

Reframing Engagement in Work-Integrated Learning: Rethinking Partnership through Indigenous Worldviews

JENNIE NILSSON¹

Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada, Toronto, Ontario Canada

Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is typically framed around structured experiences involving third-party engagement and student contributions to an external organization. Yet, as new models of WIL emerge — particularly those shaped by Indigenous knowledge systems — questions are being raised about how we define work, engagement, partnerships, and value within WIL frameworks. Land-based learning, in particular, challenges assumptions embedded in standard WIL frameworks, including the reliance on deliverables, skills acquisition, and productivity as proof of meaningful engagement with WIL partners.

Drawing on my experience administering Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada's iHub funding program, in this viewpoint piece, I explore the intersection of land-based learning and WIL. This piece highlights how land-based learning experiences are often miscategorised as *experiential learning* rather than *WIL* due to colonial interpretations of what counts as work, who counts as a partner, and how student contributions and mutual benefit are defined and assessed.

Through reflection on national practice, ongoing discussions with WIL practitioners, and considerations raised by Indigenous-led and land-based partnerships, this article calls for a shift in how we define, assess, and value partnership, particularly in Indigenous contexts. Rather than focus solely on outputs or host organizations, land-based learning reframes engagement as a reciprocal, ethical, and culturally grounded relationship, often with the land itself as partner, not just site of learning. This piece argues that if WIL is to remain responsive, inclusive, and future-facing, its definitions and criteria must expand to recognise alternative models of work-integrated learning that prioritise stewardship, community protocols, and Indigenous-led approaches.

¹ Corresponding author: jennien@cewilcanada.ca

Statement of Place:

My mother is Labrador Indigenous from the southern communities of Cartwright and Paradise River. She is a residential school survivor and a member of the NunatuKavut Community Council. I was raised in the communities of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, NL and Iqaluit, NV and on my father's side my heritage is Irish, English, and Scottish. Today, I reside on the traditional territories of the M'ikmaq people. With over two decades of experience in post-secondary education and work-integrated learning, I bring a commitment to partnerships, policy, and practices that build stronger pathways between learning and work.

Keywords: work-integrated learning; land-based learning; Indigenous; experiential learning; partnership

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely understood as a structured form of experiential education that integrates academic learning with purposeful work experience. According to the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, WIL typically involves collaboration with a third-party organization, is time-bound, and is designed to provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings while contributing meaningfully to a workplace or community partner (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Such conventional models of WIL emphasise productivity, deliverables, and alignment with professional or industry standards, often utilising employability outcomes as key indicators of success. However, as learning models grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems grow in number, researchers and practitioners alike are questioning foundational assumptions within WIL: What constitutes a deliverable? Who is recognised as a legitimate partner? What types of engagement are considered meaningful? And how are outputs defined and measured within WIL frameworks?

Land-based learning in particular challenges the dominant WIL paradigm. Rooted in Indigenous worldviews, it positions the land not just as a site of learning, but as a teacher, a partner, and a being with whom learners are in relationship (Arney, 2021; Simpson, 2014; Styres, 2017). Learning in this context is not organised around deliverables or measured by individual productivity; instead, learning unfolds through practices such as ceremony, acts of care for the land, responsibilities to community, and sustained, reciprocal relationships with both people and place. These elements often fall outside the dominant metrics of WIL assessment.

In this perspective article, I argue that, when institutions are willing to expand their definitions of partnership and meaningful contribution, land-based learning embodies the core quality indicators of WIL. By recognising the land as a legitimate partner in the WIL experience, and by grounding land-based WIL assessment in Indigenous epistemologies, institutions can begin to support models that are not only inclusive but also provide transformative learning experiences.

Work-Integrated Learning and Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a broad educational approach that emphasises learning through reflection on direct experience. Grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, it views knowledge as created through the transformation of experience. Activities such as service learning, community engagement, field studies, and artistic or creative inquiry typically fall under this category. These experiences are often flexible, student-driven, and focused on personal growth or civic responsibility (Kolb, 1984). While they can be deeply meaningful, they do not necessarily

involve structured collaboration with an external partner, formalised learning outcomes tied to curriculum, or measurable deliverables.

In contrast, work-integrated learning refers to a more formalised pedagogical model that integrates academic theory with authentic work practice through intentionally designed partnerships (Ferns et al., 2024). Common WIL formats include co-operative education, internships, field placements, applied research projects, and entrepreneurship, each with varying degrees of workplace integration, assessment, and supervision (Ferns et al., 2024).

What most clearly distinguishes WIL from experiential learning is its focus on mutual benefit and measurable contribution. Students are expected to engage in purposeful work that aligns with their field of study and provides tangible value to the host organization, while the learning outcomes are embedded in and assessed by the academic institution (Ferns et al., 2024). Quality WIL experiences are characterised by curricular alignment, meaningful experience, learning outcome assessment, and critical reflection (McRae et al., 2018).

