



# The Use of Work-Simulated Learning in a Strategic Integrated Communication Module to Bridge the Gap between Theory and Practice: A Reflection of the Experiential Learning Pathway of Faculty

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## ABSTRACT

This article explored the integration of Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Due to contextual factors, students from North-West University, South Africa cannot participate in Work-Integrated Learning within a Strategic Integrated Communication module. To address this issue, faculty at North-West University incorporated Simulation-Based Learning within their module. A qualitative research approach was executed to gain insights into the faculty's experiences regarding the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning as an experiential learning approach. Utilising Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle, this study explored module instructors' perceptions of using Work-Simulated Learning. Findings suggest that instructors viewed the inclusion of Work-Simulated Learning as a practical approach to bridging the gap between theory and practice in the absence of Work-Integrated Learning. Due to the positive experiences highlighted by the instructors, this study recommends the incorporation of Work-Simulated Learning to enhance student readiness by not only mimicking industry but also by including industry in the formulation of Work-Simulated Learning scenarios. The main conclusion of the study emphasised the experiences of lecturers at the North-West University regarding the incorporation of Work-Simulated Learning as an alternative to Work-Integrated Learning to enhance student engagement and increase career development.

**Keywords:** *Work-Simulated Learning, Simulation-Based Learning, Experiential Learning, Gibbs Reflective Cycle, Strategic Integrated Communication*

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## INTRODUCTION

Increasing competition and localised global platforms are changing industries' expectations regarding graduates.<sup>1</sup> Jackson et al. maintain that undergraduate university degrees may not be adequate when students graduate and enter the workforce due to the substantial content focus within university

<sup>1</sup> Swati Bansal and Monica Agarwal, "To Study the Gap between the Education and Industrial Expectations of Management Graduates," *Management* 7 (2019): 591.

curricula.<sup>2</sup> Various authors have argued that a theory-practice gap exists between the pedagogical knowledge obtained during university and the practical application of theoretical knowledge in practice.<sup>3</sup> Due to the perceived theory and practice gap held by industry, employers increasingly demand to hire for skills instead of content knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The expectations by industry and the changing business landscape, which fuels the need for industry-ready graduates, are forcing Higher Education Institutions to adapt traditional teaching and learning practices to more innovative approaches that will increase gradueness and value for both industry and students.<sup>5</sup> According to Björck, the theory and practice gap narrative has led to the development and application of Work-Integrated Learning in academia and research.<sup>6</sup>

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is an intentional educational approach integrating theory and practice within coursework.<sup>7</sup> Incorporating WIL into teaching and learning creates an opportunity for students to enter the workplace, while also allowing the workplace to be incorporated into the curriculum.<sup>8</sup> WIL is a partnership to learning that involves the student, the university, and the industry/community working together to benefit all parties. Furthermore, during WIL, students are exposed to and communicate with different stakeholders (supervisors, peers and customers), which can contribute to adopting professional practices or developing skills that may not be embedded into the curriculum.<sup>9</sup> From a pedagogical point of view, students benefit from WIL by engaging in work-related tasks which provide authentic experiences which contribute to learning, work-readiness and gradueness.<sup>10</sup> WIL also benefits the industry by providing graduates with a sense of familiarity with the workplace and a feeling of being work-ready. Furthermore, exposure to the workplace can ensure productivity from graduates upon starting at a company, reduce risks and potentially save money on induction and skills training.<sup>11</sup>

Although the benefits of WIL cannot be refuted, applying this educational approach within specific contexts may not be feasible due to resource constraints or access. On the other hand, Kaider et al. highlight the competitiveness of work placement during WIL, when various higher education institutions employ WIL as a learning approach.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the various benefits of WIL, some considerations exist for industry, universities and students when considering participating in WIL. Industry may have concerns regarding the suitability and quality of the students within their specific organisations. Additionally, employers may be concerned about the time, effort and resources required for WIL, which can hinder their participation in WIL opportunities.<sup>13</sup> Wheeldon et al. also argue that WIL can only benefit different stakeholders if

<sup>2</sup> Denise Jackson et al., "Employer Understanding of Work-Integrated Learning and the Challenges of Engaging in Work Placement Opportunities," *Studies in Continuing Education* 39, no. 1 (2017): 35–51.

<sup>3</sup> Michael James Anderson and Kelly Freebody, "Developing Communities of Praxis: Bridging the Theory Practice Divide in Teacher Education," *McGill Journal of Education* 47, no. 3 (2012): 359–77, 362; María del Carmen Álvarez Álvarez, "Can Teachers Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap? An Ethnographic Study of a Teacher," 2015, 233.

<sup>4</sup> Times Higher Education, "Universities Must Prepare Their Students for the Workplace, Not Just Graduation," 2023, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/hub/coursera/p/universities-must-prepare-their-students-workplace-not-just-graduation>.

<sup>5</sup> Friederika Kaider, Rachael Hains-Wesson, and Karen Young, "Practical Typology of Authentic Work-Integrated Learning Activities and Assessments," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 18, no. 2 (2017): 153–65.

<sup>6</sup> Ville Björck, "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" (University West, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning, "Defining Work-Integrated Learning," 2023, <https://www.ijwil.org/defining-wil>.

<sup>8</sup> S. Khan and J. Brunner, "Can We Rely on the Workplace to Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap in Planning," in *Work Integrated Learning—Responding to Challenges: Proceedings of the 2010 ACEN National Conference*, 2010, 235–50, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Friederika Kaider et al., "Designing Blended Spaces to Maximise Student Learning in Work Integrated Learning Programs," *Same Places, Different Spaces*, 2009, 496–505, 496.

<sup>10</sup> Susanne Taylor and Cookie M Govender, "Increasing Employability by Implementing a Work-Integrated Learning Partnership Model in South Africa—A Student Perspective," *Africa Education Review* 14, no. 1 (2017): 105–19; Annie Venville, Bernardine Lynch, and Elizabeth Santhanam, "A Systematic Approach to the Evaluation of the Student Experience in Work-Integrated Learning," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 19, no. 1 (2018): 13–21; Karsten E Zegwaard and Anna D Rowe, "Informed Curriculum and Advancing Innovative Practices in Work-Integrated Learning," 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Khan and Brunner, "Can We Rely on the Workplace to Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap in Planning," 236.

