knowledge exchange and knowledge development”. The University has embedded WIL in postgraduate disciplines, with courses at master and doctoral levels. Indeed, in the Swedish higher education system, University West has postgraduate examination rights in WIL, but not in Political Studies, meaning it can only give a master’s degree and PhD in WIL. At the same time, WIL offered an opportunity for Political Studies to offer a more applied training for students that is uncommon and arguably much needed in the discipline. The idea to introduce a Masters in WIL with a focus on Political Studies was an attempt to take this opportunity.

At the central level, University West constructs WIL as having three interconnected dimensions: a philosophical or epistemological dimension that “considers theoretical and practical knowledge as equally important and mutually dependent on each other”, a pedagogical dimension “for the students to obtain a deeper understanding of the given subject, to facilitate the conditions for them to engender their own insights, and to get practical experience” and a disciplinary dimension “characterized by the studying of learning through the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge and experiences” (2021; University West, 2020). All three dimensions are integrated into WIPS as illustrated below.

Lastly, as argued by (xxxx), University West operates with a notion of WIL that is underwritten by a binary between theory and practice articulated across four dimensions of space, institutions, knowledge and learning with the tacit assumption this gap between theory and practice should be bridged. These binaries manifest within the institution in various ways. In the public facing messaging University West, WIL is presented as a synergetic relation between theory and practice, whose combination leads to more “advanced” and “useful” knowledge production (Ibid). Furthermore, within the institution, the various education programs design their curricula to be more work-like, and thus to produce “more employable” students. Where the education programs differ is over how to “bridge this gap”, and the role of traditional theory in such an approach. Thus, in vocational programs the approach is to strengthen the existing bridge between theory and practice by adding more practice, whereas in academic disciplines, the need is to build a bridge in the first place and to adjust theory to this end (Ibid).

While University West is not alone in framing WIL in terms of these kinds of binaries, and much of the earlier WIL literature is run through by a similar framing of the relationship between theory and practice as a “gap” that the field is constantly trying to address and bridge (Björck 2020; Björck & Johansson, 2019; Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Hill & Morf, 2000; Zinn et al., 2014), more recent work is showing how simplistic, problematic, and just inaccurate many of these assumptions are. For example, as shown by Kay et al. (2019, p. 410), theory and practice can meet on campus to provide practical learning through authentic tasks and processes with real world clients, supervisors, and peers. Indeed, the framing of WIPS shares the rejection of an over simplistic binary relationship between theory and practice across a range of divides.

2.3. Challenges for political studies

The master’s in WIL with a focus on Political Studies (WIPS) was developed by a team of Political and Social Scientists at University West from 2017 until implemented in 2020. In developing WIPS, several problems were confronted. The first was identifying who the host organizations would be, and therefore what content to include in the master’s program. Politics is broadly understood as those aspects of human behavior, life, organizations, and institutions concerned with the exercise of power or rule over a collective (Lukes, 2004). The study of politics includes international relations, national politics, comparative politics, political theory, public administration, and various forms of policy studies. Furthermore, our graduates find employment in a range of organizations, and while these are usually connected to politics and the public sphere they vary tremendously in their location and content focus. Hence, graduates find work in international organizations like the United Nations, the various branches of national, regional, and local government, civil society organizations, the media, academic and business. Furthermore, the content focus of these organizations—at any level—can vary from issues in international political and economic relations, to national politics and policy, to local development and urban issues.

Secondly, like other academic disciplines, Political Studies is orientated towards knowledge framed by a disciplinary tradition in University West whereas WIL is historically orientated towards knowledge linked to the professions and vocations. Thus, teaching and designing learning for WIPS students is focused on how to conduct research and to reason in support of making an argument, rather than other more central skills connected to political practice in another institutional context. Thirdly, as noted above, the framing of WIL in terms of a series of binaries around theory and practice in terms of knowledge, institutional home, and spatial location overlays traditional divides between academic and vocational disciplines in Sweden. This made WIL initially seem unappealing to some academics at University West who saw the embrace of WIL as coming at the cost of an academic discipline.

