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Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) vs Work Based Learning (WBL) Similarities and differences: A historical overview

The confusion surrounding Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) and Work-Based Learning Opportunities (WBLs) is born out of legacy. In New Hampshire's contemporary language surrounding the proliferation of ELOs it's easy to confuse the two as there are various points of intersection and in many cases their application have similar, if not identical, objectives: to provide a youth-centered, outside the classroom experiences that better prepare students in their personal development for real-world scenarios ⁵. However, the WBL movement has its roots even before the School-to-Work initiative of the 1990's¹ including practices that schools implemented not layered with the ELO standards we enjoy today and in these ways the two educational frameworks begin to differ.

A Historical Perspective: How did differentiating become so difficult?

In order to explain the differences, it may help to first explore the similarities and understand the historical framework from which each term was born.

If we explore WBL's connection to the School-to-Work movement, we see ambiguity at its inception. During the 1990's there was confusion in the application of WBL and for whom the associated programs benefitted. In the early years, like today, there was a misinterpretation as to the one-size-fits-all assumption of the School-to-Work movement. The following is a direct quote from the October 1996 publication as part of a four-year study of School-to- Work Transition Education Reform funded by the Academy for Educational Development's National Institute for Work and Learning (AED/NIWL) by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement: ²

"The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that has no institutionalized school-to-work transition system to help its young people navigate successfully between their learning and work experiences. The lack of a comprehensive and effective school-to-work transition system has a serious impact on many students. It also means significant costs to business and our economy as a whole. A skill-deficient workforce hampers the nation's economic growth, productivity, and ability to compete in an international economy. In recognition of these problems, "school-to-work transition"

*has become the catch phrase for American education in the 1990s. **Too often, however, this phrase is interpreted to mean that there should be one path taken by all young people directly from the classroom to the workplace.***

In practice, what was once the traditional route for most young people, completing school and then entering full-time employment, has given way to a variety of paths. Our use of the term "school-to-work transition" is intended to embrace this variety and can include:

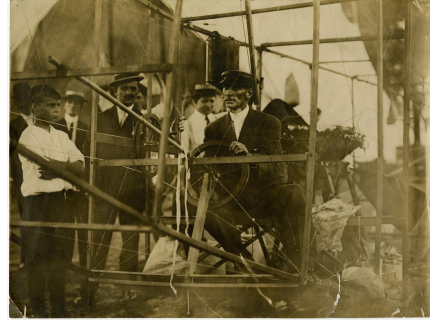
- 1) *young people who leave or complete high school and seek full-time work;*
- 2) *those who enter the workforce and undertake employer- provided training;*
- 3) *those who work and continue their education simultaneously;*
- 4) *those who complete relatively new programs like academies or tech prep (now called CTE) programs and then enter the full-time labor force or continue postsecondary education;*
- 5) *those who remain in the labor force for several years and then return for postsecondary training;*
- 6) *and finally, those who participate in high school programs that link education to work, regardless of whether the student is anticipating continued education or entry into the workplace."*

The students for whom School-to-Work would benefit look quite similar to the applications of ELOs today. Confusion around the application of WBL also stems from the significance of the term's history even prior to School-to-Work. As an example, The National Skills Coalition (NSC) considers WBL to be not so much an add-on to the education environment but actually is the fabric of Apprenticeships and CTE ³. In its April 2017 report, it cites WBL examples such as Apprenticeships and CTE because they are "*programs that blend worksite and classroom learning to prepare workers with the skills employers need.*" The report continues saying, "This dual model of training has a long tradition of proven effectiveness. Yet, the scale of [work-based] learning, especially *paid* work-based learning, is limited in the United States." Ironically, it cites New Hampshire as one of only 15 states **not having** a statewide WBL strategy because, according to NSC, these experiences need to include ***paid employment***.



In its Learning to Work, Work-Based Learning report of 1995, Princeton University cited Cooperative Education as "*oldest and most widely used model of work-based learning in the U.S.*" The report continues stating the "*actual implementation [of co-op] varies considerably, especially in respect to the objectives and extent of coordination.*" ⁶

It would be safe to assume, therefore, the term Cooperative Education, not WBL, had the historical upper hand with roots dating back to the foundation of the first Cooperative Education class by Dean Herman Schneider at the University of Cincinnati on September 24, 1906⁷. The class had 27 students with weekly alternating experiences between work



and class. Students were paid 8 cents/hour while at one of 13 company locations. Dean Schneider proposed the concept 7 years earlier in 1899 under the philosophy “*if you want to educate a student to become an engineer, then you should provide that student with the opportunity to practice being an engineer.*”

Dean Schneider’s commentary while lobbying for the very first cooperative education experience in the United States sounds vaguely in line with today’s New Hampshire ELO experience; so the ambiguity of these terms clearly started early. An ELO starts with a student’s interests in mind, which may, or may not, be a career interest.

Confusion continues with the post-secondary application of Cooperative Education and Internship used interchangeably. As an example, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth College of Engineering’s marketing material clearly stated as of this writing, “*With a co-op semester or an internship, you can see how your classroom learning applies to the kinds of projects you’ll work on as a professional. Your education becomes more relevant and more interesting.*”⁸

Confusion also disseminates from the mixed use of WBL to include work-like experiences that are unpaid in nature in order to comply with Title 1 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Citing again the NSC report, “*Title I uses the term, ‘work experiences,’ which may be unpaid or paid. Title I also requires that at least 20 percent of youth funds must support work experiences for youth sixteen to twenty-four years of age. There are many forms of work experiences, including job shadowing and unpaid internships.*”⁴ Even graduate courses that provide a foundation of WBL training use non-paid experiences interchangeably with ELO-like frameworks.

Bethel University offers a Masters of Arts WBL extension targeted at certified educators Summer of 2019. The 12-course, 33-credit strand can be completed entirely online (which adheres more to ELO standards than WBL).

So where does this leave us today? Can we draw a line-in-the-sand and clearly delineate between WBL and ELO? There are still several definitions of both that exist, technically, 119 years after the first WBL experience was proposed.

Here are some recognized points to consider as schools define both terms for their own purposes (not all inclusive):

Similarities:

1. While academic credit is normally associated with the deployment of ELOs, there are many examples of ELO in existence today that do not, independent of any other experience, provide academic credit. This includes job shadows, apprenticeships, and hybrid courses to name a few. The same for WBL experiences where in some cases cooperative education or internships even if directly related to a student's declared career path do not provide stand-alone academic credit.
2. Both WBL and ELO owe their in part to New Hampshire's change to enabling competency-based education in Summer 2005^{11 12}. This provided a foundation for competencies, or mastery of skills attainment, to be used deviating from a seat-time or Carnegie unit of measurement.

Differences:

1. An ELO may connect to a career choice, but it's not required. WBL often connects to a career choice or a student's self-proclaimed interest in a particular set of job tasks. WBL experiences can reinforce work-based skills being acquired through complementary education programs (e.g.: a federally funded CTE program) but rarely deviate in scope, depth or breadth beyond a work-associated experience
2. While a high quality ELO includes a relationship with an external industry partner⁹ it may include a relationship with a 'mentor' not associated with an outside

- organization (e.g.: an in-school faculty advisor). WBL experiences most frequently include an industry partner in some capacity, even if indirectly, through a faculty or in-school staff advisor.
3. An independent, stand-alone (aka: "pure") ELO has a defined, 4-part standard that has been adopted throughout New Hampshire¹⁰ in order for academic credit to be recommended. A WBL experience may, or may not, have these four standards with variances existing throughout the state in whether academic credit is assessed. As the NSC report highlights, there is no New Hampshire WBL standard.

References:

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