<sup>12</sup> Kaider, Hains-Wesson, and Young, "Practical Typology of Authentic Work-Integrated Learning Activities and Assessments."

<sup>13</sup> Jackson et al., "Employer Understanding of Work-Integrated Learning and the Challenges of Engaging in Work Placement Opportunities."

adequate support and administration are available from universities to manage the WIL process and relationships with the industry.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between the university and industry can be maintained if adequate support is provided to industry or students during WIL initiatives.

From a pedagogical perspective, universities need to consider that students may not necessarily be exposed to suitable projects, tasks, experiences, problems, or issues which relate to theory when participating in WIL.<sup>15</sup> Smith argues that universities assume that students have adequate disciplinary knowledge when embarking on WIL and that they will be able to draw on that knowledge to solve problems.<sup>16</sup> It is only possible to ascertain whether students correctly drew on the knowledge required after the fact. Smith maintains that WIL placements can be unreliable due to the different experiences of students within various businesses.<sup>17</sup> He adds that the validity of WIL placements can also be questioned, as the diverse experiences may not be measured according to pre-conceived criteria or standards. This can affect reaching module outcomes, while students may acquire skills and knowledge outside of the curriculum. Lastly, universities must consider societal and contextual factors affecting students' participation in WIL before implementing WIL within modules.

Within South Africa, the implementation of WIL is affected by further challenges. One of these challenges faced by students in South Africa is the issue of funding, with many students being reliant on the National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS), which is a government entity which provides financial support to disadvantaged students who want to continue their studies.<sup>18</sup> In 2023, the NSFAS had 1.3 million registered students.<sup>19</sup> Students who rely on NSFAS to pay for accommodation, transport, living, books and personal care need the financial means to participate in WIL initiatives. Furthermore, South Africa has 26 public universities, with less than half of these universities located in major cities and business hubs. Geographic locations can thus create issues for WIL within specific degrees due to their proximity to industry.

The North-West University (NWU) has three campuses: Potchefstroom and Mahikeng within the North-West Province and Vanderbijlpark in the Gauteng Province. Due to their geographical location, the North-West University campuses are far from many of the prominent public relations and communication agencies in South Africa. This creates issues of incorporating WIL within the BA Communication degree at the North-West University. To address the problems related to WIL within the North-West University regarding communication studies related to corporate communications and public relations, Work-Simulated Learning was introduced as an alternative to WIL. Galea articulates that simulations can replicate the "real" world or industry by incorporating it into education.<sup>20</sup> Loutet et al. further argue that incorporating simulations into the education space may create controlled situations linked to specific problems that benefit learning.<sup>21</sup> By combining real-world simulations and issues in educational teaching spaces, ill-structured problems which students can face once they start working or that may even be encountered during WIL can be simulated for students to derive meaning through interaction.<sup>22</sup> This article explores the reflective journey of three instructors at North-West

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<sup>14</sup> Anita Louise Wheeldon, Stephen Jonathan Whitty, and BRONTE VanDerHoorn, "Burnt out by Underinvestment: Why University Professional Staff Suffer amidst the Australian Work-Integrated Learning System," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 2023, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Khan and Brunner, "Can We Rely on the Workplace to Bridge the Theory-Practice Gap in Planning"; Jackson et al., "Employer Understanding of Work-Integrated Learning and the Challenges of Engaging in Work Placement Opportunities"; Jackson et al., "Employer Understanding of Work-Integrated Learning and the Challenges of Engaging in Work Placement Opportunities," 49.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin Smith, "Assessment of Student Outcomes from Work-Integrated Learning: Validity and Reliability.," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 15, no. 3 (2014): 209–23, 214.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, "Assessment of Student Outcomes from Work-Integrated Learning: Validity and Reliability," 211.

<sup>18</sup> NSFAS, "The DHET Bursary Scheme," 2023, <https://www.nsfas.org.za/content/bursary-scheme.html>.

<sup>19</sup> South African Government, "NSFAS Responds to South Africa Union of Students," 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Galea, "Experiential Simulations: Using Web-Enhanced Role-Plays to Teach Applied Business Management," *Information Technology and Management* 2 (2001): 473–89.

<sup>21</sup> Miranda G Loutet et al., "Using Experiential Simulation-Based Learning to Increase Engagement in Global Health Education: An Evaluation of Self-Reported Participant Experience," *Medical Science Educator* 30 (2020): 1245–53.

<sup>22</sup> Woei Hung, David H Jonassen, and Rude Liu, "Problem-Based Learning," in *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology* (Routledge, 2008), 485–506.

University regarding implementing Simulation-Based Learning to determine the value of Work-Simulated Learning in a strategic communication module to bridge theory and practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Experiential Learning

In his definition of learning, Kolb argues that experience is required to create new knowledge.<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, learning can be viewed as an adaptive process, the nature of knowledge is viewed as transformational (created and re-created), objective and subjective experience transform learning, and understanding the essence of knowledge is required. To illustrate the learning process, Kolb identifies learning as a four-stage cycle in which experience gained through observation and reflection is assimilated into theory, which becomes the basis for creating new experiences.<sup>24</sup> This cycle involves concrete experiences, reflecting on the experience, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The value of experiential learning is thus the interplay between experience and enabling the learner to construct meaning.<sup>25</sup> Experiential learning allows the student to gain self-knowledge through experiencing situations in action, which goes beyond analysing case studies and scenarios by making accurate decisions.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, intentionally incorporating different experiential learning tools like role-play, reflective observations during discussions, internships, service-learning projects and simulations can contribute to meaningful learning.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Ogbecchie and Akanji maintain that experiential learning not only contributes to learning and improving skills but, through critical reflection, enables students to create mental maps when exposed to similar experiences in the future.<sup>28</sup> Lastly, experiential learning may also foster an understanding of the industry expectations associated with different professional roles and responsibilities that they will face in their future careers.<sup>29</sup>

### Simulation-Based Learning

Shepherd et al. define simulations as "a strategic, experientially based teaching, learning and assessment method."<sup>30</sup> It is a dynamic, effective theory-to-practice change agent utilising active learning modes employing space, movement and conceptual challenges to imbue the learning environment with 'life-like' experiences. Simulations utilise various techniques and technologies to contribute to a student's experiences using a range of tools from industry involvement (face-to-face) to the use of virtual reality (multimedia).<sup>31</sup> As an assessment method simulation can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, simulations ensure reliability through control by providing student experiences and assessments to reach module outcomes. On the other hand, simulations, through narrow control, limit the unpredictability associated with real-world experiences, which can contribute to learning.<sup>32</sup> Shepherd et al. and Zegwaard et al. argue that the control aspect of simulations

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<sup>23</sup> D. Kolbe, *Experiential Learning* (New Jersey: Eaglewood Cliffs, 1984), 28.