This distinction becomes especially relevant when considering Indigenous land-based learning. Land-based learning experiences are often highly relational, protocol-driven, and community-led; they may involve time spent listening to Elders, learning about Indigenous land-based practices, or engaging in ceremonial responsibilities. This learning is rich and transformative, yet it falls outside conventional WIL parameters, such as time-bound placements, deliverables, and formal employer supervision. Land-based learning centres the land itself as a teacher and partner, and emphasises stewardship, connectivity, accountability, and intergenerational responsibility over individual productivity (McDonald, 2023; Simpson, 2014; Styres, 2017; Wildcat et al., 2014).

Because institutional definitions of WIL are predicated on Western constructs of *work*, *partner*, and *outcome*, land-based initiatives are often considered experiential learning rather than recognised as legitimate forms of WIL. This classification has material consequences, as it can affect access to funding and to institutional recognition and support. As such, there is a pressing need for WIL frameworks to broaden their definitions and evaluation criteria in ways that respect Indigenous knowledge systems and land-based pedagogies.

Land as Partner: Indigenous Worldviews and Relational Learning

Indigenous knowledge systems are inherently holistic, relational, and grounded in the interdependence of all living beings (McDonald, 2023; Simpson, 2014; Wilson, 2008). Where I live, on Turtle Island in the place now called Canada, Indigenous Nations are not homogenous; teachings, practices, and relationships to land are distinct and place-based. At the same time, there are shared principles — relationality, reciprocity, and respect for the interconnectedness of all beings, for example — that connect many Indigenous worldviews. Within these perspectives, the

land is central to knowledge and teaching, with the understanding that learning emerges through reciprocal engagement with place (Styres, 2017; Wilson, 2008). As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) notes, “the land, aki, is both context and process. The process of coming to know is learner-led and entirely spiritual in nature” (p.7). In this framing, the land is not merely a partner in education, as it is also a recipient of stewardship and knowledge. Where conventional work-integrated learning often defines deliverables in terms of outputs provided to an employer or organization, land-based learning frames outcomes as acts such as stewardship, restoration, and ceremony; these are the gifts given to the land in recognition of its role in teaching and giving. These contributions are not measured in quantifiable metrics, but in the quality of relationships, the honouring of protocol, and the upholding of Indigenous values.

Such learning also repositions the student as not just acquiring specific skills and learning processes for personal development or employment, but as part of a wider relational network with responsibilities to the land, the community, and future generations (Wildcat et al., 2014). The act of learning is inseparable from acts of giving, listening, and being-with. In this context, land is not a passive site where learning happens: it is an active evaluator, beneficiary, and co-creator of the learning process.

These worldviews challenge the dominant frameworks of WIL, which are structured around time-bound experiences and confined by institutional reporting requirements that are structured around formal workplaces or community service sites, structured outputs, and human-defined partners. Western notions of reciprocity and mutual benefit often focus on transactional exchanges, such as completing tasks or producing deliverables for a host. In land-based learning, reciprocity is lived through ceremony, gifting, seasonal stewardship, and relationship. These responsibilities are not outcomes to be measured — instead, they are ethical imperatives embedded in ways of being (Ermine, 2024).

Institutional Challenges and Emerging Practice: Lessons from CEWIL Canada’s Innovation Hub

Since 2021, Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada’s Innovation Hub (iHub) has operated as a national funding program supporting curricular work-integrated learning that would otherwise be unpaid, including community-based applied research, field placements, and student-led entrepreneurial projects. A core objective of the program has been to increase access to WIL for students from equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous learners (CEWIL Canada, 2023).

Over several funding cycles, land-based learning practitioners working in collaboration with Indigenous communities submitted proposals aimed at bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous students onto the land for guided, protocol-based learning experiences. These projects were deeply grounded in relationships with Elders, communities, and place, and demonstrated

significant learning outcomes for students. However, they frequently failed to meet WIL program criteria that required partnerships with formal host organizations, explicit deliverables, and time-bound supervision.

Reviewers commonly struggled to assess these projects within conventional WIL frameworks. Although the value to students was evident, reviewers had difficulty articulating how outcomes were beneficial to communities or how reciprocity was enacted with Indigenous partners. As a result, these projects were categorised as experiential rather than WIL — not because they lacked high impact learning or relevance, but because currently cited and understood definitions of WIL do not explicitly accommodate land-based models of engagement.

