

„Vacational Experience and Vocational Education“

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Abstract

This article addresses the changes that have been seen in the approach to vocational education in the UK since 2000 with the introduction of Foundation Degrees which require a partnership approach with the educational institutions working with the industry, offering delivering training and learning within the industry.

It uses this discussion to open up a generalisable argument about what the basis of vocational education should be in a world which has shifted from production and service to co-creation and experience. The demands placed on trainees and trainers have to shift dramatically if vocational education is to continue to be relevant and equip students to face the demands of the new tourism economy.

Key words: *relevance, responsibility, experience, co-creation*

Paper Type: *Scientific Paper*

Introduction

Serious questions have been raised about the value and basis for vocational education in the tourism, events and hospitality industries (Stergiou, Airey and Riley, 2008). This article begins by addressing the changes that have been seen in the approach to vocational education in the UK since 2000, especially with the introduction of Foundation Degrees which require a partnership approach with the educational institutions working with the industry, offering and delivering training and learning within the industry.

This is then developed into an argument about the basis for curriculum and pedagogical approaches to our subject which has a far wider relevance than the narrow confines of the UK. The article addresses the changing constructions of our industries and the way they are perceived and experienced by both our customers and our employees. By reconsidering our work as trainers from a perspective that embraces the ideas of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), it will be shown that we need to extend, broaden and deepen some of the areas of the curriculum to enable and facilitate meaningful encounters in the tourism and hospitality arenas.

Training for what

As a profession we have long been interested in the development of tourism education (Airey and Johnson, 1997) and there have been calls for more rigour in our approaches (Botterill and Tribe, 2000; QAA, 2000). As Airey (2008) observed following

the memorial lecture for Professor Rik Medlik who many credit as the inventor of Tourism and Hospitality education that it would be timely to consider the state of the subject that Medlik helped to pioneer. Airey (2008a) has wondered about whether the subject has reached a point of maturity and recognition, taking its place as an equal alongside other longer standing social sciences or whether it should still be seen as primarily a vocational application of other subject areas, designed simply to leave students “surprise free” about what they might find in subsequent employment? As the first professor in the field and as pioneer of the first tourism degree programme, Medlik and his contemporaries did much to set out and codify an initial field of study for tourism, to develop its position in relation to the wider community and to develop the pedagogy associated with the subject. Airey (2008; 2008a) has argued that a good example of Medlik’s influence can be found in the first UK textbook devoted specifically to tourism, *Tourism Past Present and Future*, which he co-authored with John Burkart in 1974. Its influence on the curriculum was clear for at least 20 years and elements of it can still be recognised in programmes today. This is a remarkable achievement but we must also perhaps consider how that influence was so long standing in industries which developed so rapidly and so distinctively over the same period.

The rationale for foundation degrees

The context for this introduction has included thought provoking work on critical influences (Stuart, 2000) and purpose (Stuart-Hoyle, 2003). In 2002 the government set out its plans

for widening participation in its White Paper on higher education, clarifying its commitment to "ensure that the expansion (in HE) is of an appropriate quality and type to meet demands of employers and the needs of the economy and students" (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002: 60). Furthermore, that expansion was envisaged to be in the form of "two-year work-focused foundation degrees; and in mature students in the workforce developing their skills" (DfES, 2002: 60) (Stuart-Hoyle (2007)

The 'foundation degree' was launched by David Blunkett in 2000 with two major aims: "to widen participation for social inclusion and to increase participation for economic competitiveness" (Foundation Degree Task Force (FDTF), 2004: 2). It has been argued that the launch was much more to do with the government's desire to achieve these policies than any attempt to deliver a carefully designed concept which responded to demand (Smith and Betts, 2003). A student undertaking a foundation degree on a part-time basis is likely to have little or no academic background, heavy work commitments and very specific motivations for study (Sheehan, 2004). One characteristic of the FD is to "empower people to survive through building self-confidence, independence, flexibility and adaptability" (Longhurst, 2004:5).

By September 2004, 24,000 students were enrolled on foundation degrees (compared with 4,000 in 2001-2002), around half of which were part time. At the time, over 800 foundation degrees were on offer across the UK, with full-time applications up by 50 per cent for 2004-2005 (FDTF, 2004). This demonstrates the rapid growth of our subject area, subjects do not stand still and tourism is no exception (Tribe, 2005a). We can see that since Medlik's time there has of course been a massive expansion in the provision of tourism programmes. Estimates (Airey, 2005) put the number of degree programmes at 150 in the UK alone, with about 10,000 students - a far cry from the 20 or so students in 1972.

