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

Case Studies – Slovenia (WP1)

28/03/2023

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

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CASE STUDY REPORT 5

Name of the case	Case study 5 - Slovenia
Organisation(s)	HE5 and Primary School
Country(-ies)	Slovenia
Disciplinary sector	Education
Case written by	University of Ljubljana
In this case, eWBL is presented in the master's programme of Primary Teacher Education at UL. WBL is compulsory and part of the study programme in the form of guided pedagogical practise carried out in the primary school environment. The main purpose of the WBL is to get acquainted with the pedagogical and psychological features of the work in the classroom, to combine theory and practice to develop psychological-pedagogical theoretical knowledge and to deepen it through own experiences. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, teaching took place remotely in all educational institutions in Slovenia from March 2020. While the faculty have a very detailed guide for the WBL while it is conducted in person, there was a difference here in that the faculty left most of the communication and organisation of the eWBL to the students and the work mentors in the schools. Interns were found to be more independent when conducting eWBL than when working in a classroom with a mentor, and interns also played an important role in introducing students to the use of digital technology and teaching/learning tools. According to both faculty and WBL mentors, many good practices were implemented in this eWBL, many online tools were provided to the interns, they prepared the curriculum and acquired new skills. The lack of interaction for this eWBL is a disadvantage compared to face-to-face teaching, because interns could not acquire these skills and competencies (face-to-face work with students, interaction, presentation). According to all stakeholders interviewed, the online tools used were a big driver and advantage in this eWBL.	

Section	**Answer**
1) Organisation's background	FE of the UL trains and educates teachers and other professionals in the field of education. They train all types of professionals, from preschool and primary teachers to teachers who specialise in teaching two subjects or subject areas in primary schools as well as in certain secondary schools. The advantage that graduates of FE have been precisely that they have been trained to teach at least two subjects, which increases their employment opportunities and meets the needs of school practise. In addition to traditional teacher programmes, UL's FE is the only institution in Slovenia that trains specialists in inclusive education and the education of children and youth with special needs. WBL is mandatory as guided educational practise in schools and other specialised settings. In this case, eWBL is presented in the master's programme of Primary Teacher Education designed to consider the fundamental principles of European higher education as formulated in the Bologna Process. WBL is compulsory and part of the study programme in the form of guided pedagogical practise carried out in the primary school environment. Between 10 and 20 days of WBL are conducted per academic year. The interviewees in the interview were: (1) the pedagogical mentor of FE, who also acted as the main coordinator for the organisation of eWBL during the pandemic period, (2) a master's student of primary teacher education who conducted the mandatory WBL in the primary school in March and April 2020 (the period of complete closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia, when all schools were closed) and was completed 100% online. The student also completed the mandatory WBL in her 4th year of study, in April 2021. The WBL was to be conducted in person, but schools were again closed for two weeks due to the situation caused by Covid-19. The students' WBL in this second phase was conducted 70% online because the school was closed the week the WBL was scheduled, and 30% in person when the school reopened;