In response to these recurring challenges, the iHub team developed updated reviewer guidance in 2025, including new training materials that proposed an expanded understanding of partnership within WIL. Specifically, reviewers were encouraged to recognise the Land itself as a partner in learning, whose stewardship is often carried by Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. As the updated reviewer guidance notes,

Reciprocity in land-based learning is about fostering a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship between humans and the natural world. Stewardship and caretaking are fundamental to this partnership. In this context, the Land itself is the partner, with an Elder, Knowledge Keeper, Indigenous community, or Nation as its steward. (Internal CEWIL Canada iHub Review Training Materials, 2025; unpublished)

The guidance also situated land-based WIL within the Canadian context of reconciliation, highlighting how these projects can support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) calls to action related to post-secondary education. In particular, calls to action 62–65 emphasise the need for culturally appropriate curricula, Indigenous knowledge integration, and respect for Indigenous teaching methods; similarly, call to action 92 calls for respectful relationships and meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities. By centring Indigenous-led decision-making, land-based protocols, and community-defined learning outcomes, land-based WIL initiatives respond to these calls. Framing funding applications in this way provided clearer indicators of impact and reciprocity, and helped reviewers to understand these projects' relevance to WIL principles and eligibility for funding.

Still, this institutional reframing raises concerns. Expecting Indigenous land-based learning to fit into existing WIL frameworks instead of changing those frameworks to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing can lead to Indigenous knowledge being taken and used without truly respecting or understanding it. This risks appropriation under the guise of inclusion (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

At the same time, there is a growing need for the creation of culturally relevant WIL opportunities that uphold Indigenous knowledge systems, community-defined goals, and holistic definitions of learning. These align with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's broader mandate to decolonise and Indigenise public education, including post-secondary education. It is necessary to explicitly honour the specific ways that land-based learning offers a powerful and culturally grounded form of WIL that meaningfully engages Indigenous communities, reflects Indigenous pedagogies, and provides students with transformative experience in reciprocal, place-based learning.

Moving Toward Inclusive and Responsive WIL Frameworks

Current WIL programs, funding, reporting, and evaluation mechanisms emphasise metrics such as hours in the WIL experience, deliverables completed, and skills gained, reflecting dominant approaches to WIL that prioritise structured, outcome-based, and assessable forms of learning (McRae et al., 2018; Zegwaard et al., 2023). These productivity-focused modes of assessment and reporting are not inclusive of land-based learning practices. If institutions are to support Indigenous-led land-based WIL, they must revise how they define *reciprocity* and *mutual benefit* to centre principles such as relationships, community, and protocols.

Additionally, the term *work* in WIL has often been equated with employment or productivity, typically in the context of a formal workplace or site of service. However, this narrow framing does not account for community-based, land-based, and ceremonial practices that are essential to many Indigenous land-based learning experiences. Those in the field of WIL must open space for diverse definitions of what counts as *work*, recognising that what may appear informal or peripheral from a Western lens is often at the heart of Indigenous knowledge systems.

To avoid extractive or performative practices, discussion around land-based learning and WIL must be Indigenous-led and grounded in relationship and long-term commitment. Institutional support must not attempt to standardise or control Indigenous knowledge systems but instead be accountable to Indigenous governance and community-defined goals (Pidgeon, 2019). This means accepting that learning may be non-linear, governed by seasonal or ceremonial calendars, and embedded in responsibilities to land and community.

Efforts to decolonise education in Canada have increasingly called for systemic change (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). One of the most frequently cited concerns in Indigenous educational research is that institutions often consult Indigenous communities after decisions have already been made (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018), which is not the basis of meaningful collaboration. As Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) discuss, this process cannot be merely involve adding Indigenous content or including Indigenous students, but must instead involve a transformation in the structures, values, and power dynamics inherent in educational institutions (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Work-integrated learning, as a growing field of

practice and policy investment, must take this challenge seriously. Without reform, existing WIL frameworks risk perpetuating colonial norms that prioritise institutional convenience, economic productivity, and Western epistemologies over Indigenous leadership, relationship, and land-based ways of knowing.

Including Indigenous decision-makers is essential to avoiding the appropriation of Indigenous models into settler-defined categories. It also ensures that initiatives are rooted in place, protocol, and community relevance. Without this leadership, institutions may unintentionally undermine the very goals they claim to support. Indigenous knowledge systems operate through deeply rooted epistemologies around ethical engagement, community accountability, and long-term relational integrity (Duria, 2025). Ultimately, this shift is not simply about inclusion: it is about transforming WIL frameworks and understanding. Land-based WIL is not an exception to be accommodated, but a model of ethical, place-based learning that holds lessons for the future of education more broadly.

Conclusion

Land-based learning offers a relational and holistic model of work-integrated learning that invites post-secondary institutions to reflect on how WIL is defined, assessed, and supported. When grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, these experiences challenge conventional assumptions about work, partnership, and deliverables — highlighting the need for broader, more inclusive frameworks.

Recognising the land as a partner in learning opens space for deeper forms of reciprocity, responsibility, and community engagement. Rather than adapting land-based learning to fit existing structures, institutions might consider how WIL frameworks can evolve to respectfully support Indigenous-led approaches. Doing so offers an opportunity to enrich WIL practice and contribute to more ethical and responsive educational systems.

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Work Integrated Learning

in Practice

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