<sup>24</sup> Kolbe, *Experiential Learning*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Linda H Lewis and Carol J Williams, "Experiential Learning: Past and Present," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 1994, no. 62 (1994): 5–16, 9; Norma Hedin, "Experiential Learning: Theory and Challenges," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (2010): 107–17, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis and Williams, "Experiential Learning: Past and Present," 10; Massiel Carolina Henríquez Parodi and Ilan Alon, "Experiential Learning Using Social Media in International Business Education," *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning and Teaching International Business and Management*, 2019, 111–34, 112.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis and Williams, "Experiential Learning: Past and Present," 10; Hedin, "Experiential Learning: Theory and Challenges," 115.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Ogbecchie and Hamed Akanji, "Experiential Learning in Executive Education: The Lagos Business School (LBS) Experience," *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning and Teaching International Business and Management*, 2019, 953–79, 954.

<sup>29</sup> Emily S Kinsky, "This Means War: Using an Advertising War Room Simulation to] Teach Social Media Skills," *Journal of Advertising Education* 19, no. 1 (2015): 29–41, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Irwyn Shepherd, Elysebeth Leigh, and Amanda Davies, "Disrupting the Familiar: Applying Educational Theories to Simulation-Based Learning and Assessment Design," in *Intersections in Simulation and Gaming: Disruption and Balance: Third Australasian Simulation Congress, ASC 2019, Gold Coast, Australia, September 2–5, 2019, Proceedings 3* (Springer, 2019), 61–76.

<sup>31</sup> Carol-joy Patrick et al., *The WIL (Work Integrated Learning) Report: A National Scoping Study* (Queensland University of Technology, 2008); Shepherd, Leigh, and Davies, "Disrupting the Familiar: Applying Educational Theories to Simulation-Based Learning and Assessment Design," 15.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, "Assessment of Student Outcomes from Work-Integrated Learning: Validity and Reliability," 211.

benefits learning as it provides students with safe and supportive settings instead of a real workplace setting.<sup>33</sup> Within this environment, students can experiment, experience and fail without feeling pressured or concerned about the risks and consequences of failing.<sup>34</sup> Without the additional stress of coping with the real world, learning can occur by ensuring that students analyse situations, apply their knowledge, act according to what the environment expects, and reflect on the learning experience. This will lead to students not only understanding content but also learning new habits and behaviours through the experiential learning process.<sup>35</sup>

Bayerlein argues that the value of simulations lies in the shift in students' frame of reference to engage more with authentic learning experiences that mimic the real world.<sup>36</sup> Shepherd et al. maintain that authentic experiential learning can narrow the gap between theory and practice while allowing students to reflect on the requirements linked to industry-related skills, knowledge and attitudes.<sup>37</sup> Simulations should precede WIL initiatives to help students with limited exposure to transition from university to WIL.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Zegwaard et al. differentiate between the concepts of simulated learning, simulated learning as WIL and work placement types of WIL (see Figure 1).<sup>39</sup>



Figure 1. A conceptualisation of simulated learning and simulated learning as WIL by Zegwaard et al. (2020:325)

Although WIL initiatives provide a better learning experience than simulated learning or simulated learning as WIL in terms of proximity to workplaces, not all students have access to or the opportunity to gain work experience opportunities.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, scalability, cost, time and support can also contribute to an issue that can prioritise the use of simulations over the use of WIL within curricula.<sup>41</sup>

### Simulation-Based Learning in Communication Studies

Sutherland and Ward argue that more research should be conducted on using simulations within Public Relations modules to prepare students for the possible challenges that they can encounter when entering the industry.<sup>42</sup> However, studies on the use of simulations in Public Relations have been

<sup>33</sup> Shepherd, Leigh, and Davies, "Disrupting the Familiar: Applying Educational Theories to Simulation-Based Learning and Assessment Design," 15; Karsten E Zegwaard, T Judene Pretti, and Anna D Rowe, "Responding to an International Crisis: The Adaptability of the Practice of Work-Integrated Learning," 2020, 325.

<sup>34</sup> Zegwaard, Pretti and Rowe, "Responding to an International Crisis...," 325.

<sup>35</sup> Shepherd, Leigh, and Davies, "Disrupting the Familiar...," 54.

<sup>36</sup> Leopold Bayerlein, "Curriculum Innovation in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes through 'Virtual Internships,'" *Education+ Training* 57, no. 6 (2015): 673–84.

<sup>37</sup> Shepherd, Leigh, and Davies, "Disrupting the Familiar: Applying Educational Theories to Simulation-Based Learning and Assessment Design," 29.

<sup>38</sup> Bayerlein, "Curriculum Innovation in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes through 'Virtual Internships,'" 15.

<sup>39</sup> Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe, "Responding to an International Crisis...," 325.

<sup>40</sup> Bayerlein, "Curriculum Innovation in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes through 'Virtual Internships,'" 681.

<sup>41</sup> Bayerlein, "Curriculum Innovation in Undergraduate Accounting Degree Programmes through 'Virtual Internships,'" 681; S. Cerimagic et al., "Bridging Education to Employment through Virtual Experience Placement," in *Reconnecting Relationships through Technology: Proceedings of the 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022* (Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education-ASCILITE., 2022); Christine Bilisland, Helga Nagy, and Phil Smith, "Virtual Internships and Work-Integrated Learning in Hospitality and Tourism in a Post-COVID-19 World.," *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* 21, no. 4 (2020): 425–37, 434.

