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## *THE LEARNING STYLES OF TOURISM MANAGEMENT STUDENTS*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at identifying the learning styles of tourism management programme students in Greece and the investigation of embedding problem-based learning (PBL) via online activities in the assessment. There is need for degrees in tourism management programmes that will enable students to think critically. Tourism education and training is required to adapt to patterns of change which seem certain to exert a profound influence on future roles and behaviours, since the vocational aspect of learning and teaching has been criticised. In order to understand the students' learning style and behaviour it is important to develop learning and teaching strategies that enhance the student experience. The author has used Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ); even though it has been used widely in management training, very few studies using the LSQ however, have focused on hospitality and tourism. The results suggest that the students have a preferred style that poses challenges to lectures in understanding the students' learning behaviour as well as at developing their teaching strategy. The findings show that students prefer concrete learning styles, active and occasionally reflective. The author suggests

that an appropriate teaching method is problem-based learning with the use of online techniques to trigger the students' interest and give them the opportunity to reflect and practice the knowledge gained at the course.

**Keywords:** learning style, PBL, online learning, online teaching, tourism

## **INTRODUCTION**

Hospitality and tourism are an applied area of study that depends on and draws from a wide range of disciplines. Tourism education and training is required to adapt to patterns of change which seem certain to exert a profound influence on future roles and behaviours (Simpson, 2001; Cooper et al., 1992). The growth in the provision of tourism programmes of study has been extraordinary in the last ten years in the United Kingdom (Stuart, 2002) while the number of students in these programmes has risen by 42% in the period of four years (UCAS, 2005). This paper aims at exploring the learning style of tourism students and their response to the use of problem-based learning via online environments as a means of enhancing the teaching and learning experience.

## **HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM EDUCATION**

Busby & Fiedel (2001 in Inui et al., 2006) state that they have conducted a study on the coursework offered in tourism degrees and they have found that there is a strong vocational focus. This is explained by the fact that tourism education has had the vocational focus since its development in European schools and mainly in Swiss schools. These schools put more emphasis on hotel management skills (Butler, 1999 in Inui et al., 2006; Busby, 2001). Hospitality and tourism are an applied area of study that depends on and draws from a wide range of disciplines. Tourism education and training is required to adapt to patterns of change which seem certain to exert a profound influence on future roles and behaviours (Simpson, 2001; Cooper et al., 1992).

In their study, Silver & Brennan (1988 in Stuart, 2002:11) found that the majority of tourism lecturers appear to have been taking on a form of liberal vocationalism in their approach to delivering their courses. Baum & Nickson (1998) claim that a

practical education should develop to the students the skills to cope with employment. In contrast other studies emphasise the importance of balancing the vocational with the academic aspect of tourism studies (Inui et al., 2006) and they claim that this approach prepares students who not only have the operational skills but they also have the knowledge on their field of study.

In addition, lecturers in tourism combine academic and vocational aspects and this has been described as 'an aggregative approach to education, despite the tendency for stated aims to favour the employment preparation focus' (Raffe, 1994; Inui et al., 2006) in counterpoint to the view that tourism students do not learn to reflect upon their body of knowledge (Inui et al., 2006:28). Therefore, Morgan (2004) suggested that there is need for degrees in tourism management programmes that will enable students to think critically. In view to this, a degree in tourism is regarded as a significant qualification in the tourism industry (Moira et al., 2004), moreover, it is required 'in order to provide personnel of high calibre to support the development of the tourism sector in Greece' (Christou, 1999).

The tourism management programme specification in the study focuses mainly on the academic aspects of the subject. Moreover, due to the nature of tourism studies, attention is paid to the vocational aspect as well. Therefore, there is support on behalf of the programme tutor and the teaching staff to the vocational aspect of the content and the delivery of the modules, resulting in an effort to recognising tourism as a discipline of study in higher education. Interestingly the skills and experience the students acquire during their studies result in high employment rates of tourism graduates (Busby, 2001; Inui et al., 2006).

## **THE LEARNING STYLE OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM STUDENTS**

According to Keefe (1979 in Huang & Busby, 2007:93) 'learning styles are characteristic cognitive, effective and psychological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment'. There are however, many different terms used when defining and discussing learning styles and approaches. For example, Tickle (2001:956 in Dale & McCarthy, 2006:49) sees learning style as 'an expression of personality within the academic context and as such it is said to include learning

strategy, motivation, attitudes and cognitive style'. According to Hsu (1999:18) 'cognitive styles are information processing habits representing the learner's typical mode of perceiving, thinking, problem solving, and remembering'.