In what follows we outline how WIPS was designed to address these challenges, but also to the larger institutional approach of WIL as a discipline better suited to learning for life after university. First though, we outline the methodology of this paper.

3. Methodology

As noted in the introduction, the aim of the paper is to develop a model of WIL for an academic discipline that reconciles the principles of WIL with the imperatives of the Political Studies discipline. This model is a new form of theoretical knowledge that will be of interest to other academic disciplines trying to embrace WIL or related work-based learning innovations. The model is thus a contribution to theory knowledge in the WIL discipline.

The theoretical knowledge in question is, in philosophical terms, not about ideal or normative theory so much as non-ideal or realist theory that explains how real-world social practices, in this case educational practices, actually work rather than how they should work (Valentini, 2012). In this case, we are concerned with reconciling two kinds of non-ideal or realist theory about, on the one hand, what constitutes WIL, and on the other, what constitutes our academic discipline of Political Studies. While, the model may be non-ideal in a normative sense, at the same time, it may be ideal in another sense—that is it sets up “end-state” or model to which we aspire, but may not quite reach (Ibid: 656, 660). The extent to which the model is realized in practice, and the extent to which it realizes its goals, will be the basis for further empirical research.

This process of reflection to develop our model requires interpreting WIL principles in a way consistent with Political Studies disciplinary principles. This back-and-forth interpretive process is akin to abduction, but it is not abduction. Abduction is inference from data to the best explanation (Douven, 2021), but we are not working between theory and data in this paper so much as between two theories or conceptual frameworks. Given this, a more appropriate account of what we are doing is given by the notion of “reflective equilibrium” (Daniels, 2020). Inspired by the work of Political Philosopher John Rawls, reflective equilibrium is “the end-point of a deliberative process in which we reflect on and revise our beliefs about an area of inquiry” (Ibid). For Rawls, the beliefs in question were normative principles, but in our case, they are theoretical principles as stipulated in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1998). As Daniels (ibid) notes, this revision might be guided by a search either for agreement and/or for coherence, but in our case we are looking to identify a model based on coherence between the principles of WIL and those of our discipline. Finally, then, the “reflective equilibrium” that we reach in this paper is the model of “WIPS as reflective practice on research-intensive political work”.

4. WIPS as reflective practice on research-intensive political work

The WIPS program is designed as a two-year, international master’s program that provides an academic degree in WIL, but with a focus on Political Studies. As noted above, WIPS is an attempt to offer something unique for Political Studies graduates who want a more applied training through the WIL framework. Briefly summarized, the structure of the program is that in the first-year students complete four courses at university, two of which are compulsory and focus on (applied) research theory and methods and WIL theory, and two of which are content focused Political Studies courses. In the second-year students complete both a research internship with a host political organization, at the same time as participating in two WIL reflection or portfolio courses. The key task of the internship is to conduct applied research for the host and to produce specific research related products in relation to this. The research tasks and outputs are defined in an agreement at the start of the internship and reviewed by all three partners at the end. The degree is then completed by a compilation thesis that reflects on the work conducted in the host organization through a WIL lens.

In this design, WIPS reflects the philosophical, pedagogical, and disciplinary dimensions of WIL at University West. While undergraduate programs focus on WIL as a form of pedagogy for learning other disciplines and vocations, the PhD program focuses on the actual content of WIL as a distinct research field. Compared to the undergraduate and PhD levels, the Masters level represents an instance where the two meet: where WIL as pedagogy/form and discipline/content combine. Consequently, WIPS does WIL as both form and content. In this way, WIPS contributes to the development of WIL as a discipline as it contributes to defining both the object of study and

method/strategy for approaching the object of study. It attempts to develop both a theoretical answer to “what do you study when you study WIL?” as well as defining such study through implementing educational practices, mostly in the form of student produced theses. Furthermore, it does this in ways that work for an academic program and a Political Studies discipline through affirming the forms of knowledge and knower central to the tradition of the discipline.