<sup>42</sup> Karen E Sutherland and Alistair Ward, "Immersive Simulation as a Public Relations Pedagogical Tool," *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* 19 (2018): 66–82, 69.

conducted that explored the use of simulations within the context of crisis communication.<sup>43</sup> These studies explored the role of social media and media relations within crises. Nonetheless, limited research exists on the application of simulations about other functions of public relations and strategic communication, such as internal communication, issue management, leadership communication, stakeholder management, relationship management and marketing communication.<sup>44</sup> Olson (2012:38) indicates that the use of simulations can benefit public relations students by 1) teaching students how to monitor and evaluate information carefully, 2) creating awareness regarding the effects of making assumptions, 3) preparing students for unexpected events that may appear during a crisis, 4) generating cognisance of the effort it takes to make decisions, 5) students are exposed to the dynamics associated with teamwork, and 6) students learn more about the relationship between public relations and journalism.<sup>45</sup>

The ability of Simulation-Based Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice as an alternative to WIL, along with the limited research on Simulation-Based Learning in public relations and strategic communications, poses the following research question:

*How do the Strategic Integrated Communication Instructors at the North-West University experience the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice?*

### **Work-Simulated Learning within a Strategic Integrated Communication Module**

Strategic Integrated Communication is an approach to communication in which organisations strategically manage all communication efforts to position themselves to reach their strategic intent.<sup>46</sup> Strategic Integrated Communication aims to integrate all communication activities like public relations, marketing, internal communication and brand management to benefit the organisation.

At NWU, Strategic Integrated Communication forms part of a second-semester/four-month-long capstone module called COMS325 within the BA Communication and BCom Communication degrees. This module aims to integrate all of the knowledge and skills obtained in modules like Introduction to Corporate Communication, Public Relations, Reputation Management, Marketing Communications, Social Media, Visual Communication, and Web Development before students graduate their third year second semester at the North-West University. Students engage with the theoretical foundations of Strategic Communication, Integrated Communication, and Strategic Integrated Communication and are expected to develop a communication model for a prospective client. Students may choose a South African organisation, whether for-profit or non-profit, as their client. The client should be a medium-sized organisation with an established hierarchy, a communication practitioner, and a digital presence among stakeholders. The assessments within the COMS325 module scaffold from assignments one to three, and in their final assignment, students are expected to construct a personalised model for their clients to support them in integrating their communication practices more strategically (see Figure 2).

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<sup>43</sup> Shari R Veil, "Using Crisis Simulations in Public Relations Education," *Communication Teacher* 24, no. 2 (2010): 58–62; Nicholas J Olson and Rohini Ahluwalia, "When Sharing Isn't Caring: The Influence of Seeking the Best on Sharing Favorable Word of Mouth about Unsatisfactory Purchases," *Journal of Consumer Research* 47, no. 6 (2021): 1025–46; Laura M Foote, "Honing Crisis Communication Skills: Using Interactive Media and Student-Centered Learning to Develop Agile Leaders," *Journal of Management Education* 37, no. 1 (2013): 79–114; Betsy Anderson, Rebecca Swenson, and John Kinsella, "Responding in Real Time: Creating a Social Media Crisis Simulator for the Classroom," *Communication Teacher* 28, no. 2 (2014): 85–95; Ryan P Fuller, "The Big Breach: An Experiential Learning Exercise in Mindful Crisis Communication," *Communication Teacher* 30, no. 1 (2016): 27–32; Ming Wang, "Using Crisis Simulation to Enhance Crisis Management Competencies: The Role of Presence," *Journal of Public Relations Education* 3, no. 2 (2017): 96–109.

<sup>44</sup> Wang, "Using Crisis Simulation to Enhance Crisis Management Competencies: The Role of Presence." 106.

<sup>45</sup> Karen S Olson, "Making It Real: Using a Collaborative Simulation to Teach Crisis Communications," *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 23 (2012): 25–47, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:154666061>.

<sup>46</sup> I. Niemann-Struweg, "Integrated Communication Implementation," in *Strategic Integrated Communication*, ed. D. Mulder and I. Niemann-Struweg (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2015), 213–28, 215; Joep P Cornelissen, "Corporate Communication: A Guide to Theory and Practice," 2023.

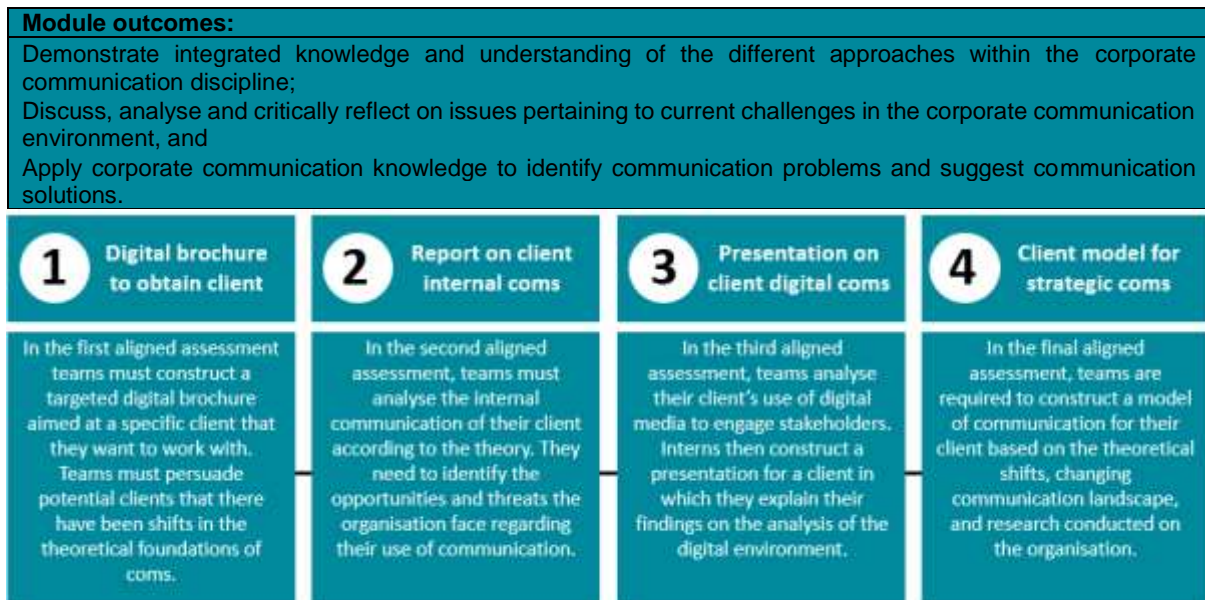


Figure 2: The scaffolding nature of the Strategic Integrated Communication module assessments

The practical nature of the assessments and outcomes of the COMS325 module makes it an excellent course for students to engage in WIL. However, due to the geographical locations, students' financial situations, and the varied experiences students gain from employers when engaging in WIL, the instructors tried various teaching and learning approaches to simulate the corporate communication environment.

