WILSPACE: REFLECTIONS ON ESTABLISHING SMALL SIGNIFICANT ONLINE NETWORK GROUPS (SSONG) TO ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE IN WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

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Abstract

In 2020 during COVID-19 lockdowns, a small group of Australasian Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) practitioners gathered online for semi-regular conversations. The purpose of this small significant network group (SSONG) was to provide support for one another as we navigated WIL education during this time of turmoil.

Reflecting on their SSONG experience two years later, the authors realised these small online group conversations provided the means to engage at a deeper level with likeminded individuals, without restrictions arising from differences in physical location. SSONG members could share alternative viewpoints with ease and interest because they were familiar with one another, yet from diverse perspectives including disciplines, location, experience and background, hence adding to the richness of their conversations. Out of this, and in discussions with a third New Zealand based academic, WILspace was conceptualised.

WILspace is an online international community of practice, comprising of multiple SSONGs. It was launched at World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) in June 2023, where WIL practitioners were invited to register their interest. The first WIL SSONG conversations were held in November 2023.

We report on our experience in developing and managing this international community of practice. A key aim of the initiative was to facilitate meaningful discussions about WIL related issues, extending conversations beyond the physical environment of an international conference or a WIL-related course. Topics & prompts developed by the WILspace team were used to activate these conversations, after which each SSONG provided feedback on their discussions via an email to the facilitators. These resources were then summarised and shared via the WILspace website. Following each conversation, feedback was also obtained from SSONG members via a short Qualtrics survey. It was important to the authors that we measured the success of this innovative initiative. Ethics approval (AUTEC 22/329) was gained from both University Ethics Committees before the global conversation platform launch.

In this paper we identify, examine and reflect on our successes and challenges in maintaining conversations with an international group membership, across multiple time zones. To date, evaluations suggest support for the initiative is strong amongst active participants, however there is evidence of continuing challenges in maintaining these conversations. Strategies are presented to facilitate implementation and management of future online communities of practice, based on the use of SSONGs.

Keywords: Work-Integrated Learning, WIL, International Community of Practice, online community, SSONG, global network

1 INTRODUCTION

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a discipline incorporating many different modes of practice-based learning [1]. Typically involving a tripartite relationship between student, university and organisations, WIL has gained increased prominence as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have sought to bridge the gap between graduate competencies and employability [2]. Internationally WIL has been recognised as a crucial tool for supporting learners in transitioning from novice/learner through to experienced professional [3].

The notion of a Small Significant Online Network Groups or SSONG was coined by Green and colleagues [4] as a consequence of attending a conference workshop focussing on small significant networks. Green *et al* [4] went on to establish their own SSONG beyond the conference to continue conversations initiated at the time. During the first Covid lockdown in 2020 two of the authors became involved in a SSONG with a group of international work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners. This online community provided the opportunity to exchange ideas, navigate challenges and facilitate discussions about WIL. Participation in this SSONG enabled both members to successfully navigate the turbulent and uncertain times and led to the sharing of the success of the SSONG experience with the WIL community at the 2022 WILNZ conference.

Arising from the conversations following the WILNZ conference presentation, we realised the further potential these smaller online group conversations could have for other WIL stakeholders, including bringing together international communities. By establishing smaller international communities of practice within a larger WIL membership, we anticipated opportunities for sharing global perspectives and experiences, that could not only benefit individual practice, but potentially also prompt research. The concept of WILspace was conceived.

WILspace is an online international community of practice, comprising of multiple SSONGs, reflecting the coming together of work-integrated learning and a space where conversations can be shared and expanded, irrespective of locality and role. It is an opt-in community where participants acknowledge the like-mindedness of one another in the desire to be involved in ongoing conversations about relevant issues. This initiative is a means to broaden and strengthen connections amongst work-integrated learning (WIL) practitioners around the world. WILspace is a platform to enhance conversations, collaboration and sense of community for WIL practitioners.

Ethics approval (AUTEC 22/329) was gained from both University Ethics Committees before the global conversation platform was launch.

2 ESTABLISHING WILSPACE

Late in 2022, the three founding academics spent considerable time discussing the merits of different operational approaches to WILspace. This included what to call the initiative, how to launch it, what platform to use, how to recruit participants, what measurements to use in evaluating its' success, what topics to include.

Naming our initiative came from a connection we made between the value we saw in building a WIL community and the concept of 'space' - an open, unbounded area where there is much to be discovered. We used the word SPACE as an acrostic to guide our thinking and developed a logo to reflect this using Looka (figure 1).