The WIL pedagogical approach comes through most clearly in the WIPS second year when students embark on a combined internship and thesis writing year. The construction is as follows: the students do not participate in traditional internships at their hosts, instead they do what is defined as research internships. The students are assigned a workplace supervisor and university supervisor that guides the student throughout this process. During this period, they write one or several reports for their hosts on issues that the hosts want investigated. Examples include a 2020 report for the Stockholm County Boards on all County boards work around discrimination, and 2021 reports for several local municipalities regarding integration and citizenship dialogues. These reports are used by the hosts while at the same time being appendixes in students’ theses. The main body of the thesis is an analysis of and reflection over the learning process and/or knowledge production in the writing and nature of the reports for the hosts. This can have different foci and starting points, but the common denominator for the master’s thesis is a focus on some aspect of WIL in a political context.

This design approach means that master’s thesis writing includes and unifies WIL as form and as content in a way that is not represented at undergraduate or PhD levels. It includes WIL as form through work-based internships and report writing, and WIL as content through the object of study. Central to this double-layered process is also an institutionalized and iterative process of reflection where the student critically examines their own learning process in context; a context containing academia *and* working life, both separately and intertwined, and how they shift positions and change roles within and in relation to this context. This complex situatedness sometimes leads to students expressing a sense of uncertainty, which of course must be handled properly by supervisors and hosts, but it also creates a situation akin to Barnett’s (2012) call for learning for an unknown future and constitutes a pedagogical form focused on adjustment, adaption, and creativity.

It also means that WIL as form and content—as pedagogical approach, and academic field or arguable discipline in the making—unite in that what the students’ study is a process that they themselves are within, and that an upholding of “theoretical” and “practical” knowledge as strict and divisible knowledge regimes becomes impossible. Therefore, the WIL theses that has so far been written within WIPS are ethnographic, even auto-ethnographic, based on the collection of WIL specific field notes—an approach that has precedence (see Hains-Wesson & Young, 2017). However, other forms of WIL reflections on the knowledge production during the internship are possible, for example, through a comparison of reports, or placing the report as part of a project into a greater context or as a case, but this requires the availability of such data and the time to collect a significant set of empirical data. The task of the Masters’ thesis writing remains within a traditional student-educator relationship, at least for now.

By design then, the WIPS masters requires both learning the theory and practice of research, as well as reflecting on some key aspects of WIL in the master’s thesis. In what follows, the article unpacks the model in more detail, illustrating how it offers a political reading of WIL as “reflective practice on research-intensive political work” in three dimensions.

4.1. The focus on research theory and practice

The first innovation of WIPS is to narrow the gap between an academic discipline and the world of work through a focus on research theory and practice. As noted above, a key challenge for WIPS is the great diversity of content that is taught under the title of Political Studies, and the tremendous range of potential hosts with divergent practices. One way that WIPS managed the diversity of

subject content and host organizations is by focusing on training postgraduate students in key aspects of research, and to co-define the placement with the host around research work of use to the host. In addition, this approach has further potential benefits of more closely integrating student learning with academic research thus infusing the values and priorities of academic discipline into WIL. This is regarded as one of the unique features of WIPS, and a key strength of the program, that enriches the learning focus of WIL by integrating it with research practice. Last, but not least, by designing the program around postgraduate research students who are trained in research, the host organizations stand to benefit more in terms of high-quality research results that are relevant for the host. This research can take multiple forms, including researching an issue of pressing concern for the host or the industry more widely, for example, de-segregation policies in municipalities.

In contrast with some WIL programs, where the rules of practice focus the internships and theoretical training, WIPS reverses this relation by bringing a substantive focus on research as practice at both the University and the host organization. Thus, despite the great variety of host organizations, with divergent subject areas, almost all student activities are organized around research. Furthermore, this amounts to a co-creation of research outputs that, while not unique as there are other WIL research-placements, does require the statement of learning outcomes that are distinct for this kind of WIL program. Finally, through the focus on applied research, and the strong link between research and learning, WIPS can be seen as applying WIL in a way that is more closely linked to academic research within the discipline of Political Studies.