In 2022, Purple Innovation was established as a fictional communication agency that helps for-profit and non-profit organisations improve their communication practices. Students are treated as interns within this communication agency and must abide by all of the agency's rules and regulations. The simulation is executed in different ways, from a website that provides students with the organisation's strategic intent to a Corporate Identity Document that dictates how the Purple Innovation brand must create content, a code of conduct that students must sign, and so forth. The simulation, guided by the documentation listed above, is then incorporated into online learning, contact sessions and assessments (see Figure 3 for an overview of the simulation).

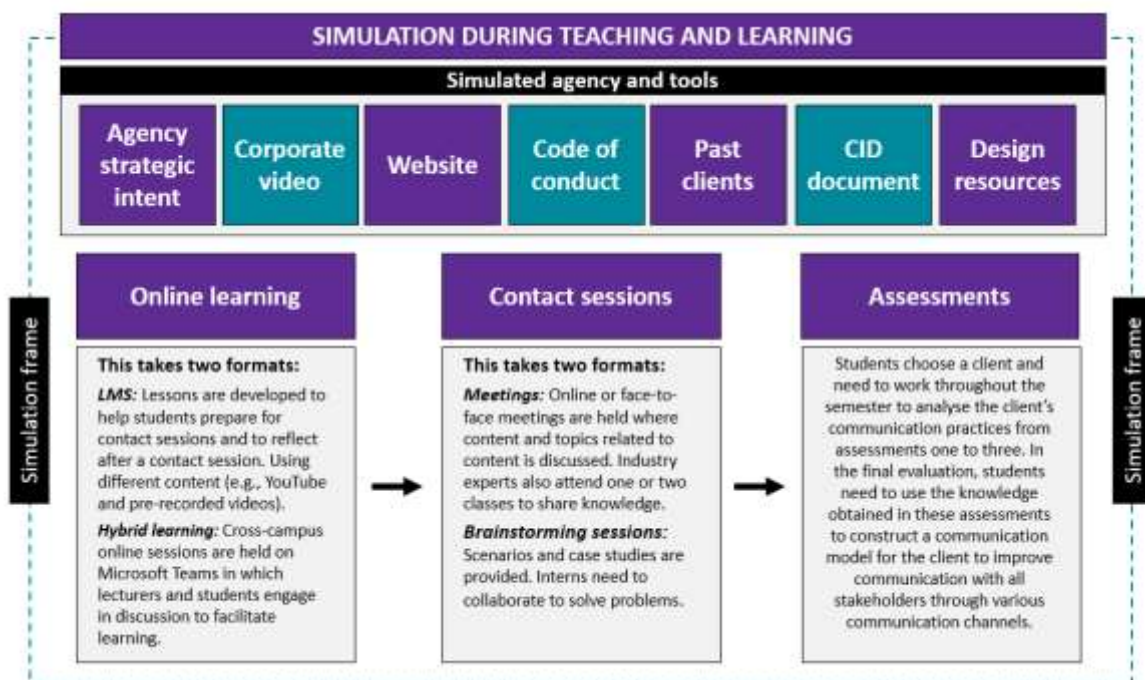


Figure 3: A breakdown of the simulation process in the Strategic Integrated Communication module

Within the Work-Simulated Learning environment, instructors are considered managers on the different delivery sites, and contact sessions are treated as meetings or brainstorming sessions. During meetings, interns and managers discuss specific aspects of the content that are important. External experts are also invited to meetings to discuss important information that may benefit the knowledge and skills of interns. During brainstorming sessions, interns and managers work together to solve problems based on scenarios and case studies. In both the meetings and brainstorming sessions, the classroom is treated the same as a boardroom, and the expectations of a corporate work environment are discussed with interns. Students are expected to act in a manner that reflects the behaviours expected in the workplace. Whenever students/interns display behaviours inconsistent with the industry's expectations, the simulation is stopped, and the expected behaviour is communicated for students to adapt. The scaffolding nature of assessments also focuses on guiding students/interns in constructing content required by industry. The agency intent, website, Corporate Identity Document (CID) and design resources provide a simulation frame that shows the interns' behaviour and the managers' expectations (in this regard, instructors).

From the description of the activities and assessments above it becomes evident that the Strategic Integrated Communication module incorporates both simulated learning (with no workplace involvement) and simulated learning as WIL (some workplace/external partner involvement) as proposed by Zegwaard et al. Incorporating Work-Simulated Learning within the Strategic Integrated Communication module aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice while increasing graduateness.<sup>47</sup> The argument can be made that incorporating simulations in both teaching and learning and assessments can enable students to experience a controlled version of reality, allowing them to succeed or fail in a safe environment that can contribute to their learning. Furthermore, De Villiers and Leendertz maintain that simulations in modules/courses such as Strategic Integrated Communication could enable students to challenge existing mental models by allowing them to apply what they learn practically.<sup>48</sup>

However, since its initial conceptualisation and design in 2022, the lecturers on the three different campuses of the North-West University have experienced various challenges and identified new opportunities regarding the design and implementation of the Work-Simulated Learning within the Strategic Integrated Communication module (COMS325). This led to re-evaluating and expanding the Work Simulated Learning approach within the COMS325 module that accommodates flexibility in designing and implementing Work Simulated Learning on the different delivery sites at North-West University. To address the research question, this study explores three lecturers' reflections on the design and implementation of Work-Simulated Learning in a third year second-semester Strategic Integrated Communication (COMS325) to bridge the gap between theory and practice within the BA and BCom Communication degree at the North-West University.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach

This study executed a qualitative research approach. Through the use of qualitative research, the phenomena associated with the lived experience and reality of individuals and groups were explored.<sup>49</sup> Miles et al. argue that experiences and stories can sometimes be more convincing than numbers.<sup>50</sup> This study aimed to understand the experiences of individuals, which contributes to the richness of data.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe, "Responding to an International Crisis..." 325.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobus Marthinus De Villiers and Verona Leendertz, "The Evaluation of a Hybrid Work-Simulated Learning Environment for a Strategic Integrated Communication Course," in *EdMedia+ Innovate Learning* (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 2023), 985–97, 989.

