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Assessing Learning Outcomes Using Program Theory: An Experiential Tourism Marketing Course Project

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Abstract

Experiential education is a pedagogical approach that connects the academic course components to practical skills, and contributes to a student's deeper learning, personal growth, and professional motivation. Most tourism and hospitality instructors use an applied learning approach due to the nature of the field. This paper discusses benefits of using the program theory as a framework to design and assess learning outcomes for an experiential learning project in a tourism marketing course.

Key Words: Experiential learning, program theory, learning outcomes, course design.

Introduction

Experiential education is widely accepted in the hospitality and tourism field because of the assumption that students can benefit from learning by "doing." Sometimes referred to as "real-world" learning, the approach can be a powerful participative method that invokes the students into an immersive and/or interactive learning environment (Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2000; Daly, 2001; Kenney, Lawton & Walker, 2001). This notion of bridging theory and practice is particularly important for tourism and hospitality, as it is a relatively new area of study that tends to be applied in nature (Moscardo & Norris, 2003). With this said, there is an immediate need to promote new teaching and learning methods that facilitate deeper learning in the hospitality and tourism field that will arm students with the competencies the market is demanding (Ruhanen, 2005).

Employers, customers, or guests expect tourism and hospitality professionals to have a broad understanding of the dynamics and needs of people and the community (Gursoy & Swanger, 2005). They must demonstrate, at a high-level, the ability to work with people of different races, ethnicities, and religions and work within the context of local, national and international societies. Students in the field of tourism or hospitality are required to exhibit competencies that focus on problem-solving, teamwork, and conflict resolution (Christou, 2002). Therefore, placing students in situations where knowledge can be applied can be extremely valuable in the development of transferable skills (Ball, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of experiential learning in a tourism marketing course with a theoretical framework. First, this paper will provide an overview of an implemented experiential project. Second, a review of the literature in the area of experiential learning will be presented as well as the

theoretical framework for assessing the impact of this practical approach. Finally, results from students' reflective work and course evaluations will be shared to provide insight into the effectiveness of the course design and project.

Literature review

Experiential Learning

Applied, real-life, and practical learning are all synonymous for experiential learning. The method allows students to apply theory to current situations in the field and "engage in a higher level of thinking as they personalize the subject matter to develop a deeper understanding of the material" (Hamer, 2000 in Ruhanen, 2005, p. 39). Experiential activities can include classroom-based activities, laboratory activities, practicum or field experiences, internships, etc. These pre-professional opportunities allow students to practice the skills and gain confidence in their abilities in a non-threatening environment (Ruhanen, 2005).