4.2. From theory and practice to practical wisdom through reflective practice

Probably the most important and widely shared conception of WIL is as a pedagogic approach where learning happens through the integration or bridging of theoretical and practical knowledge Sunnemark et al., (2023). As Björck (2018) notes, the contrast between theoretical and practical knowledge may coincide with an institutional and a spatial contrast such that it is assumed that theoretical knowledge is taught at the university and practical knowledge is learned through practice in the workplace or wider community. However, consistent with many recent innovations in WIL (Ferns et al., 2022; Jung, 2022), the advent of WIPS calls this into question in three ways.

First, WIPS assumes the existence of multiple forms of theory and practice in the realm of Political Studies and multiple forms of practice and theory in the realm of political working life. This plurality of both theory and practice is a key reason why the WIPS program was chosen as a postgraduate *research* program to enable theoretical training in research philosophy, methodology, design, and methods that can be implemented across a diverse range of host organizations. However, even this approach has its limitations given the deep divides that run through research theory and practice, with most practitioners falling into one of the (usually contending) positivist/realist quantitative versus the social constructivist/interpretivist qualitative paradigms. This places limits on how well students are prepared for the specific research tasks required by the host with which they intern. For example, some municipal hosts may require simple descriptive statistical analysis of residential segregation, while other civil society hosts may require content or process analysis linked to forms of public engagement. Thus, while the focus on research theory and practice in WIPS helps narrow the diversity of content covered between learning at the university and in the workplace, it cannot perfectly align.

Second, WIPS recognizes the co-existence of several forms of theory and practice important to student learning in University West and in the workplace. Hence there are theoretical and practical activities occurring at both the university and workplace—such as the practices of writing, teamwork, research practice, policy considerations, theorization of models and critical consideration of knowledge production and new technological tools—as is evident in other recent WIL programs too (Ferns et al., 2022, pp 135–9). Crucially however, in addition there are forms of practical knowledge based on deliberative and normative reflections as acquired through experience, as they pertain to actions in particular situations, essential to student learning that are not, and

cannot be just informed by theoretical knowledge. There are also forms of practical knowledge and know-how in the workplace that are not just technical practices as they are informed by deliberative, critical, and ethical reflection (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012), such as often is the nature of the work in the field of the political.

These insights rest on notions of theory or science (*episteme*), practice (*techne*), practical wisdom or judgment (*phronesis*) and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) drawn from Political Philosophy. In ancient Greece, a distinction between *episteme*, theoretical activity, and *techne*, practical activity, developed over time (Parry, 2020). In book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle differentiated between the intellectual virtues, *episteme*, *techne*, *phronesis*, *sophia* and *nous*, and which to this day is the most influential account of these key concepts. *Episteme* he defined as axiomatic or demonstrable scientific knowledge and concerned the realm of what is by necessity or that which could not be otherwise. *Techne*, he defined as the making of things, concerning the realm of things that are contingent and could be otherwise (to make a thing or not, and in what way) (Aristotle, 2011: 119–131). *Phronesis* concerns not the practical making of things (*techne*) but the specific activity of politics as the realm of action (*praxis*) and thus pertain directly to political studies. Both *techne* and *episteme* can be taught according to Aristotle. Practical wisdom (*phronesis*), however, Aristotle argued, could not be taught, and for it to be learned, it requires a different kind of acquired experience that both involves theory (universals) and doing (particulars).

Phronesis, like *techne* (but unlike *episteme*) concerns particulars and what could be otherwise and thus “about which it possible to deliberate” and necessitates a choice or decision by an agent (Ibid, pp. 124–126). Deliberation over opinions informs the action (*praxis*) or doing required to attain an equitable end. Unlike *techne*, however, the end of practical wisdom is not the *making* of a thing, the product (*ergon*), but the end itself is the doing (*praxis*), or the “acting well” through correct deliberation (Ibid, p. 120). *Phronesis* “is a true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things good and bad for a human being” (Ibid, p. 120). Possibly *phronesis* includes not only the deliberation and action to how to attain an end well, but also the philosophical or theoretical reflection (*sophia*) on which end among ends is desirable as well as the highest good. Furthermore, political *phronesis* is not merely concerned with individual self-reflections and actions, but with collective deliberation, legislation, and judicial decisions (Ibid, p. 124).