Byrne et al. (2002) and Lashley (1999) and Hsu (1999) suggest that in order to understand the students' learning style and behaviour it is important to develop learning and teaching strategies that enhance the student experience. Therefore, the students' characteristics and learning styles are critical for lecturers to understand and reflect on, since students bring different expectations to learning. In addition, students in hospitality and tourism should be prepared for the changes that occur in the industry and more importantly they need to learn how to learn (Christou, 1999).

There are different approaches to learning one of which is the deep and the surface approach to learning. The deep approach 'arises from a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully, so the student tries to use the most appropriate cognitive activities for handling it' (Biggs, 2003:16). When using the deep approach in handling the task, students have positive feelings: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, even of exhilaration; they find the material easier to understand (Ramsden, 2005:57). The surface approach to learning is 'typified as an intention to complete the task, memorize information, make no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge' (Fry et al., 2007:18). The approach to learning depends on the task and the student (Ramsden, 2005) and therefore each may be implemented at different situations. The two approaches have been considered in the design of the online task as it is discussed in the following.

Furthermore, several models and measurement instruments have been developed to classify individual learning preferences, nevertheless Honey and Mumford's Learning Style Questionnaire (LSQ) has been used widely in management training (Huang & Busby, 2007). Very few studies using the LSQ however, have focused on hospitality and tourism (Dale & McCarthy, 2006), despite that the learning preferences of tourism and hospitality management students have been the focus of many recent studies. Despite the suggestion by Berings & Poell (2002:57 in Lashley & Barron, 2006:555) that the 'LSQ has better reliability and better face validity than other instruments, but its construct validity has hardly been investigated' the author has used it to identify the learning styles

of the sample. She believes that this tool helps at identifying the students' views and alternative to learning styles. The aim has been to identify the students' learning style so as to stimulate reflection. The LSQ offers a four-fold classification that is presented in the following table.

Table 1: Learning styles

<b>ACTIVISTS</b>	Respond most positively to learning situations offering challenge, to include new experiences and problems, excitement and freedom in their learning.
<b>Reflectors</b>	Respond most positively to structured learning activities where they are provided with time to observe, reflect and think, and allowed to work in a detailed manner.
<b>Theorists</b>	Respond well to logical, rational structure and clear aims, where they are given time for methodical exploration and opportunities to question and stretch their intellect.
<b>Pragmatists</b>	Respond most positively to practically based, immediately relevant learning activities, which allow scope for practice using theory.

Source: Fry et al. (2007:20)

The above description shows a tendency towards the adoption of different styles based on the task, the time and the allocated effort (McGill & Beaty, 2001). Lashley (1999) and Barron & Arcodia (2002) claim that the hospitality and tourism students favour the vocational and practical aspect of their studies. They are diverse, from different cultures and they bring their own skills and experiences when entering the higher education (Dale & McCarthy, 2006). The existing differences in learning in higher education may be the result of the ability of the individual learner (Wickens et al., 2006). Lashley & Barron (2006:555) suggest that 'there is no one best way, but teaching strategies that are not sensitive to students' learning style preferences can present learners with difficulties'.

Lashley (1999) suggests that hospitality management students prefer to learn from action-based situations and according to Barron & Arcodia (2002) they have the tendency towards activist learning styles; they are challenged by new experiences (Lashley & Barron, 2006). In another study, in contrast, Wong et al. (2000 in Barron & Arcodia, 2002) have found that Asian students show reflector-learning preferences. In addition, research conducted in Greece suggests that the traditional form of teaching and learning should be revised (Christou, 1999) and he proposes that new methods proven successful in other countries should be implemented. Therefore, this research has used the LSQ to explore the learning styles of level 2 tourism management students at IST College-University of Hertfordshire in Greece.

### **THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTING THE LSQ**

The sample included the level 2 students (N=20) at the BA (Honours) Tourism Management programme. The students were given the questionnaire to study at home. Then they were required to assess their learning style bearing in mind both their studies at level 1 as well as at level 2. The LSQ comprises of 80 questions that the students should state whether they agree with (v) or not agree (x) and then they had to calculate their result following the instructions they were given.

The findings show that the majority of the students (80%) are activists. These students prefer to engage in practical experiences with hands-on activities (Dale & McCarthy, 2006). Additionally, they prefer the teaching style that is a reflection on their own learning approach. They work well in teams and they enjoy contexts with variety and situations difficult to predict (Lashley & Barron, 2006:564) that matches the hospitality and tourism environment. On the contrast, activists are thought to avoid planning, they rush into things and may leave things to the last minute and occasionally they have poor time management skills (Lashley & Morrison, 2000). Only four students are reflectors and therefore require more instructions in performing a task. The author bearing in mind the learning style of the group designed the assessment of the level 2 module - Tourism Geography Field Research.

