

(WIL-)STRETCHING FOR RELEVANCE: CONNECTING THE RELEVANCE OF LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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BACKGROUND AND AIMS

Work-integrated-learning is most effective when it involves tasks that are authentic (resemble professional challenges) and proximal (resembles the professional environment) to a students' intended graduate destination (Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Oliver, 2015). Creating overt connections between the relevance of learning experiences to the professional setting can increase task authenticity, enhancing students' motivation for learning and their sense of professional identity (Sutherland & Markauskaite 2012). This study examined how the authenticity of inquiry-based learning could be enhanced by prompting Biomedical Science students to think about the relevance of their experiences to topics beyond the classroom.

METHODS

Students enrolled in a 2nd year biology course (Semester 1, 2023) completed an team an inquiry-based project over a series of laboratory classes, culminating in an individual written scientific report. Alongside, they were tasked to describe in 500 words how they perceived the relevance of a learning experience throughout the project to a topic in healthcare or research. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2022) was applied to the responses from 63 consenting students.

RESULTS

Students most commonly cited gaining disciplinary knowledge (30%), with each of scientific and communication skills, learnings from troubleshooting or considering the ethics of animal use cited by around 15% of students. Half related their learning to clinical settings such as for disease diagnosis or patient care, whereas a quarter in relation to the rigors of scientific inquiry. A smaller portion described connections to professional practice or personal growth. Many read about their topic extensively despite little instruction except to include cited examples and use judgement when selecting sources. With little prompting, students identified a wide range of connections between their learning and topics in professional settings, with some exploring their topic through additional independent research. This assessment design is an effective and easy tool to integrate, and prompted students to meaningfully think about the relevance of their learning both immediately and beyond the educational setting.

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