Practical knowledge or judgement (*phronesis*), or the deliberation/reflection that informs good actions in human matters, is of additional relevance for WIPS then since it concerns the kind of *activity* – *human* actions—and knowledge of human actions in the political realm. As pointed out earlier, the employment trajectories of political studies graduates are wide, however, in one way or another, work in the political or public sphere will inevitably involve a human and moral dimension. For Aristotle then, a notion like WIL implies learning this third kind of knowledge: the knowledge that is gained from reflecting on learning both from theory or science and practice. This critical idea, that practical wisdom itself cannot be taught and that it is through experience of both learning theory and doing that one might come to grasp it, imbues the world of practice with necessary importance for knowledge production and learning; not least in the field of Political Studies that concerns, even when practiced through researcher work as part of our student’s internship, human (action) in the sphere of what could be otherwise. Hence, WIPS can be seen as deepening the kinds of knowledge that political studies graduates acquire in their studies in comparison with a more traditional academic degree precisely by requiring that students learn by practice and action too.

These elements are then built into the WIPS program. Thus, alongside learning the theory of research at the university, students practice research at a host, while reflecting in an ongoing and iterative way on their research practice with their peers, academic and host staff. This practice is at the heart of compulsory modules as well as the research placement with the host organization. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, this kind of critical reflection takes place through the

master's thesis on WIL. Here students are asked to reflect on the work they have undertaken and produced for the host through some theoretical lenses or methods. These lenses could be formed from hermeneutics, critical theory, grounded theory, political economy, management studies, public administration, intersectional analysis, critical pedagogy, WIL pedagogy, and so on.

WIPS thus offers a particular model for how a WIL program can institutionalize and spatialize not just theory (*episteme*) and practice (*techne*), but practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and political action (*praxis*), including normative judgements and philosophical reflections (*sophia*). Again, the emphasis on reflective practice is not unique to WIPS, and perhaps resonates with other cases, such as Tai et al. (2018) on assessment, and Boud et al. (2020) on judgement. Nevertheless, it has been consciously and deliberately foregrounded as a learning outcome for the program and understood as a condition for *phronesis* in terms of the philosophical traditions of the academic discipline.

4.3. WIPS knowers as political knowers

The third way that WIPS interprets WIL is in relation to the production of new kinds of knowers as follow from the idea of *phronesis*. This approach builds on the argument that WIL can yield important “ontological” changes in the being of the knower as well the “epistemological” gains of new form of knowledge. The key contribution of WIPS is to offer a political framing of the knower broader than for example, the employee, building on the idea of WIL as “learning through or in work” rather than just “learning to work”. In this vein, WIPS looks to produce graduates better prepared for the world of political work, a goal that also dovetails with the commitments of University West to graduates committed to become change agents for democracy and sustainability.

The importance of producing a new kind of knower through WIL is articulated by Barnett's (2012) who argues that in an uncertain and hypercomplex world, the combination of knowledge and skills alone is insufficient to cope with the future. In addition, what is required is to learn ways of being in the world that can cope with change and uncertainty. Key here are human qualities “such as carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage, and stillness”, as well notions of adaptability, flexibility, and self-reliance. Barnett's (2012, p. 76) states:

The achievement of qualities such as these calls for a transformatory curriculum and pedagogy which are themselves understood to be and practiced as endeavours of high risk; high risk not just for the participants but also for the academic staff in their educational roles as “adaptability”.

Importantly, these notions resonate with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* that, as outlined above, involves the development of practical wisdom that comes from ongoing theoretical reflection on experience over time, as it concerns action with specific ends in mind.