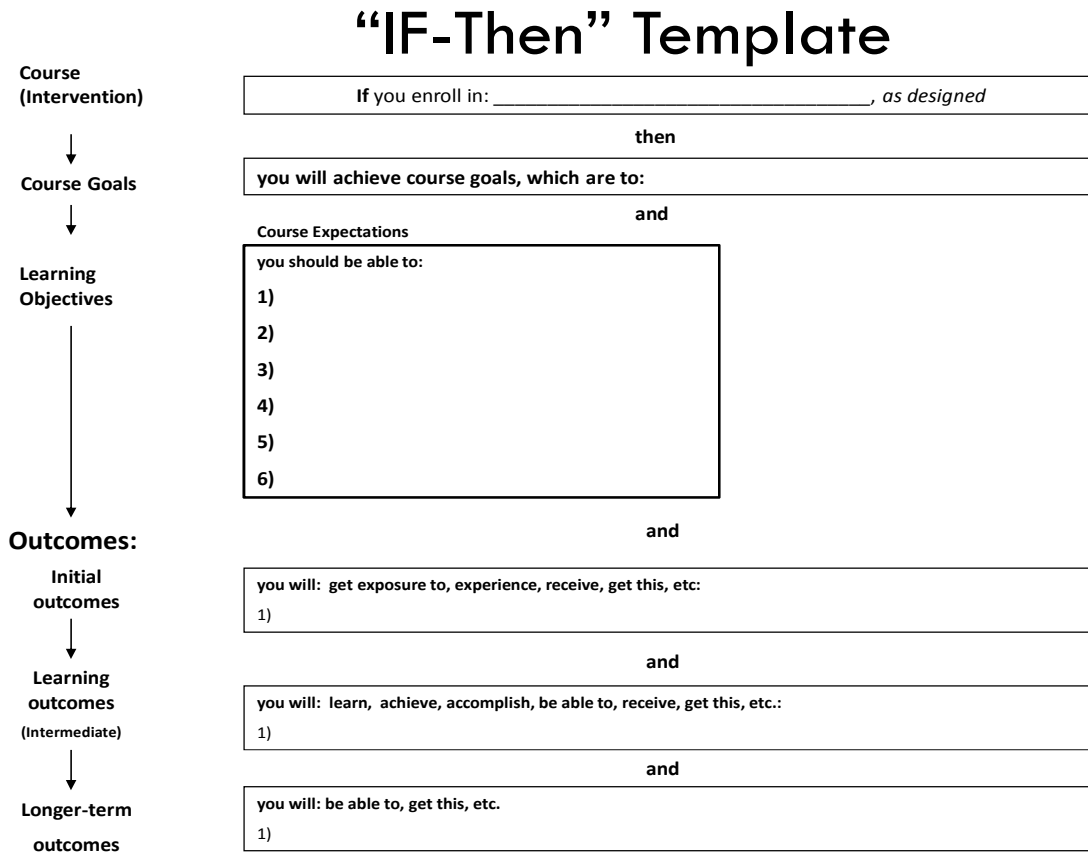
Scholars and educators debate the use of experiential education and its purpose and place in higher education curriculum (Cantor, 1997). The make-up of students at colleges and universities, much like the today's workforce, is complex. With an increased understanding of learning theories and student's cognitive development, instructors are challenged to explore a variety of pedagogical approaches to address the multiple learning styles. As nontraditional learners continue to enter higher education in growing numbers and the Millennial generation enters the academia seeking relevance and meaning to their college experience, adding valuable outside the classroom activities becomes increasing important (Rolls, 1992 in Canton, 1997). As the need grows for educated workforce to be able to address business, economic, and community needs (Canton, 1997), the ability to work collaboratively, to solve the problems, and advance best business practices surfaces. Experiential education allows instructors to observe student's abilities to apply the classroom knowledge, and develop and assess these necessary life and business skills.

A number of studies have been conducted regarding students impressions of their participation in an experiential learning course or project. In a 2000 study conducted by McDonald and McDonald, students involved in festival and event management found the experiential learning approach beneficial, but noted a range of reactions to the activities from "excitement, involvement and appreciation, to apathy, withdraw and confusion" (McDonald & McDonald, p. 12 in Ruhanen, 2005, pg. 38). Additionally, the practical experience may lead to challenges with group dynamics, namely differences in communication and leadership styles leading to team conflict (Lawrence & McCabe, 2001). The key to overcoming these challenges is to intentionally design the course with clear learning outcomes and expectations, so that students understand the rationale of using an experiential approach.

Theoretical Framework

The program theory is a framework that can be used for course planning and assessment. Every course can be reviewed as a "program" that includes interventions (e.g. lectures, exams, projects, case studies, reflective papers) that help students achieve the course learning outcomes (Brickman, 1987). Using this approach, the experiential learning activities are viewed as "interventions" that bring about changes in the way students approach, react and adapt to tourism marketing situations. The learning opportunities are assessed through a series of reflective activities. The program theory suggests using a flow chart, or "If-Then Template," that shows connections of components within a course (see Figure 1). This approach helps to identify logic of a design of a course and clearly articulates course objectives. Therefore, the program theory helps instructors connect the course outcomes to the course components such as assignments, projects, exams, and other class activities. Although the framework provides many benefits for assessing course or curriculum design, so far not much research has empirically tested the theory in academic setting yet.

Figure 1. Program Theory “If-Then” Template



The theory can be captured through the use of “if-then” statements and explains how the intervention is to work. For instance, if students are involved in an experiential learning project, then they will change some type of behavior or gain a unique skill. By asking “if-then” questions, the faculty member can examine if a hands-on activity guided students to achieve intended learning objectives through participation in the experience (Singh, 2010).

Faculty members leading experiential learning courses and projects tend to have a specific purpose for assigning students assignments; however, often times an instructor assumes that students understand their intent and projected impact of the experience. Without clearly communicating the outcomes and anticipated results, students may not know the significance of doing this type of project besides meeting a course requirement and getting a grade. Therefore, the theory of change makes transparent the faculty member’s goals for an experiential learning project or experience. Notably, this approach helps the faculty instructor make the connection between the experiential learning activities and results, which ultimately serves to gain “buy-in” from administrators, faculty, students, and other relevant stakeholders.