In 2002, the QAA published its qualification benchmark for foundation degrees, the key generic outcomes were (Adapted from Longhurst, 2004):

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in their field of study and the way in which those principles have developed
- Ability to apply underlying concepts and principles outside the context in which they were first studied, and the application of those principles in a work context
- Knowledge of the main methods of enquiry in their subject(s), and ability to evaluate critically the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems in their field of study and apply these in a work context
- An understanding of the limits of their knowledge, and how this influences analyses and interpretations based on that knowledge in their field of study and in a work context.

This also reinforced the DfES's need to see employers engage in the design of FDs and the higher education institutions' commitment to working with employers at a local and regional level, in turn, fostering a closer relationship with the business community.

Curriculum comes from where? Owners/managers/employers

One of the defining characteristics of FDs was the central role that employers should play in their design and delivery, engaging them in these processes either through direct consultation or through relevant sector skills councils (DfES, 2002). Sheehan, (2004:26) highlights a range of challenges facing those designing successful FDs, including the need to ensure that employers are given the opportunity to make "meaningful contributions ...for example, [in] course design and structure, and the mentoring of students during work experience".

A representative Foundation Degree for Tourism and Hospitality Management

Year 1

- Socio-cultural perspectives
- Psychological Perspectives
- Financial Resource Management
- Marketing and Communications
- Human Resources and Legal Issues
- Tourism and Hospitality: the Business Environment
- Work Based Study 1
- Research Methods
- Vocational Language Skills

Year 2

- Information Systems and ICT Applications in Tourism and Hospitality
- Vocational Language Skills
- Event Management
- Transport Systems and Management
- Incoming and Domestic Tourism
- Work Based Study 2
- Tourism, Sustainability and the Environment
- Strategic Hospitality Management
- Heritage Arts and Entertainment
- Risk Management

The programme structures should take a flexible pathway approach; allowing students to follow a programme of core Business courses, with an introductory industry-based course and work-based courses during Year 1. Specialism in Tourism or Hospitality Management is found throughout Year 2 with their option courses. Further specialisation occurs in the second year through the work-based study course, which sees students capitalising further on their work experience and developing their research skills.

Therefore blended learning approaches have become a strategy for reaching previously untapped markets in the form of online programmes, using tools such as Blackboard or WebCT. Add to this the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) commitment to foundation degrees (FDs) that "will play an important part both as the main vehicle for

continuing expansion and in widening participation”, and encouraged programmes that should be “accessible, flexible and relevant to employer needs” (HEFCE, 2003: 13). This combination of factors explains the driving forces behind the development of industry-led, innovative FDs that reflect government thinking on widening participation.

Previous research into the role that industry should and has played in the development and delivery of Tourism undergraduate programmes revealed a tendency in a number (but not all) of HEIs to pay lip service to ‘industry involvement’. Interviews with Tourism academics at the turn of the century revealed a reticence in some cases to engage with industry throughout the curriculum design, development and delivery process owing to a number of factors, including cost, time and ‘nervousness’ about what industry would actually require (Stuart-Hoyle, 2004).

The arrangement of partnerships does raise issues about collaboration and forces stakeholders to work across the cultural differences which can be found in the different sectors, including the issues of the politics and cultural differences involved in developing a successful set of relationships. Lyle and Robertson (2003) are adamant about the importance of the transparency and the quality of the HE/FE partner relationship in developing new foundation degrees.

Shifts in tourism and hospitality

Competitiveness (Clarke, 2010) can be viewed as a matter of demand and supply but there are some who would see it as a coming together of the suppliers and the customers in the satisfaction of demand, the meeting of expectations and the mutual use of resources from both sides of the traditional equation in the co-creation of touristic experiences. Experience management is seen as the way to remain competitive in markets where global competition and internet technology have turned products and services into commodities, bought and sold on price alone (Schmitt, 2003). Pine and Gilmore (1999) have argued that developed countries are now ‘experience economies’ where sustainable competitive advantage can only be maintained by giving the customer a unique and memorable experience. This is done through treating ‘work as theatre and every business

a stage’. This was more than a re-working of Shakespeare, for the image was not seen as a descriptive metaphor but that work was an actual theatre, with staging and audience participation! Exploring Schechner’s (1988) Performance Theory, Pine and Gilmore attempted to use drama in the way that business strategy had capitalised on military terms and as Morgan (2010: 219) observed “The advantage of the theoretical metaphor is that the consumers are no longer seen as a target to be hit or penetrated, but an audience to be entertained, involved and drawn into participating in the drama.” More recently Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) have called for a strategic approach based on shared values, allowing customers to co-create their own experiences in a search for personal growth. The emphasis has thus shifted in recent debates from narrow conceptions of staging or production to broader notions of experience creation, involving a wider range of agencies and processes (Sundbo and Darmer, 2008)