While WIL activities are highly various, and so it is difficult to generalize, WIL usually requires that students undertake real world tasks that carry a degree of responsibility and even risk (Boud, 2012 Orrell & Higgs, 2012, p. 47). Furthermore, workplace practice typically involves working with others, working with practitioners, and often the co-creation of tools and strategies to ensure that they meet their own needs and those of different practice settings in which they operate. At the heart of all of this is active student engagement in learning, including new forms of assessment orientated to developing learning, fostering a professional identity, involving collaboration with all partners, and the incidental learning that occurs in the workplace (Boud et al., 2020).

These ideas are found in the WIPS program to various degrees, depending to some extent on the host and the research activities defined for the internship, and then to some extent in the overall design of the program, including forms of assessment especially the thesis. What is distinctive is the recognition that conditions of uncertainty and conflict in working life are even more likely to be found in the public sector or civil society than the private sector—whether in government bodies,

non-governmental-, human rights-, or philanthropic-organizations. Central here is that these organizations tackle the tough questions of our times from refugees to segregation, inequality and poverty, climate change, natural disasters, violent conflict and even war. It seems reasonable to assume that WIPS practice will inevitably push most students out of their comfort zones and into at least one of these multiple and difficult domains.

Important too in some WIL programs are notions of “learning for life”, rather than only “learning to work” (Jung, 2022; Rice et al., 2016). WIPS gives this approach a clearly political framing, and so the core modules of WIPS explicitly tackle the notion of “employability” or “work-readiness” in normative terms. Not only is the workplace for politics graduates more often the public sector rather than the private, but more than that, it takes place in an advanced democracy in a context of a global sustainability crisis (amongst other challenges). Thus, not only will WIPS graduates be more likely to confront precisely these challenging normative questions in their working life, but a key learning from political history is the importance of learning a form of democratic citizenship that reflects on the ends along the line of philosophical reflection or wisdom (*sophia*) as well as the means (*techne*) of work. In the Political Studies tradition, “employability” and especially “work-readiness” should include the capacity of graduates to relate workplace activities to normative ends such as democracy and environmental sustainability. In this way, WIPS frames WIL as preparing students for working life in the public realm of a democracy or *for* democracy and sustainability where it is deficient.

5. Conclusion

This article develops a model for how an academic discipline like Political Studies can embrace WIL to produce graduates better prepared for the world of work, but also the world in general. This model is of a Master’s in WIL with a focus on Political Studies (WIPS), a new program introduced at University West in Sweden in 2020. Seizing the opportunity to fill an applied gap in Political Studies offerings, the program staff constructed WIPS through applying the theoretical assumptions of WIL to the forms of knowledge and knower valued by Political Studies, and developing a reflective equilibrium informed by these two frameworks. Thus, while many of the features of WIPS already exist in other forms of WIL globally, WIPS is innovative and unique in bringing them together under a new model also informed by the traditions of the discipline. This model we summarize as “reflective practice on research-intensive political work”.

WIPS is designed to address three challenges. First, Political Studies does not have one obvious vocational outlet but many. This leaves a large gap between our graduates and life after the University, especially working life. Second, students are traditionally taught how to make academic arguments rather than learning skills and knowledge connected to political practice. Third, the framing of WIL at University West wrongly establishes a set of binaries around theory and practice in terms of knowledge, institutional home, and spatial location that overlays traditional divides between academic and vocational disciplines.

To address these challenges, WIPS applies WIL through a politics lens in three ways. The first is that students learn research theory and practice on campus and in host political organizations to help bridge the gap between the discipline and the professions. The second, is that the important relationship between theory (*episteme*) and practice (*techne*) that runs through WIL is framed, in terms of an additional concept of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). This includes normative reflection on ends through a theoretical and reflective engagement (*sophia*). Here, student learning proceeds through institutionalized and iterative individual and collective reflection on practice and political actions (particulars) considering theory (universals) and vice versa. Third, following from this is a focus not just on producing new knowledge (epistemological concerns), but also new kinds of knowers (ontological concerns). This includes developing personal qualities like thoughtfulness, receptiveness, adaptability, and resilience, but also extends to normative reflection on the ends of work as well as the means, particularly as citizens who live in a democracy that confronts serious challenges like the sustainability crisis.