Methodology

A series of experiential learning courses are offered in the Department of Tourism, Conventions, and Event Management (TCEM), one of which is a 200-level tourism marketing course. Like most tourism marketing courses, it introduces basic marketing concepts such as marketing mix, marketing research, targeting, and segmentation. The unique component to this course is the instructor is using an experiential - "learn by doing" - approach and has collaborated with many community partners to assist students in achieving course learning outcomes. This purpose of this study is to assess the link between the experiential learning project and the learning outcomes by using the program theory.

Upon completion of the course, students are expected to achieve four course objectives: (a) understand and utilize important marketing principles and concepts, (b) research consumer behavior, (c) analyze and solve hospitality marketing problems, and (d) develop marketing strategies. In addition, the university has six Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs) that comprise a common, campus-wide articulation of expectations for undergraduate students. The PULs are (a) core communication and quantitative skills, (b) critical thinking, (c) integration and application of knowledge, (d) intellectual depth, breadth, and adaptiveness, (e) understanding society and culture, and (f) values and ethics. Each departmental curriculum on the campus is expected to integrate the PULs at course level.

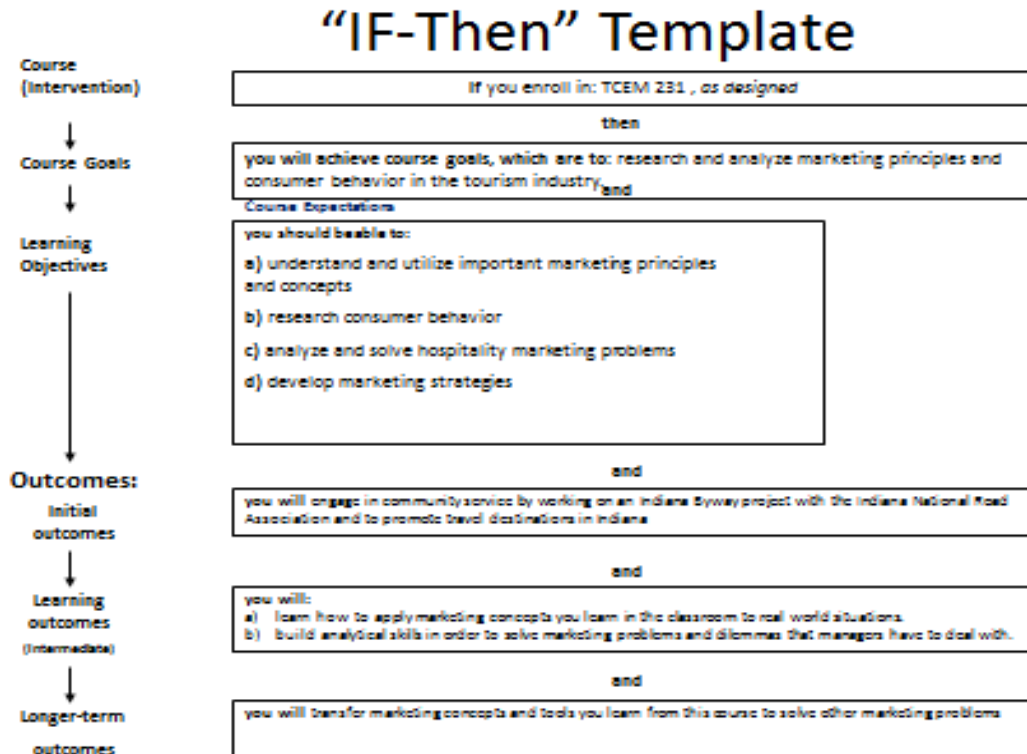
Overview of the Experiential Learning Project for the Marketing Course

In 2010, the instructor of the course incorporated an experiential learning project in which students assisted with Indiana's National Historic Road project, a roadway in the Indiana Byway Program. The Indiana Byway Program was developed to preserve, protect, enhance, and recognize transportation corridors of unique scenery, history, culture, and art. The program attempts to create a distinctive travel experience for people to learn and enjoy American culture, history, archeology, and hospitality. At the same time, the program helps local communities to preserve their resources and to develop their economies by attracting visitors. However, so far the Indiana Byway Program has not fully capitalized on its tourism possibilities.

Given the large scope of the Indiana Byway Program, key leaders of the program partnered with the instructor and students in the course to focus on new ways of promoting the Indiana's National Historic Road. Students enrolled in the 2010 tourism marketing courses spent an entire semester analyzing the historical sites and tourist attractions along the Indiana's National Historic Road, identifying target markets, conducting a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, evaluating current marketing efforts, and suggesting marketing initiatives that would increase people's awareness and usage of the road.

