

AN EFFECTIVE USE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO INTEGRATE FIELD TRIPS AND CLASSROOM TEACHING

Rong Huang

Plymouth University

Plymouth, UK

email: rong.huang@plymouth.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This research aims to assess effectiveness of use of experiential learning to integrate field trips organised for postgraduate students who are studying in tourism and hospitality management in one British university and their lessons in classroom. Questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were adopted. It is apparent that the students were satisfied with their field trip experience but they felt less clear of links between field trips and classroom teaching unless the lecturers provided a clear induction.

Keywords: Field trip, experiential learning, classroom teaching, postgraduate students

INTRODUCTION

The use of educational field trips has long been a major part of the education programming for both youth and adults at schools or colleges or universities. Lisowski & Disinger (1987) call this 'learning in the environment', and they trace the literature on the topic back to the 1930s, which refers to significant increases in effective learning of techniques and subject knowledge. Novelli and Burns (2010) point out that field-based experiences gained specifically through field trips have a long tradition in disciplines such as geography, biology, anthropology, archaeology and literature, as well as more multidisciplinary fields of study, including tourism.

Orion and Hofstein (1991) found three student-centred variables that had a significant effect on learning: level and type of knowledge and skills, acquaintance with the field trip area, and psychological preparation. In 1994, in another research, they conclude that 'the field trip is one of the most complex and expensive activities in the education system' (1994:1117) and note three types of variables that influence the effectiveness of such trips: teaching issues, student characteristics and field trip components. Anderson et al.(2003) draw on Novak's theory of education ('human constructivism') to make the point that 'meaningful learning' requires a framework comprising the teacher, the learner, the content, the context and the evaluation and that '[a]t the heart of constructivism is the recognition that knowledge is not an entity transferred in to from teacher to learner, but rather that learning requires active engagement of the student's mind' (2003:177).

Griffin (2004) identifies that there are three key aspects dominated the research through the early 1990s: the overall educational value of the trips; the impact of preparing for field trips; and early studies into the complexity of elements that influenced student learning. Numerous research studies have documented significant increases in participant factual knowledge and conceptual understanding after participation in well-planned field trips (Myers and Jones, 2004). Field trips allow students to experience something that would not be possible inside the four walls of the classroom. They allow students to have the direct experience that can be the beginning of the experiential learning cycle. Well planned field trips and experiential learning are great on their own, but together they provide an opportunity for students to experience class content first hand, learn from their experience in the field, and apply what they have learned (Easterly and Myers, 2009). From these studies we learnt that the value of the field trips was equivocal and apparently context specific, preparation improves the chances of learning especially if it involves integration of the school and museum learning and provides opportunities for student involvement. These findings provided a platform and a need for deeper and more extensive research. But Griffin (2004) argues that the earlier studies did not fully address the complexity of the context including the nature of the students' and the teachers' perceptions and expectations of learning in informal settings.

It is generally acknowledged that field trips have the ability to promote deep learning (Hill & Woodland, 2002). The value of field trips and their contribution to student engagement and learning can be viewed from an experiential learning framework. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) encourages deep understanding by progression through four steps in the learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective

observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Using Kolb's (1984) model for experiential learning as a guide, field trip activities go through at least four iterations of the learning model. The first step of the cycle actually begins in the classroom, and then moves to concrete experiences that take place in the field to achieve learning objectives. The following iterations of the cycle move from applying the concept to more focused, having the students eventually learning how to solve the problem (becoming 'experts' in the field).

The aim of this research is to assess effectiveness of use of experiential learning to integrate field trips organised for postgraduate students who are studying in tourism and hospitality management in one British university with their lessons in classroom. More specifically, two objectives are sought: (1) to evaluate students' experience of different field trips (2) to discuss lecturers' organisation of field trips and their observation of students' participation in different field trips.

STUDY METHODS

Questionnaire survey was adopted to understand the experience of postgraduate students. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain the lecturers' feedback. Fifteen questions were used in questionnaire and they were informed by Fuller et al., (2006), Isoardi (2010) and Stokes et al., (2011). The interview questions for lecturers were related to their planning process, the impacts of the field trips and emerging issues. SPSS were used to analyse collected questionnaires. Framework analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

RESULTS

For the postgraduate students, field trips provide first-hand experience of the real world, whichever part of the world the students are in; skills development (transferable and technical); and social benefits. The extent to which fieldwork develops transferable skills depends on the context in which the fieldwork is undertaken. Field trips may also act as an inverted curriculum experience for new students to engage them and promote learning within a professional context.

As for the lecturers, their planning process normally involve 1) obtaining seminar sessions schedule 2) deciding which sessions were appropriate for assessment; and 3) setting relevant assessment. Therefore, their field trips tend to relate to some assessments. As for the impact on students' learning, the lecturers summarised (a) listening to at least 5 industry experts otherwise impossible to arrange (b) learning about latest tourism technological trends from experts, and (c) being exposed to the world travel trade. As far as the emerging issues are concerned, the lecturers pointed out that (a) students deciding to attend bare minimum of 2 sessions to go shopping in London/ alternative activities; (b) students performed better in trip related assessment compared to essay assessment towards the end of term (c) extra costs for the students, and (d) As there are many Chinese students in the postgraduate class, the language used by the groups tended to be Mandarin. For the future, if a group of over 15 is recruited, we should design an extra-mural activity that will engage the postgraduates in UK English speaking activities which are more linked to their research in tourism and hospitality management.

CONCLUSION

Students' reports reflected that the goals relating to enhancing graduate capabilities were achieved and that the field trip provided students with authentic experiences of international issues in tourism industry in a professional context. Additional benefits of the trips were reported in terms of its motivating and inspiring students and in the development of industry contacts nationally and internationally. The lecturers' concern related to difficulty of larger group is clear. Future directions for this research include incorporating more direct assessment into the field trip to further promote experiential learning, and structuring the trip as an inverted curriculum experience.

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