In various ways then the WIPS program embraces the WIL agenda, but in ways that increases the “semantic density” (Maton & Doran, 2017) or meaning of the key concepts of WIL. At the same time, the WIPS approach is also a new form of doing Political Studies. On the one hand WIPS includes learning and knowledge processes, and on the other it includes live research processes in our host organizations. Here a conflation of *techne* and *episteme* in relation to Political Studies can also be seen, since WIPS is not about using political theory to understand political practice, but to understand how elements of theoretical and practical knowledge intermingle both in the actual thesis writing of the students and in their internship context. This internship context includes practical political studies research, the domain of action that concerns different ends or “what could-be-otherwise”. In addition there is a Masters’ thesis writing context that involves theoretical reflection on the research-intensive political work. This combination also sets the stage for a potential journey towards *phronesis*, or even *sophia*.

It is too early to know how well this model works philosophically, and relatedly whether in practice WIPS will succeed in all or even just its core ambitions. Ongoing research on the program over the next few years will assess its philosophical innovation and practical efficacy. At the same time University West is continuing to interrogate the idea of WIL and how best to discharge its national mandate, a task that will inevitably involve an ongoing conversation with state and wider society, including international partners and interested parties. In this regard it is notable that the idea of collaborating internationally around forms of WIL in Political Studies at the postgraduate level is high on the agenda, and time will tell how the version of WIL at University West articulates with versions in other contexts. For now, though, the WIPS masters continues to be an ongoing, reflective, and innovative project informed by a spirit of practical, epistemic, and ontological experimentation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Learning in and for the new worklife (LINA) at The University.

Funding

The work was supported by the Högskolan Väst .

Author details

Laurence Piper¹

E-mail: laurence.piper@hv.se

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0061-0736>

Karl Dahlquist¹

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2625-6218>

Fredrik Sunnemark¹

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4822-6247>

Per Assmo¹

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5848-4288>

¹ School of Business, Economics & IT, University West, Gustava Melins gata 2, Trollhättan 461 32, Sweden.

Citation information

Cite this article as: Rethinking WIL for an academic discipline: the model of Work Integrated Political Studies (WIPS), Laurence Piper, Karl Dahlquist, Fredrik Sunnemark & Per Assmo, *Cogent Education* (2023), 10: 2191397.

References

- Aristotle. (2011). *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A new translation* by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago.
- Barnett, R. (2012). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(1), 65–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.642841>
- Billett, S. (2022). Learning in and Through Work: Positioning the Individual. In C. Harteis, D. Gijbels, &

- E. Kyndt (Eds.), *Research Approaches on Workplace Learning. Professional and Practice-based Learning* (Vol. 31, pp. 157–175). Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89582-2_7
- Björck, V. (2018). The idea of academia and the real world and its ironic role in the discourse on work-integrated learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 42(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1520210>
- Björck, V. (2020). Learning 'theory' at university and 'practice' in the workplace : A problematisation of the theory-practice terminology that the dualistic design of Work-integrated Learning institutionalises. Phd Thesis, University West, <http://hv.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1503985&dswid=3464>.
- Björck, V., & Johansson, K. (2019). Problematising the theory-practice terminology: A discourse analysis of students' statements on work-integrated learning. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(10), 1363–1375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1483016>
- Boud, D. (2012). Problematising practice-based education. In J. Higgs, R. Barnett, S. Billett, M. Hutchings, & F. Trede (Eds.), *Practice-Based Education: Practice, Education, Work and society* (Vol. 6, pp. 55–68). Brill.
- Boud, D., Ajjawi, R., & Tai, J. (2020). Assessing work-integrated learning programs: A guide to effective assessment design. *Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning*. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv:87412>
- Cunningham, W. G., & Sherman, W. H. (2008). Effective internships: Building bridges between theory and practice. *The Educational Forum*, 72(4), 308–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720802361936>
- Daniels, N. (2020). Reflective Equilibrium. In E. N. Zalta Ed., *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* Summer 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/reflective-equilibrium/>
- Douven, I. (2021). Abduction. In E. N. Zalta Ed., *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* Summer 2021.