<sup>49</sup> Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research.," 2008, 4; G M Trudie du Plooy and Gertruida M Du Plooy, *Communication Research: Techniques, Methods and Applications* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2009), 88; Jane Mills and Melanie Birks, "Introducing Qualitative Research," in *Qualitative Methodology: A Practical Guide* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), 2–16,9. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473920163.n1>.

<sup>50</sup> M.B Miles, A.M. Huberman, and J. Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Margaret R Roller and Paul J Lavrakas, *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Guilford Publications, 2015).



A qualitative approach was best suited for this study as the researchers wanted to explore their practices and experiences in planning and implementing Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a capstone module. Qualitative research enabled the researchers to reflect on their teaching practices, which can lead to self-improvement and professional growth.<sup>52</sup> Self-reflection can serve as a mechanism that contributes to positive change, leading to self-actualisation.<sup>53</sup> Kayapinar and Alkhalidi advocate for more empirical research within the context of Higher Education that uses reflection and reflective thinking to highlight the ability of instructors within this context "to put reflection into action".<sup>54</sup>

McCabe and Thejll-Madsen articulate that reflection is "the conscious examination of past experiences, thoughts and ways of doing things. Its goal is to surface learning about oneself and the situation and to bring meaning to it to inform the present and the future. It challenges the status quo of practice, thoughts and assumptions and may therefore inform our decisions, actions, attitudes, beliefs and understanding about ourselves."<sup>55</sup> Reflection is a robust process of thinking, acting, questioning and collaborating, which enables practitioners to combine theoretical knowledge and practical experience.<sup>56</sup> Empirically, this study employed reflection as a practice to explore the researcher's own and collective experience of designing and implementing Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In this regard, Gibbs's reflective cycle was used as a research method for this study, as it creates a structured process to reflect on learning experiences, especially simulations.<sup>57</sup>

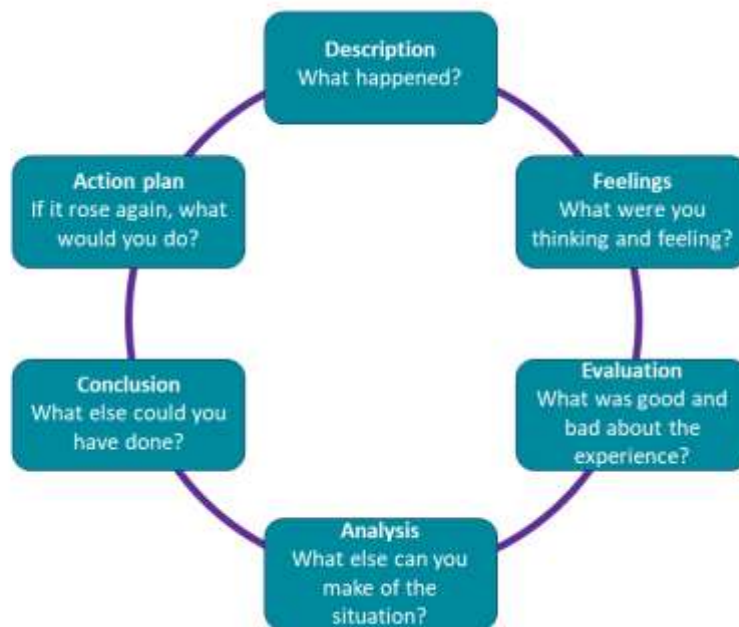


Figure 4: Gibbs's reflective cycle (1988)

Using Gibbs's reflective cycle, the authors reflected on their experiences of implementing Work-Simulated Learning at three North-West University delivery sites (namely Potchefstroom, Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark).<sup>58</sup> The authors reflected on the simulation concerning online teaching,

<sup>52</sup> John Ross and Catherine Bruce, "Professional Development Effects on Teacher Efficacy: Results of Randomized Field Trial," *The Journal of Educational Research* 101, no. 1 (2007): 50–60.

<sup>53</sup> Ulas Kayapinar and Ali Ata Alkhalidi, "Reflective Thinking in Higher Education: Examining Practices of Higher Education Faculty," *Reflective Practice* 24, no. 5 (2023): 575–90.

<sup>54</sup> Kayapinar and Alkhalidi, "Reflective Thinking in Higher Education: Examining Practices of Higher Education Faculty."

<sup>55</sup> Gavin McCabe and Tobias Thejll-Madsen, "Reflection Toolkit: Creating and Valuing Reflection as Evidence beyond Numbers," 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ruth Helyer, "Learning through Reflection: The Critical Role of Reflection in Work-Based Learning (WBL)," *Journal of Work-Applied Management* 7, no. 1 (October 6, 2015): 15–27, 17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-003>.

<sup>57</sup> Graham Gibbs, "Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods," *Further Education Unit*, 1988.

<sup>58</sup> Gibbs, "Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods."

contact sessions and assessments to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In reflecting each author described, felt, evaluated, analysed, concluded and formulated an action plan based on their experience with the current design and implementation of Work-Simulated Learning. Each step of Gibbs's cycle was explored based on the three instructors' experiences. A comparison was made between the stages in Gibbs's reflective cycle to identify the commonalities and differences regarding each cycle stage following each instructor's reflection.<sup>59</sup> According to Gibbs et al., individual and collaborative reflection enables academics to challenge the existing notions of education.<sup>60</sup> It can support academics in identifying the aspects of their teaching and learning that give them personal value, as opposed to the standards set by opinion leaders. In this regard, the instructors identified the aspects of Work-Simulated Learning that benefitted learning and those that required re-conceptualisation for future iterations of implementing this approach. From the collective reflection, the instructors developed new insights to improve the design and implementation of Work-Simulated Learning within the Strategic Integrated Communication module/course.

## ANALYSIS

The following section will explore the three instructors' reflections based on the six main aspects of Gibbs's reflective cycle (1988). Using this reflective model will enable the three instructors to reflect on the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning within a Strategic Integrated Communication module to analyse thinking patterns, motives and methods experienced through the simulation implementation. The analysis also aims to generate learning to improve future practices for future iterations.<sup>61</sup> Table 1 outlines/describes participants' Work-Simulated Learning experiences using Gibb's reflective cycle (1988).