In tourism we have become accustomed to debates that look at staging and accountability. What is of interest in this collection is how the idea of staging has been broken down into front staging and back staging. The traditional artistic notion of front staging is repositioned through the analysis of the operations and processes which allow the front to be seen and to survive against the ever increasing experience of competition. The roles and processes of the back staging are fundamental to the sense and possibility of the experience. It is an addition to the critical processes which applies well in tourism and delivers insights that will serve not only to deepen tourism but also events management literature if it is pursued. It is clear that the work has shared a common thread and the explorations of experience creation are informed by a relatively shared theoretical perspective. We are reminded by Pine and Gilmore (1999:6) and the terms are used consistently throughout the book that the emphasis should be placed on the “the importance of the customer in experience and experience creation as they point out that ‘Experiences occur whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage the individual’ (p.11). By this they mean that an experience occurs whenever companies intentionally construct it to engage customers. The engagement of the customer in the experience also means that customers rarely have the same experience, even though it is the same experience they are experiencing.”

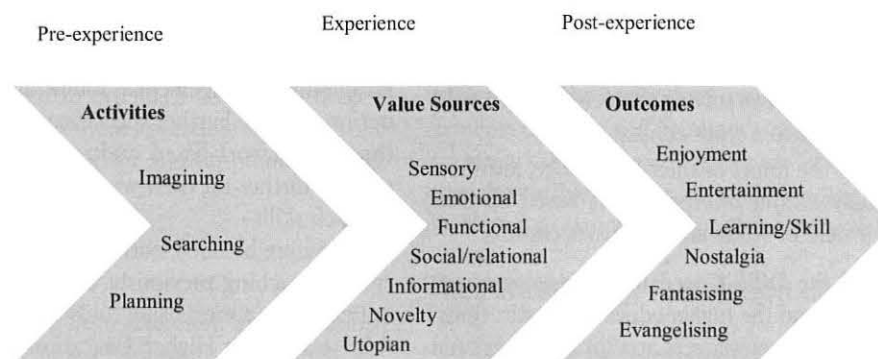


Figure 1: The Value Experience

Source: Tynan and McKechnie, 2009

As Sundbo and Darmer (2008) correctly observe that this is because the individual experience is constructed through the interplay of the companies and the customers and therefore will be constructed differently by the different customers and although Pine and Gilmore (1999) offer a starting point we should not be constrained by the economic enterprise of their work. The more we apply these concepts the more we have to move beyond the market pre-constructions of the customer and reach for the constructions of the consumer (Clarke, 2011). The creation of any and all experiences calls into play the relationship between the constructors of the experiences and the consumers of those experiences, both directly and indirectly. Consuming a tourism experience is a process that involves three stages: pre-experience activities, engagement in the experience through value sources and post-experience outcomes (Tynan and McKechnie, 2009).

Reaction and reflection in provision, in training

We have built curricula in and around boxes of skills and competencies that have become well established. We recognise courses around the world because they are built around a consensus view of what are the core subjects, functions and skills in business and in tourism, hospitality and events. Our education systems have reproduced this through direct sponsorship and indirect influence, championed by UNWTO and World Bank initiatives.

We should have moved beyond these narrow definitions and we have been encouraging people to think outside these boxes by challenging and changing the ways we deliver our offerings to our students and to our clients (Shulman, 2005). Having indoctrinated our students in these classical approaches, we are now re-educating our clients to think outside these boxes. Indeed it is possible that we have been encouraging entrepreneurs to think outside the boxes for so long that there is a danger of forgetting what was in the boxes in the first place (Winne and Marx, 1977). Perhaps there would be virtue in looking in the boxes again within the new contexts of the contemporary industries.

Morgan et al (2009) summarised key recommendations for management from the Pine and Gilmore (1999) agenda:

- the importance of the setting, the design and ambience of the service environment or servicescape;
- the importance of staff/customer interaction;
- the need for staff to put something of their own personality into their roles;
- an emphasis on charting and scripting each stage of the service encounter, often using metaphors from drama and storytelling;
- a view of service delivery as an integrated production in the cinematic rather than the factory sense of the word (i.e. a concern that each time the customer encounters the brand they should get the same high-quality experience).

This establishes a very different sense of what the basis of the vocational training for our industries should be and suggests

a way of refocusing both the subject content and the pedagogical processes involved.