## **PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING**

Lashley (1999) suggests that hospitality management students prefer to learn from action-based situations and according to Barron & Arcodia (2002) they have the tendency towards activist learning styles; they are challenged by new experiences (Lashley & Barron, 2006). Students in this case take responsibility of their own learning by exploring the available resources to solve the problem posed to them; they construct their knowledge and they make connections between prior knowledge, experiences and newly acquired knowledge (Martin et al., 2008). Sivan et al. (2000:382) propose that in active learning 'students acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes while being actively involved in the process of inquiry', therefore the activists (the students in the sample) may reflect what they have experienced via PBL and active learning. According to Loughran (2002:37) 'effective reflective practice involves careful consideration of both "being" and "action" to enhance the possibilities of learning through experience'. He continues that reflection has been recognised as a valuable cognitive process and helps to conceptualise the practice setting. Reflection is recognised as a higher-order learning activity (Schon, 1983 in Biggs, 2003). Similarly, Kivela & Kivela (2005) advocate that PBL helps the students develop their critical and analytical thinking. Nevertheless, they claim that PBL requires prior knowledge, motivation and skills for self-directed learning.

Martin et al. (2008:19) state 'PBL has been used, with great success, in a range of vocational curricula'. Research in the field of PBL has shown that students develop an improved attitude towards learning and higher level thinking skills is used for example critical analysis, problem solving and reflection (Heliker, 1994). Duncan & Al-Nakeeb (2006) claim that students demonstrated higher motivation, wider reading and critical thinking with PBL approaches. Kivela & Kivela (2005:440) state that PBL makes that students curious and 'stimulates them to search for information'. The learner autonomy has been linked closely to motivation and self-esteem that allows the students to feel valued and urge them to contribute to their group's exploration of the problem presented (Martin et al., 2008). On the one hand, research has shown that PBL results in intrinsic motivation, nevertheless the 'degree of autonomy demonstrated by a student relies on the prior learning experience, attitude and knowledge of learning' (Dickinson, 1997 in

Martin et al., 2008:20; Kivela & Kivela, 2005). On the other hand, there is also evidence that extrinsic motivation is still high with PBL, students were outcome-oriented since there is emphasis on performance rather than learning in education (Luddy, 1998). He claims that the individual focuses on extrinsic motivation in order to cope with the time and the effort to perform tasks in PBL. On the contrast, Miller & Peterson (2003) claim that students may show frustration in managing and coping with group dynamics, as well as in managing the time and work required at PBL.

According to McGill & Beaty (2001:12) 'action learning is based on individuals learning from experience through reflection and action'. They support the view that PBL is not dissimilar from action learning, and reflective learning in higher education is similar to action learning. They continue that action learning may blend with new technology in making more effective use virtual learning environments.

## **ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING**

Education is changing with the development of wider interest in the internet and the use of new technologies. The traditional teaching methods in higher education have been face-to-face delivery and paper-based distance learning (Dale & Lane, 2004), these methods have been criticised as poor learning methods (Keegan, 2007). Even though lectures are thought to be popular in higher education and the basic learning foundation for students they are also considered to have passive students participation and lack of feedback regarding the understanding of the lecture (Keegan, 2007). The development in technology has also penetrated higher education with the increasing use of virtual learning environments (VLES) (Dale & Lane, 2004; Dale & Lane, 2007; Biscoomb et al., 2008). The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) defined VLE as 'the components in which learners and tutors participate in online interactions of various kinds, including online learning' (Weller et al., 2005:253 in Dale & Lane, 2007:101).

VLEs usually enhance student learning by encouraging discussion and online tasks (Dale & Lane, 2004) and they 'offer more stimulating learner experience' (Dale & Lane, 2007:101). This approach has benefited higher education institutions



especially since the increase in numbers and class sizes. This increased number of students, the work overload as well as other elements such as the inadequate resources and funding create high levels of work-related stress to lecturers in higher education. This stress may be addressed with the use of technology (Biscomb et al., 2008). Nevertheless, Dale & Lane (2007) claim that the use of technology and VLEs should be under rigorous evaluation.

The Internet has benefited a lot the teaching and learning (Zheng et al., 2008). The main benefit from the use of technology is a saving of marking time, since the system may assess each answer and provide the students with a score. The technology allows the lecturer to analyse student progression and achievement in relation to each question or task separately. It also allows the use of digital images that are a better way for the human brain to store and recall them as opposed to text (Keegan, 2007). According to Williams et al. (1996 in Keegan, 2007) they are triggering a wide range of associations and they enhance creative thinking. Besides that the cognitive theory proposes that learning occurs when the learner processes selected material and integrates that with knowledge (Keegan, 2007), therefore images that are relevant to the content of the module may promote or even enhance effective learning. In contrast, other authors suggest that surfing the net or uploading notes do not lead to learning (Zheng et al., 2008). They suggest that a systematic approach in the design of the tasks must be adopted. Additionally, students may feel isolated, frustrated, anxious and confused (Chou & Liu, 2005).