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	and (3) the primary school mentor is a professor of primary teacher education at a primary school in the Ljubljana region. He mentors many students; during the time of the closures, he mentored two students.
2) Design, delivery and management	When conducting face-to-face WBL, faculty mentors will contact primary school mentors and a group of students prior to the start of the internship and agree with them on the details of the collaboration. They are provided with similar instructions for conducting the internship. Together with their primary school mentors, students plan and analyse their pedagogical work on a daily basis. Faculty mentors are in constant contact with students before and during the WBL (online classroom, email, joint meetings, video conferencing). In the primary school, they teach at least one lesson, and both mentors (the pedagogical mentor and the school-based mentor) analyse the student's work together with the student and other students in the team. During the practicum, each student receives feedback on his or her work from both the students on the team and the primary school mentor and faculty mentor. The main purpose of the WBL is to get acquainted with the pedagogical and psychological features of the work in the classroom, to combine theory and practice to develop psychological-pedagogical theoretical knowledge and to deepen it through their own experiences. Pedagogical practice for students also takes place in the 4th year and at master's level, so it can be said that in the 3rd year students are in the middle of the path of special didactic training. During this pedagogical practice, they could understand and actively try out special didactic skills to achieve curriculum objectives in a direct learning situation. Under the guidance of a primary teacher, each student teaches independently for at least one hour per day and actively participates and supervises the rest of the time. As a rule, the department selects 10 primary schools in Ljubljana and its surroundings for cooperation. At each of the selected primary schools, 9 to 12 students complete their internships in 3 to 4 sections, also guided and supervised by a faculty mentor. In each primary school, the group leader is another faculty mentor, for a total of 10 mentors. The content preparation for the teaching practice takes place before the beginning of the internship as part of the regular teaching process for the specialised didactic subjects. Assessment of pedagogical practice occurs at multiple levels. Each faculty mentor first conducts an evaluation with a group of students at the school he or she led, with their primary school mentors, and with the school principal. Then, at the conclusion of the practicum, the students, the primary school mentors, and principals submit reports on the implementation of the internship, which are evaluated by a group of faculty mentors. This group reviews and analyses the submitted materials (preparations, reports, analysis, etc.), evaluates the practice of the entire generation of third-year students, and develops suggestions for possible changes in the implementation of future pedagogical practice. The faculty mentor pointed out that some specific guidelines were not a problem in transferring eWBL remotely, as all students were familiar with the situation since the whole study process was already organised online. The WBL mentor expressed that many challenges arose for primary teachers during the lockdown. He was very experienced in using online tools, so he did not have any problems. During the first lockdown there were no online classes, after some time Google online classes were set up and Zoom was used later, and 2 to 3 times a week classes were held online. All work and assessments were done by the students themselves, and the

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	teacher graded their work daily. Despite this fact, the results of the work showed that the teaching was at a fairly high level when national tests were conducted.
3) Difference and similarities	Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, teaching took place remotely in all educational institutions in Slovenia from March 2020. This meant that even the WBL planned for the month of April could not be carried out in the usual way. The members of the department and faculty leadership decided to give students the opportunity to gain practical teaching experience to help teachers in distance education: e.g., help in preparing materials, finding or recording activities or shorter learning content, individual help for distance students, and all those forms of help and support that teachers need in this situation and that students can provide. They were aware that such collaboration should be helpful to teachers and not an additional burden. Student help was offered to all primary schools electronically by faculty and through direct arrangements between students and schools or mentors. School administrators or individual teachers agreed to collaborate and accepted the help. In the faculty, the coordinator collected requests from schools and teachers and posted them in the online classroom for students to contact teachers. Primary teachers, mentors, and students were not given detailed instructions for the student's work, so the teacher and student could agree on their own in what areas and in what ways the student's help would be most useful and necessary. Students worked with one or more teachers and/or provided individual assistance to one or more students. Pedagogical practice was shortened from fifteen to ten working days. During this time, students were required to provide at least 20 hours of instructional assistance and had no other study obligations. Many students continued to work together, especially in cases where they provided individual assistance to students, even in the month of May or until the end of the school year. At the end of the teaching practice, students and supervising teachers completed a brief online report. The professional prepared a final evaluation in the form of a report on the nature of the work students did in supporting distance learning and their assessment of the contribution of that work to the students' professional development. Under the circumstances, the primary teacher-mentors were pleased with the students' help and praised in particular the students' originality and their careful and coordinated work in providing individualised support to students. All involved were aware that pedagogical support during the distance learning program is only a substitute for the obligations of pedagogical practice. Therefore, in the 2020/21 academic year, the number of days of pedagogical practice will increase by five working days. Due to ongoing actions related to Covid 19 infections, the pedagogical practice has also been partially adjusted in April 2021. While the faculty have a very detailed guide for the WBL while it is conducted in person, there was a difference here in that the faculty left most of the communication and organization of the eWBL to the students and the work mentors in the schools due to the situation (the work mentors as teachers had direct coordination with the interns on how to conduct the eWBL, how to do the preparation, how to work with the students in an online classroom, or how to provide additional individualised help to the students if they have a little extra time, etc.). Interns were found to be more independent when conducting eWBL than when working in a classroom with a mentor, and interns also played an important role in introducing students to the use of digital technology and teaching/learning tools. Educator mentors on faculty who worked remotely began taking