**Table 1: Participants' reflection on Work-Simulated Learning based on Gibb's cycle (1988)**

Description		
	P1	In 2020, the Strategic Integrated Communication module was developed. After two years, the team decided to streamline the assessments in the module to scaffold, which would help students formulate an integrated communication model tailored to a specific organisation. During 2022 we decided to create an experiential simulation that reflects the future world of work that students will enter. The simulation aimed to prepare students with graduate attributes required to function in industry and narrow the gap between theory and practice by incorporating different activities and assessments that simulate the work environment that students may experience once they graduate. In 2023, we further developed the simulation to include new elements that will contribute to applying theoretical knowledge within practice.
	P2	In 2020, the Strategic Integrated Communication module was launched, and after two years, assessments were refined to assist students in crafting integrated communication models for their chosen client organisations. We created an experiential simulation to bridge the theory-practice gap aligning with the future workplace. In 2023, the simulation was enhanced with new elements to better apply theoretical knowledge in practical scenarios.
	P3	When the Strategic Integrated Communication module was introduced in 2020, the lecturers strived to develop it into a module that would create a model for students to live out their different organisational experiences through their chosen clients. The developed assessments assisted the students in living out this experience while bridging the gap between theory and practice. Since then,

<sup>59</sup> Gibbs, "Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods."

<sup>60</sup> Paul Gibbs, Panayiotis Angelides, and Pavlos Michaelides, "Preliminary Thoughts on a Praxis of Higher Education Teaching," *Teaching in Higher Education* 9, no. 2 (2004): 183–94, 185.

<sup>61</sup> Amisha Chauhan and Helen Noble, "Using a Reflective Framework to Assess Skills–Taking a Manual BP," *British Journal of Nursing* 18, no. 13 (2009): 794–98.

		the module has been further developed to improve students' experience through the Work-Simulated Learning approach.
<b>Feelings</b>	P1	I felt optimistic about incorporating Work-Simulated Learning within the Strategic Integrated Communication module. Despite the work that went into designing, implementing and improving the simulation, the students' positive feedback on including the simulation within the module made it worth it.
	P2	Collaborating with our Centre for Teaching and Learning to craft purposeful simulations brought feelings of deep fulfilment. However, the journey also posed a challenging test as I navigated a steep learning curve, pushing my abilities as a lecturer to think outside the box.
	P3	I felt excited and challenged by the new experience. I knew work was waiting for us in developing a module meant to be student-centred. However, I knew and felt that we needed to create a module for the students to have a worthwhile experience and one that would be memorable for them where they would take away knowledge intended for their future endeavours.
<b>Evaluation</b>	P1	Incorporating research, knowledge generation, report writing, content creation, and design aspects aligned with a corporate identity, communication strategy, and guiding policies provided an excellent learning experience for my students. I saw my students engaging critically with the theory and applying it to practice, which showed me that students understood the module's content. A bad experience was that students are sometimes conditioned into expecting to be taught in a specific manner. Students struggled to adapt to changes when a new teaching approach was introduced.
	P2	Highlights include successful scenarios, improved content engagement, new knowledge acquisition, and effective collaboration. However, concerns surfaced about outdated venues not designed for agency collaboration, the impact of COVID-19 on students, and challenges related to student comfort zones. Some students desired a more guided approach, preferring to be spoon-fed information. Additionally, some students showed reluctance to collaborate with counterparts from other campuses.
	P3	From 2020 to date, I noticed my students engaging with the content in ways that opened up their thinking through scenarios, assessments, collaborative learning, teamwork in the agencies that they were in, and the knowledge creation. I also noticed that they were inspired by the week-by-week contact lessons where they could engage critically through the in-class activities which got them to participate more and to reflect.
<b>Analysis</b>	P1	Work-Simulated Learning contributed to students' understanding of theoretical module content while providing them with experience of what to expect once they enter the industry. Evidently, many students grew throughout the semester and as the simulation continued. Work-Simulated Learning can be an excellent tool to bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially when WIL may be challenging to implement within a module.
	P2	Students experienced discomfort as they stepped out of their comfort zones, which wasn't always well-received. Students are uncertain at the beginning of the semester, but as it progresses, their understanding grows. Their reflections indicate an increased sense of readiness for the workplace after incorporating Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) into the module. They particularly enjoyed their roles as interns, engaging in meetings and brainstorming sessions and the valuable insights shared by guest speakers from the industry.
	P3	Although students felt uncomfortable being 'forced' out of their comfort zones, their progress grew through the semester with an eagerness to learn from

		mistakes – particularly the 2023 cohort. The 2023 group of COMS325 took the incorporation of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) with readiness and a willingness to engage in meaningful collaborative learning in their brainstorming meetings, in-class activities, guest lectures and week-by-week contact sessions.
<b>Conclusion</b>	P1	From implementing Work-Simulated Learning, I have learned that strategic and creative thinking is required when designing a learning experience for students. By finding ways to narrow the gap between theory and practice, students can learn how to contextualise knowledge to practice. Students also learn that applying knowledge is not linear and that organisational guidelines and rules provide requirements to complete tasks. The multidimensional nature of the world of work thus challenges students to think beyond the scope of the theoretical content taught in a module.
	P2	Work-Simulated Learning effectively aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Students appreciated the idea of working as interns at Purple Innovation. Students recognised the importance of adhering to Purple Innovation's guidelines while also cultivating the skill of thinking outside the box to create a communication model for their chosen client organisations.
	P3	Throughout the process, I have learned that Work-Simulated Learning is as effective as the students in the module. Teamwork makes the dream work, and when the students are engaged in the content of the module, the module works, and they begin to appreciate the effort in conceptualising the module. Purple Innovation worked as far as Work-Simulated Learning is concerned, and the ability of students to think outside the box in COMS325 is unmatched when critical thinking and engaging with content are cultivated.
<b>Action plan</b>	P1	In future iterations of Work-Simulated Learning, I would build on the simulation by incorporating more practice requirements in offering the module. To help bridge the gap between theory and practice, I would invite more industry professionals to engage and work alongside students to refine their skills and behaviours, which would help them once they enter the industry.
	P2	We are committed to ongoing improvement for the module, aiming to enhance student's overall experience and better prepare them for the workplace. We aim to grow and improve the simulation within the module.
	P3	In the future, more can be done to further immerse the students in the world of Strategic Integrated Communication, as well as the intricacies that come with it. I speak for my teammates in the module who are growing the module so that even greater heights can be achieved.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how instructors at the North-West University experience Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a Strategic Integrated Communication module/course. Instructors used Gibbs's reflective cycle to reflect on their experiences of using Work-Simulated Learning to close the theory and practice gap.<sup>62</sup>

In the description of the situation, it is evident that a need arises for experiential learning to bridge the theory-practice gap of final-year BA Communication students. Since the initial implementation of the module in 2020, the participants felt the need to incorporate Simulation-Based Learning to provide students with experiences that mimic industry. In this regard, the participants developed different simulated activities and assessments that would provide some of the benefits of WIL through simulation based on the issues with implementing WIL due to their contextual factors.

