



eWBL – Making work-based learning work in an online environment

Case Studies – netherlands (WP1)

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Exploring the challenges met and the alternatives found by WBL providers across Europe in their shift from WBL to eWBL.

Prepared by: The University of Groningen



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CASE STUDY 3

Name of the case	Dutch case study 3
Country(-ies)	Netherlands
Disciplinary sector	Faculty of Arts
Case written by	André Perusso
Executive summary (summarise the case in 200 words)	
<p>This case describes the online work placement offered to the BA and MA students of the Faculty of Arts of a university in the north of the Netherlands, delivered by a major Dutch publishing company. More specifically, the placement was conducted in the company's foreign language division and it took place exclusively online. Despite the absence of specific features at the company level, the case portrays a series of tools to make online work more efficient and minimize the social isolation typically associated with online work. Tools include weekly meetings, feedback sessions, happy hours, work walks, working in pairs and digital lunches. Participants also described the implications of online work for WBL and what the future of internships might look like.</p>	

Section	Answer
1) Organisations' background	<p>The publishing company is one of the largest educational publishers in the Netherlands. The company covers a broad subject range within its primary, secondary, vocational and higher education teaching resources. Hundreds of authors collaborate to develop up-to-date course materials. The focus of this case study is on the publishing company language department which covers four languages: Dutch, English, German and French.</p> <p>The HEI currently has 27,000 students and 5,500 staff members from home and abroad. Most of the interns at the publishing company language department are students at the Faculty of Arts. The Faculty of Arts has more than 5,000 students and 700 staff members. It offers a range of degree programmes: 15 Bachelor's programmes and over 40 Master's in Archaeology, Cultural Studies, History, International Relations, Journalism, Language and Literary Studies, and Linguistics.</p>
2) Design, delivery and management.	<p>Given the sudden change in working conditions due to COVID-19, a significant part of the internship activities had to be planned as the situation unfolded. From the HEI side, this meant that substantial time was dedicated to updating students, lecturers and partner companies about current COVID-19 rules and trying to arrange internships for all the students, especially for programmes where internships are mandatory. Once the situation became more "stable" the HEI organised individual and collective mentoring and feedback sessions with the different interns.</p> <p>From the publishing company's side, internships were moved to the online environment without a specific plan of action at the organisation level, mostly because some tasks like meetings were already being conducted online. However, the publishing company ensured that interns were officially welcomed, received IT support and were given a general overview of the company departments and the key persons they would be working with. The actual design and delivery of the intern's tasks was the responsibility of the coordinators directly working with them; namely a publisher and two innovation content developers.</p> <p>Given this background, the work was typically organised as follows. Monday mornings the whole team would meet to discuss what must be delivered during that particular week (for the ongoing or new projects) and how interns can be of help. Additionally, participants shared their calendars and defined which meetings interns must (or could) participate in. Interns typically worked in pairs, sharing responsibility for a given task.</p> <p>For executing their tasks, interns accessed their supervisors at the publishing company or external authors through different digital means, including scheduled online meetings email, phone calls or Whatsapp. Interns received</p>



	<p>access to a shared platform where they could save, upload, and access documents necessary to perform their tasks. Working hours were from 8 AM to 5 PM and interns were not supposed to be reached outside of these working hours.</p> <p>Interns and their more direct supervisors had a “virtual coffee break” on Thursdays at the end of the day. There, participants had the chance to give and receive feedback and mentoring on their performance but also socialise and get to know each other at a more personal level. Interns working on the same tasks also organised non-official daily coffee breaks to talk about personal matters. It was also the publishing company culture to dedicate 10 minutes to “small talk” at the beginning of every meeting.</p> <p>In addition to work and mentoring activities, the publishing company organised once a week an online “happy hour” where employees could chat about life outside of work. The publishing company also encouraged walks in parks and other open spaces to discuss both work and non-work-related matters.</p>
<p>3) Difference, similarities and impact on learning outcomes</p>	<p>Regarding the specific nature of the interns’ tasks, the work processes and the outcomes were not highly impacted by the migration to the online setting. Students had to support editors, content developers, and authors and they were able to successfully fulfil these tasks online. However, the internship coordinator remarked that the online environment makes it more difficult to track what interns are doing. There is a general understanding of the task at hand it is overall more difficult to track specific challenges and obstacles interns are facing. In the same way, it is more difficult for interns to reach out to supervisors to share their issues. This harms feedback and mentoring.</p> <p>The online internships also allowed students to acquire <i>professional experience</i>, especially regarding the habit of performing regular work, assuming responsibilities, being a part of an organisation, and following a work schedule; even though interns were doing it from home. However, according to the interviewed intern, this was possible because the entire organisation was working online so she felt inserted in the same environment as the others. Had she been the only one working online, perhaps the impression would be different; she might have felt like a complete external.</p> <p>On the development of <i>soft skills</i>, interviewees recognise that there were opportunities to foster some of them online, especially during online meetings. Students had to present themselves, update on their work and work collaboratively. For these types of skills, working online might have been beneficial because they could not rely on visual cues they had to compensate with a clearer form of communication. Notwithstanding, other soft skills were not fully developed as there was no opportunity to do so. The interviewed intern mentioned that she had problems with presenting in front of large groups and she would like to have developed that skill. Presentations online did not have the same impact. The same goes to working in larger teams. The internship supervisor also added the difficulty to grasp whether or not students acquire soft skills because they have less direct contact with them. The issue of reduced contact also connects with the process of mentoring, assessment and evaluation insofar as it makes it more challenging for the company to assess and give feedback on interns’ performance.</p> <p>The <i>networking</i> opportunities were also negatively affected by online work. While the publishing company created various opportunities for interns to network (for instance, as part of the work placement interns got to know other areas of the company) interns perceived that they did not know people well enough to contact them in the future or to consider them as part of a professional network. Similarly, students believe that the persons with whom they interacted probably do not remember them as oftentimes they only knew their names or the fact that they were interns. The placement coordinator added that being in the office creates opportunities for conversation on tangent topics (e.g. on image rights for someone who does not work with image rights) that not only improve knowledge but also create a chance to network. Despite that, the internship coordinator suggested that the most relevant contacts for the interns, namely the</p>