The experiential learning project for Indiana's National Historic Road was developed as a comprehensive project that require students to apply concepts that students learn from lectures, class discussions, and textbook to the project. The project represented 60% of the total grade. The other 40% of the grade comes from weekly case studies and two exams. Throughout the semester, students were encouraged to reflect upon and to integrate class materials into the various sections of the project, demonstrating the ability to transfer their marketing knowledge to this "real-world" situation. Thus, the purpose of this study is to assess whether the design and assessment of this experiential learning project was beneficial and achieved learning objectives and outcomes. Figure 2 depicts the program theory model using the "If-Then" template.

Figure 2. Example of Tourism Marketing Course Using Template



Experiential Learning Outcome Assessment

At the end of each semester in both semesters in the spring and fall of 2010, students in the course were asked to submit a written assignment that contained open-ended and quantitative scaled questions to assess students’ experience, as it related to learning outcomes. There were 86 total students enrolled in the course in 2010 and the assessment was given the last week of the course. After students turned in the assignment, their answers were stored in the course management system and were exported to SPSS for data analysis. The reflection exercise represents approximately five percent of their total course grade. In order to encourage honest answers, students were told before it was due that the assignment would be graded based on whether or not all questions were answered, not for the contents of their answers. A total of 76 students from the two semesters completed the reflection assignment.

In the reflection assignment, students were asked to assess how useful the project was to help them achieve the four course objectives based on a nominal scale of (1) not useful, (2) somewhat useful, and (3) very useful. The four questions were (a) “Was doing the project helpful for your understanding of important marketing principles and concepts?,” (b) “Was doing the project helpful for your understanding of consumer buying behaviors?,” (c) “Was doing the project helpful for you to gain an ability to analyze and solve hospitality marketing problems?,” and (d) “Was doing the project helpful for you to gain an ability to develop marketing strategies?”

Additionally, students' perceptions of their improvement in six PULs categories were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Low to (5) High. To add clarity and depth to their quantitative responses, students were given two open-ended questions and asked to explain their rating by giving specific rationales or examples. The two open-ended were: (a) "There are many destinations or organizations that are facing challenges similar to Indiana's Historic National Road and are marketing their attraction or tourism package with very limited information and resources. Recall what you did for the project. Do you think you can apply the knowledge and tools that you learned from doing the project when dealing with similar challenges in the future? If yes, what are the knowledge and tools that can be transferred to multiple settings?" and (b) "What would be the marketing concepts or tools that you think would be used in the future if you were asked to solve (or provide suggestions to solve) similar marketing problems or even different situations?"

Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore the impact of the experiential learning approach, as it relates to student's achievement of the learner outcomes and development of the principles of undergraduate learning. Four questions were posed to students to assess if the project was aided their learning of the four course objectives. The results are shown in Table 1. The response of "very useful" ranged from 39.5 % to 73.7%, with consumer behavior receiving the lowest percentage and developing marketing strategies the highest percentage. Notably, 10.5% students indicated the project was "not useful" and 50% only "somewhat useful" in understanding consumer behavior. On the other hand, the other three objectives (understanding important marketing concepts, ability to analyze and solve hospitality marketing problems, and developing marketing strategies) received high student rating.

Table 1. Results of Assessment of Course Objectives

Scale	Course Objective							
	The project was helpful for your understanding of important marketing concepts.		The project was helpful for your understanding of consumer behavior.		The project was helpful for you to gain ability to analyze and solve hospitality marketing problems.		The project was helpful for you to gain an ability to develop marketing strategies.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not Useful	1	1.3 %	8	10.5%	1	1.3%	1	1.3%
Somewhat Useful	26	34.2%	38	50.0%	31	40.8%	19	25.0%
Very Useful	49	64.5%	30	39.5%	44	57.9%	56	73.7%

Regarding the six PULs, the results are also encouraging that the project contributed to student development. As presented in Table 2, mean scores of all PULs were above three on a five-point scale. The PULs that received the highest mean score rating were "Core Communication and Quantitative Skills" (3.82) and "Critical Thinking" (3.76). Values and Ethics" received the lowest mean score of 3.14.

Table 2. Assessment of Principles of Undergraduate Learning

Principles of Undergraduate Learning	Mean	Standard Deviation
Core Communication and Quantitative Skills	3.82	.706
Critical Thinking	3.76	.831
Integration and Application of Knowledge	3.64	.895
Understanding Society and Culture	3.61	.865
Intellectual Depth, Breadth, and Adaptiveness	3.45	.915
Values and Ethics	3.14	1.08

Note: Items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from (1) Low to (5) High.