The level of students' knowledge and skills on the use of IT is an issue to be considered, even though most of the students are computer literate. The design and functionality of the VLE influences the engagement of the students (Dale & Lane, 2007). They continue that the students' engagement can be considered as a 'content plus support model'.

On the one hand, Biscomb et al. (2008) claim that the use of online learning helps with testing theories and knowledge rather than for deeper forms of learning. On the other hand Gibbs (1999) and Chou & Liu (2005) claim that they may encourage deep learning with the provision of feedback. Johnson (2005 in Dale & Lane, 2007:101) claims that reflective skills can be developed in VLEs as there is more time for the student to interact.

Lashley & Rowson (2005) claim that information technology is an important element in hospitality and tourism studies. Other studies (Sigala & Baum, 2003) suggest that a challenge posed to hospitality and tourism graduates highlights the need of information literacy, knowledge management and interaction at VLEs. This has led to a change in the use of pedagogical models that are now used to foster collaborative learning communities. They propose that virtual hospitality and tourism universities will be established in the near future.

For the purpose of this study the environment that is used at the IST College – University of Hertfordshire is StudyNet. There are a variety of functions of this system such as uploading lecture notes, podcasts or assessment such as multiple choice questions, and discussion forums. Students may also upload information themselves. Some students engage with the VLE but others decide to just download information and lecture notes. Williams (1996 in Chou & Liu, 2005) suggests that the students in VLEs should have the opportunity to self-monitor their progress that may be done through practice assignments and discussions. Additionally, they should show self-efficacy to judge their capabilities after they have evaluated the programme and the assessment.

Having identified the main students' learning style (Activist), the lecturer adopted the PBL concept and active learning through the use of the VLE. She has designed the assessment of the module following the results of her study. A set of teaching procedures and guidelines are provided to the students for the module in the module guide. The content has been consistent with the university's programme and the assessment has been both formative and summative. She acted as the facilitator (McGill & Beaty, 2001) and encouraged the students to take responsibility for action in overcoming a problem. In the formative assessment as part of their final coursework the students are given a set of statistics on their chosen tourism destination and are asked to perform some statistical analysis which then they had to compare with the other members of the group and upload a draft report on the findings. The deep approach to learning (Biggs, 2003) was encouraged by asking them to search and use the main concepts on the module and comment on them. Each group should also access the rest of the reports and they should put their comments online for discussion. The comments made by the teams and the lecturer, are used as constructive feedback towards their final assignment. The lecturer has been monitoring the procedure and the interactions

both in the VLE and in the classroom and has provided suggestions and directions when necessary. Additionally, the students could control the content, their pace of learning and towards the end a self-assessment marking framework was provided to give them the opportunity to evaluate their own work, knowledge and learning. The above agrees with Sigala & Baum (2003) who claim that online teaching should facilitate online learning and knowledge building. Therefore, students moved from being passive recipients of knowledge to participants in activities that encompass analysis, synthesis and evaluation. They have been encouraged to be active learners, that 'involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing' (Sivan et al., 2000:381).

## **FINDINGS - CONCLUSION**

The findings of this practice paper suggest that hospitality and tourism students learn more effectively in VLEs even though it has been a novelty within the department. With appropriate guidelines the particular group developed the necessary learning strategies in order to perform well at the particular task, and they showed enthusiasm in the interaction and the discussion. Interestingly, those students expressed their satisfaction on the module evaluation and the positive affects this activity had on their learning. They also commented positively on the quality of the VLE, the easy access and use of the system. The above affirms the suggestion made by Hara & Kling (2000 in Chou & Liu, 2005:74) that 'technological proficiency and the ability to rely on the community of learners through learning tools have a positive effect on satisfaction'.

It is evident from this study that active learning with use of technology in hospitality and tourism programmes contributes to the development of critical thinking and problem solving and they give the opportunity to students to develop themselves as learners and it may be an effective path to help the students respond to the changes in the industry. Online collaborative learning has been widely used allows the instructor to use the tool in facilitating insight and understanding (Du et al., 2007:95) rather than as 'one way dispenser of knowledge'. Nonetheless, concluding it is suggested that a blending approach of

both online learning and teaching as well as with traditional practices may be the most effective approach in the hospitality and tourism education.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The significant limitation of this study is that the sample is small and not representative of the population. The learning style of as many as possible students should be investigated in order to reach generalisations. There is great diversity among the students in hospitality and tourism programmes.

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