Knowledge, Skills and Competencies

Another shift in our thinking has been to consider the implications emerging from the studies of knowledge management. Davenport and Prusak (1998: 5) describe knowledge as a "fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, an expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information". As Cooper (2006:48) has pointed out "while the pivotal role of knowledge as a competitive tool has long been recognised", tourism has been slow in adopting this so called "knowledge management". This is partly because of the gap between researchers and the tourism sector and partly because of a "hostile knowledge adoption environment" (Cooper, 2006: 47). Development processes require multi-stakeholder involvement at all levels, bringing together governments, NGOs, residents, industry and professionals in a partnership that determines the amount and kind of tourism that a community wants (Sirakaya et al., 2001). Clarke, Raffay and Wiltshier (2009) express the concern that the accounts of tourism that inform our educational and training approaches should elaborate the knowledge accumulated in both explicit and tacit forms, and the ways in which that knowledge can and should be embedded to facilitate improved formal and informal communication within knowledge communities. While explicit knowledge, the "know-what" is usually collected in written format, tacit knowledge, the "know-how" is needed to put the "know what" into practice. Tacit knowledge is built upon experiences and is subjective while explicit knowledge can be seen as objective. When people leave only that part of their knowledge which has been made explicit remains but the ability to use the acquired knowledge disappears. To prevent this, organisations that realise the importance of this intangible asset can create knowledge sharing circumstances with the help of a systematically and consciously organised knowledge management system. The knowledge sharing process is successful when the source is transferred to the recipient who can and will reuse it by recreating the knowledge elements. The measurable valid success is when the recipient internalises the received knowledge that is "obtaining ownership of, commitment to and satisfaction with the transferred knowledge".

We have to recognise that any (all?) of the specific knowledge(s) we can teach have an increasingly short shelf life before they become out of date and should be removed. This is not to deny that some (all) can be seen as important underpinnings of what we do but they are a part of history – a history which is part of our everyday working lives but will not be the cutting edge of those experiences. We have to bridge the gap between the idea that history ended yesterday and the future starting tomorrow. The object of our training should be to facilitate the development of these intangible skills, including what Meyer and Land (2003) called 'threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge' and how these connect to, underpin and impact on the ways of thinking and practising in our industries.

We have moved on from a simple and single focus on hard

skills, which were difficult enough to deliver, evaluate and operationalise, to soft skills, which are even more difficult to deliver and very difficult to develop within specific and relevant contexts. This reinforces the need to build very real and effective links with the employers. The harsh reality is that however hard we try to make the involvement with employers genuine and meaningful (resulting in their feeling compelled to support employees in the form of release to study and financial contribution to fees), it is impossible to prevent employers questioning their support. However as Smith and Betts (2003: 236) comment: "If Governments fail to provide the incentives for employer involvement they will have failed to learn from the experience of previous initiatives." We also have to enthuse and inspire those employers (as well as their employees) with what we offer and what value we add to the service delivery of the touristic experience.

Filling spaces on a timetable - opening spaces in the heads of trainees

Evidence from those who have commented on the nature and the growth of knowledge about tourism, the development of the research base, the diversification of the curriculum and the development of the pedagogy (Xiao and Smith, 2006; Echtner and Jamal, 1997; Tribe, 2005b; Tribe and Airey, 2007; Stergiou et al., 2008; Tribe, 1997; Tribe, 2000; Tribe, 2006) suggest that tourism has moved far beyond its "surprise free" origins. If the following are indicators of maturity: a community of scholars with the support structures of dedicated journals, other publications and scholarly conferences; a curriculum which is not constrained to a particular territory and about which there is a measure of agreement; an appreciation that teaching and learning is as much about encouraging students to challenge and think as it is about passing on knowledge; a recognition

in common with other social sciences that tourism has taken a cultural turn (Ateljevic et al., 2007); an ability for scholars to be self-critical and aware of the nature of the truths about their work (Tribe, 2006); then as Airey (2008) has noted, tourism has reached a point of maturity (Airey 2008a).

This should see us as trainers, practitioners and professionals seeking to equip the people we work with for a future where they cannot only deal with the functional tasks required of them but where they can take greater responsibility for the experience, responded to the emerging issues in the co-creation of the touristic experience. This requires a sense of engagement, empowerment and enterprise that we have not always encouraged. There are risks here but in a co-creational world we must be sure to explore the bases of these risks, the origins, the emergent solutions and the way to optimise the responses. This will mean shifting our emphasis from vocational education to a concern for the vocational experience and the vocational experience. Perhaps this is where we should decide on how mature we are in tourism and our approaches to developing those who work in our industries. The maturity comes in recognising that we do not know all the answers to the future of development in tourism, but we can work on developing our understanding of the constructions and reconstructions of our working lives. It means that we must follow Urry's (1990) footsteps but turn the gaze not only upon the tourist but also upon the employers and the employees in our multi-core and multifaceted industries. What we know is important but how we use that set of knowledges, skills and competencies is much more important in how we develop and how we fulfil our roles in the future of tourism.

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