Figure 1: Naming the initiative

In our initial framework, we also mapped out a general overview of the process for development. This document continued to evolve as we adjusted our thinking following each meeting and discussion. We met online via Zoom over the course of approximately six months during which time we undertook the following:

- Mapped the overall journey from conception to implementation to evaluation

- Identified a suitable process for accessing WIL colleagues to gain awareness and register interest in participation
- Completed ethics applications for research associated with the initiative (from two institutions) including development of research instruments for gathering feedback
- Developed initial ideas around how to operationalise conversations using different stimuli
- Discussed parameters for establishing each SSONG i.e. country vs timezone, number of participants, self-driving vs managed groups.
- Conceived different types of prompts for use as provocations to start conversations i.e. quotes, imagery, song/lyrics, poem, quotes.
- Identified relevant topical themes for conversations i.e. wellbeing, payment vs nonpayment, diversity equity & inclusion, relationships, reciprocity.
- Determined key evaluative criteria to measure the WILspace experience

3 DEVELOPING AND MANAGING WILSPACE

The WILspace initiative was initially offered to WIL practitioners who engaged in World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) global WIL courses and delegates attending the WACE conference held in Canada, June 2023. WILspace was officially launched at the WACE conference where multiple opportunities, formal and informal, were taken to present and discuss the mechanics of the platform throughout the event. WIL practitioners were invited to use a QR code linking to a Google registration form to join the WILspace community and contribute to the bi-monthly virtual meetups. Despite being an international conference, most initial registrations came from practitioners located in Canada, USA and U.K. Post conference, additional communications focused on invitations to organisations and institutions in other geographical locations and because of this additional communication 83 registrations of interest were received.

One of the initial challenges was in determining the best way to form the SSONGS. Using Excel, and registration details of name, email address, country, WIL role, and platform accessibility, we sorted the participant list. As this was a global initiative it was important for us to ensure each group contained a mix of geographies, while still recognising potential limitations due to time zones. Our first group selections resulted in the formation of 15 SSONGS, with a maximum number of 6 members.

A website was created using GOOGLE (https://sites.google.com/view/wilspace/home) to outline the purpose of WILspace, provided a link to register for SSONG conversations, profiled the three academics behind the initiative, and shared links to relevant WIL resources. Details of upcoming conversations and BLOGs of past discussions were also hosted on the site.

Emails were sent from a GMAIL email account (wilspace2023) to registered participants ahead of each conversation. Our first email explained the format for the first session as a 'get to know' each other, gave a link to a video introduction we created (https://youtu.be/UHjvcVDsH7E) and advised of an upcoming email to each SSONG with individual member contact details. In this follow up email we provided a link to an online meeting planner (Time zone meeting planner) to facilitate the groups agreeing on a suitable meeting time and establishing their own WILspace practices. Each group chose their platform for meeting (typically Zoom), and self-managed their SSONG.

Two weeks later, we emailed details of the first official conversation, Money Money Money. (November 2024). We provided a link to a video hosted on YouTube explaining the format and shared a PowerPoint to support this. We asked the individual groups to watch the video and share the slides during their online conversation. In this session we used a song as a provocation (ABBA), followed by some WIL related questions about payment in WIL to prompt further discussion. Groups were asked to summarise their conversations and email this back to the WILspace team. Then, each summary was used to provide a single overview of key elements, together with additional topical resources we identified and added to the website.

Additional conversations were held over the coming months and included topics of reciprocity, authenticity, relationships and artificial intelligence. Each conversation included a provocation or prompt i.e. song, image, quote, poem or AI generated resource. Participants were also asked to complete a short survey at the end of each conversation, evaluating their experience. This included ratings of

agreement with statements including the enjoyment of the conversation, choice of theme, effectiveness of the prompts, interest in talking more about the topic, evolvement of research ideas, and interest in attending the next conversation (Figure 2). Overall results supported the choice of theme, use of prompt and value of conversations held. In most cases, few research ideas evolved, however interest in attending the next conversation was high.