These results were further explained by students in the reflection assignment. This gives some rich information on student's perception of their personal and academic growth. Below in Table 3 is a sample of the students' comments.

Table 3. Student Comments from the Reflective Exercise

Core Communication and Quantitative Skills	"Writing the project helped me to exercise expressing ideas and using multiple resources such as textbook, the Internet, brochures, etc. in order to expand my knowledge on the subject. By both writing the paper and presenting information orally to the class, we gained experience of communicating in various settings".
Critical Thinking	"I feel my critical thinking skills have improved when doing this project. We really had to investigate what markets we wanted to target and how we could attract visitors to the road in different ways."
Integration and Application of Knowledge	"Integration of knowledge is probably the most important competency because we had to gather and use information from so many different sources. We had to incorporate knowledge from other classes, personal preferences, and life experience. Each of us brought different expertise to the project."
Understanding Society and Culture & Intellectual Depth, Breadth, and Adaptiveness	"Evaluating different demographics and finding what suites them best can be though so it was important to use skills we learned in class about market segmentations and apply them to this project."
Values and Ethics	"I don't think there were a whole lot of ethical and value oriented issues while doing the project. There was not anything where I felt I would have to make any decisions or use the concepts of ethics and values when creating the marketing plan."

Lastly, students commented they felt they could apply what was learning in this project to other destination or tourism marketing situations they may encounter in the future.

The skills of researching of the Indiana Byways' strengths and weaknesses, of understanding of consumers' motivation, expectations, and behavior, and of identifying of target markets and avenues to reach those markets are all transferable to other marketing projects.

Discussion and Conclusion

Experiential learning is an approach that has been found to contribute to deeper student learning and enhances student's motivation and interest in the subject matter (Ruhanen, 2005; Daly, 2001; Kenney, Lawton & Walker, 2001; Ball, 2001; Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2000). However, the rationale behind the design of a course or project is not always transparent to students, or even to the instructor or the partner. The program theory provides a framework that allows instructors to clarify the rationale of their course design and implicitly state the experiential learning outcome to students. By asking students to reflect on the outcomes, the instructor was able to assess if there is a connection between the experiential project and students' achievement of course's learning outcomes.

Students' reflection shows that the project also provided an opportunity for students to apply the marketing concepts in classroom in a real world situation. Therefore, this case study shows that the use of program theory helps faculty members verify if their course design achieved the outcomes. Furthermore, Singh (2010) suggested that not only the program theory helps to examine connections of components of a course, it can also help to identify disconnects or omissions in course design.

Overall, the student survey responses showed the experiential learning project was well-received and participants felt positive about the "hands on" Indiana Byways experience. Students noted the project assisted in their growth in the areas of communication, critical thinking and application of knowledge; these are skills employers noted were critical for our future leaders in the field of tourism and hospitality (Gursoy & Swanger, 2005; Christou, 2002; Ball 2002). The hope is this project can be used by students to show future employers in a business portfolio and discuss the Indiana Byways project, in terms, of demonstrating the ability to apply and execute the knowledge learned in their college courses.

Moving ahead, the area of ethics and values in marketing profession need to be explored and more emphasis placed on this important social and business expectation, as students did not make the link with this concept to the overall success of the experience.

Limitations

Although the instructor of the course discussed the six PULs in class, some students may not fully understand the meaning of them. Therefore, students may interpret the PULs differently when responding to the measurement items in the reflection assignment. Secondly, students were told that their reflection will not be graded on whether or not their comments are positive or negative, there is still a possibility that the assessment data may not truly reflect their opinions because it was not collected in the anonymous way.

Future Studies

For future studies, other class activities, not just the reflective paper, need to be included in the project assessment to examine the alignment of all components in the course as they relate to achieving course objectives. At that point, the instructor can compare the experiential project's impact to various assessments and do further evaluation. Additional survey items may need to be added and the student questionnaire further validated.

The Department of Tourism, Conventions and Event Management (TCEM) has offered several experiential courses for years, but there has not been a thorough review and assessment of the department's effort, as it relates to course academic learning outcomes. Future work is needed to expand the use of the theory to measure effectiveness and impact of experiential learning throughout the entire curriculum. This will allow the department to examine how courses using this approach are connected, or disconnected, in the effort to develop students' knowledge, skills and abilities before entering the workforce.

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