- <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/abduction/>
- Ferns, S. J., Rowe, A. D., & Zegwaard, K. E. (Eds.). (2022). *Advances in research, theory and practice in work-integrated learning: Enhancing employability for a sustainable future*. Routledge.
- Hains-Wesson, R., & Young, K. (2017). A collaborative autoethnography study to inform the teaching of reflective practice in STEM. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(2), 297–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1196653>
- Higgs, J. (2012). Practice-based education. In D. Tasker, J. Higgs, S. Loftus, A. Croker, F. Trede, J. Hummell, T. Gerzina, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Practice-based education. Practice, education, work and society* (Vol. 6, pp. 3–12). Brill Sense.
- Higgs, J., Crisp, G., & Letts, W. (Eds.). (2019). *Education for employability (volume 1): The employability agenda*. Brill.
- Hill, D. B., & Morf, M. E. (2000). Undoing theory/practice dualism: Joint action and knowing from within. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 20(2), 208–224. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0091210>
- IJWIL (International Journal of Work Integrated Learning). 2021. Homepage. <https://www.ijwil.org/>. Accessed September 7, 2021.
- Jackson, D. (2018). Developing graduate career readiness in Australia: Shifting from extra-curricular internships to work-integrated learning. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 19(1), 23–35.
- Jung, J. (2022). Working to learn and learning to work: Research on higher education and the world of work. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41(1), 92–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.2002274>
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason (the Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant)*. (P. Guyer & A. Wood, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kay, J., Ferns, S., Russell, L., Smith, J., & Winchester-Seeto, T. (2019). The emerging future: Innovative models of work-integrated learning. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 20(4), 401–413.
- Kinsella, E. A., & Pitman, A. (2012). Engaging phronesis in professional practice and education. In E. A. Kinsella & A. Pitman (Eds.), *Phronesis as professional knowledge: Practical wisdom in the professions* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–11). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Lukes, S. (2004). *Power: A radical view*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Maton, K., & Doran, Y. J. (2017). Semantic density: A translation device for revealing complexity of knowledge practices in discourse, part 1—wording. *Onomázein Revista de lingüística filología y traducción*, 2(2), 46–76. <https://doi.org/10.7764/onomazein.ne2.03>
- Parry, R. (2020). *Episteme and Techne*. In E. N. Zalta Ed., *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* Fall 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-techne/>
- Rice, J., Johnston, E., Acuna, T., Huia Brookes, R., Campbell, M., Chuck, J. A., Meier, P., Rowland, S., & Adams, P. 2016. *WIL in science: Leadership for WIL final project report 2015 – 2016*. Australian Council of Deans of Science. <http://www.acds-tlcc.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/05/WIL-in-Science-project-report-2016.pdf>
- Sunnemark, L., Sunnemark, F., Dahlquist, K., Gahnström, E., Piper, L., & Assmo, P. (2023). *Bridging Theory and Practice through Work-Integrated Learning*. The Conceptualisations of WIL at a University in Sweden. Under review.
- Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Panadero, E. (2018). Developing evaluative judgement: Enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work. *Higher Education*, 76(3), 467–481. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0220-3>
- University West. (2020). Work-integrated learning. <https://www.hv.se/en/work-integrated-learning/>
- University West. (2021). General study plan for PhD education in WIL at the University. <https://www.hv.se/en/research/research-education/utbildningen/>
- Valentini, L. (2012). Ideal vs. non-ideal theory: A conceptual map. *Philosophy Compass*, 7(9), 654–664. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2012.00500.x>
- Zinn, D., Geduld, D., Delpont, A., & Jordaan, C. (2014). ‘Learning walks’: Dialogic spaces for integrating theory and practice in a renewed BED foundation phase curriculum. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 4(3), 103–121. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v4i3.230>



© 2023 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



Cogent Education (ISSN: 2331-186X) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.

Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at www.CogentOA.com