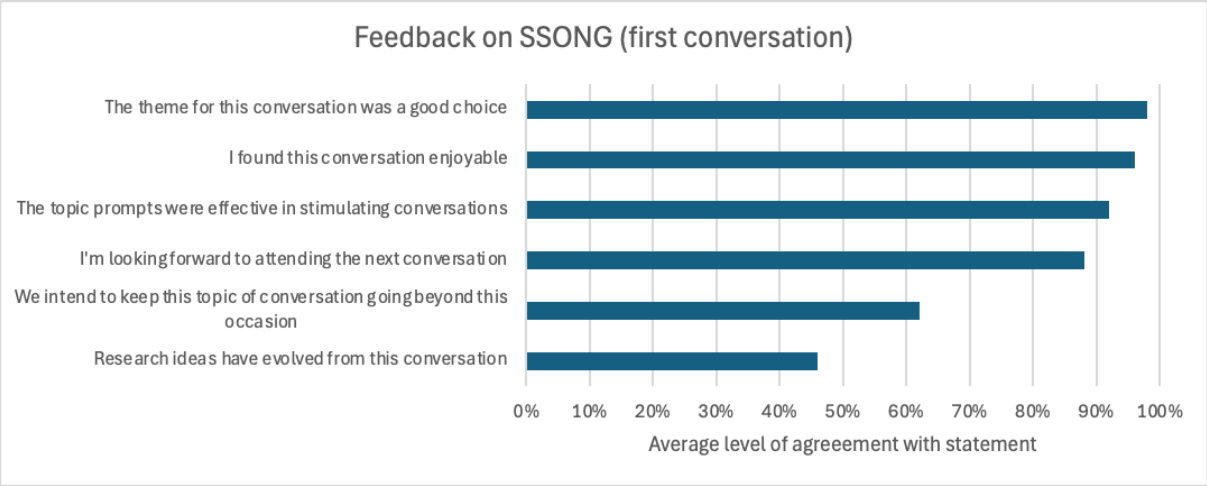

Figure 2: SSONG evaluation

4 OUR INSIGHTS IN MANAGING A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Statements like 'only the strong survive' and 'it started with a hiss and a roar' come to mind. The reality of maintaining momentum in managing an online community is highlighted in the reduction in active participation levels, 'out of office' emails and 'office hours' only availability.

Our first challenge happened in the first few weeks where we sent out emails to global groups requesting them to connect. At the end of the second week, some groups had still not engaged at all, and others only heard from one or two others despite multiple attempts to connect with SSONG members. Many out-of-office responses were received showing the variability in people's work lives. Of the 15 groups formed, we only received conversation summaries from eight with the rest either not meeting at all, or not having any summary of their conversation. Despite the less-than-ideal number of group summaries received, we gathered rich insights into the theme, this was our first success.

As some time had passed since some participants had originally registered, we sent out emails seeking feedback on the group compositions, particularly in relation to time zones. We used a Google Form to gauge responses, following which a reshuffling of SSONGs occurred. As a result of our communications, membership was reduced to 49 active participants from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Thailand, South Africa, USA, United Kingdom and Ireland. Reasons for opting out related to lack of time, on sabbatical, changes in role, and unwillingness to meet outside of work hours (part-time and full-time employees):

"More WILspace engagement from our group. Only two of us have attended this meeting and the initial meeting. Both of us agreed that our meetings have been valuable, but we would like to hear from a wider variety of voices from around the globe". (participant feedback)

In some instances, the decision to let the SSONGS self-organise meant that no one ended up leading, and consequently some conversations did not happen. Others were more fortunate where individuals were motivated to drive the organisation.

"The format works fine. Lucky one party (not me) was proactive in bringing the group together otherwise it may not have happened." (participant feedback)

Despite group sizes of 5-6 maximum, the challenges in group dynamics are still evident e.g. in one group, domination by an individual impacted the direction of conversation, resulting in less time spent on the nominated theme. In driving future SSONG conversations, more guidance from organisers may

be required in supporting how the groups are facilitated i.e. team formation and/or roles individuals are happy to assume (identified at registration).

Ultimately our conversations were loved by those who participated in their SSONGs, it is just time that seems to be the most significant barrier.

"The session was great; it is everything going on around it that threatens to derail my intention to make this time for myself. I was under a lot of pressure timewise today but still went to the meeting and was glad I did." (participant feedback)

5 CONCLUSIONS

WILspace has connected a global WIL community and provided a platform for great conversations about key issues impacting work-integrated learning. Our intentions of hosting bi-monthly conversations were overstated. While we had a lot of fun in designing the provocations and identifying the themes for the conversations, like participants, we also lacked time.

Over the last few months, we have pivoted in the format for our SSONGS. We realised we enjoyed the conversations but were missing out to some extent as we were administrators rather than participants. Reflecting on this, and the drop off in availability of participants in the smaller SSONGS, we decided to host conversations split into northern and southern hemispheres. We drew on our earlier experience of having a 'Xmas Do' organised in the same way. We loved hosting these conversations and derived great value from the global conversations we had originally conceived as benefitting WIL practice.

Presently we are unsure of the future direction of WILspace. However, we know being part of a SSONG that is cohesive, flexible and willing to meet at different times (e.g. outside of work), and comprised of participants who share similar interests is essential for its' success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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