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	online courses offered by UL (IT use, new technology, learning and teaching tools), meeting online as a group to share their practices and discuss issues. The faculty mentor indicated that differences in the quality of the process were soon noted. Some of the courses and topics in teaching (experiments, sports) are literally not implementable online, and this was evident in eWBL as well.
4) Learning outcomes	The student had a fairly limited WBL, since the closure and the way the WBL was conducted. The students had virtually no online instruction, all assignments were done at home, so their work in collaboration with the mentor was mainly devoted to preparing the curriculum. Quite a few online tools were used that the student was not previously aware of, and this was the benefit of student learning outcomes. Teamwork was very limited, the student did not have enough direct communication and missed sharing questions and problems, especially with fellow students. All of this affected the acquisition of soft skills, e.g., teamwork, interpersonal communication, and presentation skills - all of which were very limited due to the process. The knowledge of the subject was quite good in theory, but was very limited by the transfer to eWBL, in class. The student noticed a lack of these competencies and skills, especially when the online presentation was done in front of the class, which is completely different when an intern is in front of students in a class. The mentor in the primary school gave a short introduction and tried to adapt the situation to reality as much as possible (he introduced the school and the sector - how it works in Slovenia, what the workplace represents, etc.). The mentor prepared the schedule for the WBL, presented an e-assistant (a special online tool), the annual plan for the academic year and the class conference with the students was presented to the intern. According to both mentors, many good practices were implemented in this eWBL, many online tools were provided to the interns, they prepared the curriculum and acquired new skills. The lack of interaction between interns, collaboration, put the eWBL at a disadvantage compared to face-to-face teaching, according to the WBL mentor, because interns could not acquire these skills and competencies (face-to-face work with students, interaction, presentation). The WBL mentor also suggested that the course should be introduced to the faculty in this area so that interns are prepared for online work, and that there should be a focus on developing and introducing these online tools. The WBL mentor evaluated interns work, activities, intern motivation and curiosity, and IT skills. What was lacking was an assessment of the work done in class because the intern had no experience with students. The online course could not provide an adequate assessment.
5) Pedagogical innovations	In this case, no new pedagogical innovations could be identified. The use of online tools and rapid adaptation in this discipline was mentioned several times by all three respondents.
6) Technological innovations	According to all stakeholders interviewed, the online tools used were a big driver and advantage in this WBL. Many online tools were used that they were not previously aware of, and the challenge of learning them quickly was a driver for them.
7) Drivers and barriers to eWBL	The main obstacle for the intern was the fact that there was no face-to-face contact with either the mentor or the students. The intern had a lot of problems with the online preparation of the curriculum, in contrast, it would be much easier if the mentor was present in person to solve problems immediately or to receive the instructions. The lack of skills is a barrier in this eWBL, especially in terms of solving some

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	problems when the intern is already facing the class as a teacher (e.g., how to attract students' attention, how to maintain class discipline, etc.). The intern sees the driving force primarily in technological aspects - new online tools or the tools previously used have been upgraded; she/he also sees the driving force in preparing the curriculum herself/himself and in detail. If she/he were to face online work in real life, she/he is definitely better educated than before the pandemic but considering the field and sector she/he is educated in, she/he would definitely do it face-to-face. Based on the experience, the intern would like to see more teamwork and advises the faculty to create a course focused on online learning tools as part of this degree programme to gain more skills in this area. According to the WBL mentor, the most important factors were the intern's skills, motivation to work in a new environment, use of online tools, technological innovations, and use of the online space (which takes a lot of time). The mentor was able to see the interns' motivation and skills in the digital world. The obstacle is not being able to see what interns' motivation is in the classroom when confronted with students. The mentor advises to implement the system according to the didactic guidelines that have been previously established. Schedule and diary are very important to track the work, both for the intern and the mentor. The availability of the mentor to the intern is the key component for both WBL and eWBL.
8) Long-term impacts of eWBL	For the sector, online classrooms are available but not really used. The school where the mentor teaches conducts one online exercise per month for the class. The school mentor would keep this hybrid way with the interns in terms of WBL and spend the time to do some of the eWBL exercises with the interns, especially to introduce them to the IT tools used in the work environment, as he sees digital literacy as basic. All interviewees do not see any long-term impact, maybe the knowledge and skills (of students, interns in WBL) are somewhat limited, but in general no major drastic impact has occurred. When working with students, it is important to have face-to-face instruction, and impact could only be seen on an individual level (especially for the introverted and at-risk students in general).

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