	<p>internship coordinator and the editor they worked with, could be considered as part of the interns' network regardless of knowing them only online.</p> <p>Last, concerning <i>company culture</i> and the rules and norms of the workplace, interviewees believe that some aspects of the company culture (the level of formality, the team spirit, and the notion of "who is who") can be captured online, especially through online meetings and the "onboarding" activities.</p>
<p>5) Pedagogical innovations</p>	<p>Participants mentioned various pedagogical innovations introduced by the publishing company and the HEI. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Weekly Monday meetings</i>: The publishing company working groups (editors, interns and project managers) had weekly "kick-off" meetings every Monday to plan, go over the main work tasks with the interns, and synchronize meetings. - <i>Mentoring and socialising sessions</i>: Every Tuesday, interns and the internship coordinator at the publishing company had a meeting where they received feedback and mentoring on their work but also to discuss non-work topics. - <i>Work in pairs</i>: The publishing company encourages interns to work in pairs, sharing similar or the same tasks. This alleviates the feeling of isolation associated with home working and allows interns to have someone whom they can contact daily. - <i>Walks</i>: The publishing company encouraged employees to do "work walks" where they meet in a park or other open spaces to discuss a particular business problem, do work in general or socialise. - <i>Digital lunch</i>: The publishing company's HR department organises online lunches for the interns, where they can get to know each other better, socialise and share work experiences. The HEI also promotes similar meetings during and at the end of the internship period. The HEI's meetings include interns from the whole department, encompassing students working at different companies.
<p>6) Technological innovations</p>	<p>To offer each intern a laptop with a series of programmes pre-installed facilitated the initial set-up and onboarding of interns.</p>
<p>7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL</p>	<p>The main reported benefit of online work was increased productivity. Since employees are on their computers most of the time, it was easier to reach share information, make notes, hold short meetings, etc. In an offline setting, sometimes you meet people in situations where it is difficult to share information or make notes, appointments, etc. In other words, in the online work environment information is more readily-available.</p> <p>The main constraint of online work according to participants is the lack of social contact. This lack of socialisation not only makes the interns' work repetitive but also offers few cues to supervisors on how the intern is doing. If you do not need to leave your home, the interviewed intern mentioned, your working day looks very much the same, the only difference being the type of task performed. Likewise, supervisors do not know details about the interns' perception of the internship nor how he or she is coping with their tasks to a degree where they can give good feedback. To this, the internship supervisor stressed the importance of asking questions. Often, interns feel uncomfortable yet in an online environment (where there is less informal contact) inquiring is one of the few opportunities one has to clarify matters.</p> <p>At the publishing company, the feeling of repetition was alleviated by the presence of a second intern working on the same tasks. This created opportunities for the two interns to share a more personal connection, have informal chats and support each other on a more personal level. The lack of insight into interns' routines was also mitigated by feedback sessions every week. In this context, HEIs can also contribute by offering individual or group assistance to groups of interns, offering opportunities to discuss work and personal challenges, and meeting other interns in similar situations.</p> <p>Additionally, participants stressed the importance of separating working and personal time. The fact that one is at home might lead to a merge of these two parts of the day, which according to interviewees might be dangerous and counterproductive.</p> <p>Last, interviewees mentioned the lack of a framework and tools on how to work</p>

	effectively online, especially regarding socialisation. It would be useful to have access to such tools so that work activities can be prepared in advance.
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	Online work allows hiring employees from all over the country, who have to be present at the office only once a week or once a month. The same thing will likely happen to interns. They could be hired from a much broader area not just from the city where the company is located. Additionally, a significant part of the intern's work activities will remain online. Interns would go to the company a few days a week or on a part-time basis. For interns, such increased flexibility can be beneficial as it will be easier to combine university commitments (e.g. exams, thesis writing, travel) with the internship activities.