<sup>62</sup> Gibbs, "Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods."

Regarding the feelings held by participants, there was an overall positive experience regarding the incorporation of Work-Simulated Learning. However, Participants One and Two were concerned about the effort and abilities required to implement Work-Simulated Learning.

On the other hand, Participant Three based his/her feelings on implementing Work-Simulated Learning and its long-term benefits. The positive response and cautious optimism exhibited by participants indicate that despite the possible outcomes associated with Work-Simulated Learning, participants are aware of the efforts to implement such a teaching approach.

Evaluating the experiences linked to the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning provided varied insights. Participant One reflected on how implementing Work-Simulated Learning benefitted students in becoming better communication practitioners. Participants Two and Three reflected on how implementing Work-Simulated Learning positively contributed to increasing collaboration and knowledge acquisition during contact sessions and assessments. However, further reflection from Participants One and Two indicated that change management was challenging for students with this new form of learning. It is evident from their reflections that students grow accustomed to a specific approach to teaching and learning, creating comfort zones that students don't want to move out of when introducing a new teaching style. Participant Two also indicated that infrastructure did pose a challenge in implementing a new form of teaching and learning. Incorporating different simulated learning and simulated learning as WIL activities and assessments may initially provide challenges, but could potentially contribute to bridging the theory and practice gap.

The analysis regarding participants' experience of the situation was, to a certain extent, similar. Participant One highlighted the benefit of introducing Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice and prepare students for the world of work in the absence of WIL. Participants Two and Three indicated that despite students' reluctance to be forced out of their comfort zones, the experience did contribute to preparing students for industry. They also indicated that incorporating Work-Simulated Learning ultimately positively affected the students' states of mind and engagement with module content.

None of the participants provided additional information when reflecting on what else could have been done. However, all three participants indicated that the incorporation of Work-Simulated Learning provided benefits for learning, preparing students for industry and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Based on their reflections, participants agree that Work-Simulated Learning provided benefits in adjusting students' thinking by shifting focus from mere knowledge acquisition to applying what they had learned as future professionals working in the industry.

Regarding the action plans for the future of this module, all three participants agreed that Work-Simulated Learning should not only be implemented again within future iterations but should also be expanded. Participant One indicated that future action plans should include more involvement from the industry during the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning. Participants Two and Three indicated that more should be done to prepare students for industry and SIC. Based on this reflection, it is evident that Work-Simulated Learning within the Strategic Integrated Communication module/course may need to move more towards simulated learning as WIL instead of a hybrid between simulated learning and simulated learning as WIL.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the analysis and findings the following recommendations could be made to guide future actions and interventions related to incorporating Work-Simulated learning within communication modules:

**Incorporating Work-Simulated Learning to mimic industry:** Lecturers and educators should consider incorporating and developing Work-Simulated Learning to support teaching and learning in the absence of Work-Simulated Learning. In this regard, students can be exposed to simulated learning which could provide practical experiences that bridge the gap between theory and practice. Additionally, simulated learning environments could provide lecturers and educators with the

opportunity to control the learning simulation to account for different scenarios and experiences students could be exposed to once they enter the industry. This would ensure a more controlled learning environment which could not always be achieved through Work-Integrated Learning.

**Enhance student readiness with new learning approaches:** Work-Simulated Learning could strategically be incorporated into modules and specifically focus on increasing student readiness or gradueness. In this regard, Work-Simulated Learning could support gradueness which could potentially increase the employability of students.

**Strengthen industry involvement:** Work-Simulated Learning provides an opportunity for lecturers within Higher Education Institutions to collaborate with industry professionals to address the knowledge and skills gaps by co-creating simulations that reflect real-life scenarios. This would lead to more authentic learning experiences for students while ensuring that students are able to learn within a controlled environment. This creates an opportunity for students to succeed/fail and learn about the potential consequences of their actions without jeopardising their future careers.

**Invest in infrastructure that facilitates innovative teaching and learning practices:** Innovative teaching and learning practices may require educational institutions to reflect on their existing infrastructure. Traditional classrooms and university infrastructure could inhibit innovative teaching practices like Work-Simulated Learning. Educational institutions should therefore consider creating multi-functional and flexible spaces which could be adapted to different innovative teaching and learning methods.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has explored the use of experiential learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a Strategic Integrated Communication module using simulations as an alternative to WIL. Despite the opportunities associated with WIL, contextual factors do affect the implementation of WIL within HEI. As an alternative, strategically designing simulations bridges the gap between theory and practice by creating an environment where students can learn without fearing failure. Instructors can guide students on what they must encounter to achieve the desired learning outcomes. It is evident from this study that instructors at the North-West University employ various simulated learning and simulated learning as WIL activities and assessments to bridge the theory-practice gap. In this regard, teaching and learning activities and assessments are framed within a fictional agency which guides students' behaviour. Various activities follow a simulated approach, especially in meetings and brainstorming sessions where agency teams across three delivery sites work together to explore scenarios or case studies about module content. Some activities and assessments incorporate WIL to expose students to industry. In this regard, students still form part of the simulation, but based on the simulation, engage with industry and business. Based on the reflections of participants of this study, the inclusion of different simulated and simulated learning as WIL activities and assessments contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice. Overall, the continued expansion of different simulated activities enables increased student engagement and career development. Based on instructors' positive reflections at the three delivery sites at the NWU, Work-Simulated Learning can contribute to bridging the theory and practice gap. Future research should further explore the implementation of Work-Simulated Learning within communication modules from a larger sample of instructors. Furthermore, students and industry professionals should be involved in future studies to explore their perceptions of using Work-Simulated Learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

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