

## **Experiential learning in hospitality management curriculum: Case study in rural Southeast U.S.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, relevant education and the advancement of student learning have become areas of increasing concern in a rapidly changing work environment. Industry-based experiential learning activities provide students with the opportunity to apply classroom concepts and achieve immersed levels of learning. As the student's level of involvement increases, meaningful learning occurs. Although many hospitality and tourism programs recognize the importance of applied work experience, more studies are needed in higher education, within the area of hospitality and tourism management, that demonstrate the experiential learning approach.

This paper will discuss the gradual integration of various types of experiential learning activities into a hospitality and tourism management curriculum situated within a College of Business. Based on feedback from community focus groups, student course evaluations, and reflection papers, many experiential learning activities were re-designed to extend over two semesters rather than one semester. Two-semester project-based learning, instructional educational tours, and living-learning labs were designed to provide students with further hands-on experience and liberal time to engage in meaningful scholarship. The experiential learning projects discussed generated notable and appreciated outcomes for-profit and non-profit partners while providing students a valuable work experience within a group environment. Industry certifications were added to several courses to enhance specific skill sets and strengthen student resumes. When compared to one-semester projects it was determined for identifiable hospitality and tourism management courses, the two-semester experiential learning approach can be a significant teaching technique that offers students meaningful and thought-provoking learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning; Hospitality management; Project-based learning; Service learning, Living learning labs

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## INTRODUCTION

Improvement of student learning (Hsu, 1999) and applicable education (Dressler, Cedercreutz & Pacheco, 2009) have been areas of increasing concern in higher education since the early 2000s. Cooper, Bottomley, and Gordon (2004) argue that meaningful learning occurs as the student's level of involvement increases. The authors maintain that industry-based experiential learning projects provide students the opportunity for application of classroom concepts and deeper levels of learning. Furthermore, Kisiel (2006) indicates students will associate specific assignments with previous knowledge gathered during their studies, thereby deepening the learning process through greater awareness and understanding.

When included as part of a student's academic program, experiential learning can provide students with real-life, work experience. Although numerous hospitality and tourism programs acknowledge the value of applied work experience (Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2017; Lee & Dickson, 2010), more studies are needed in higher education, within the area of Hospitality and Tourism Management, that demonstrate the experiential learning approach (Croy, 2009; Deal, 2007; Ruhanen, 2005). Designing experiential learning activities representative of Hospitality and Tourism Management require actual work environments to achieve applicable results (CoreLabs, 2007). This paper examines the development of experiential learning activities designed to enhance and sustain a Hospitality and Tourism Management curriculum situated in the college of business.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of experiential learning is a recognized methodology originating in the early 1900s. As a result, numerous terms and definitions have been employed to explain the concept. For example, Dewey (1938) used the term "learning by doing," Wolfe and Byrne (1975) discussed "experienced-based learning," and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) Task Force (1986) referred to "applied experiential learning." Definitions of experiential learning also differ. Kolb (1984) explains it as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p.38). More recently, the AACSB Task Force, observing the rapidly changing pedagogy and delivery mechanisms in higher education, expressed the need for "action-learning practices" to reflect the current environment (AACSB, 2012).

Experiential learning has been used to depict a wide array of educational methods that offer students applied learning opportunities (Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2017; Lee, 2007). Types of experiential learning include internships, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, place-based education, service learning, instructional educational tours, project-based learning, and living labs (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016; Krepel & Duvall, 1981; Purdue, 2012; Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009). Methods discussed in this paper include service learning, project-based learning, instructional educational tours, and living learning labs.

Service learning involves students in organized activities intended to focus on community needs, while purposely encouraging student learning, satisfaction, and development (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001; Smith, 2004). Likewise, the Association for Experiential Education further defined this methodology to include higher education practitioners utilizing specific activities which encourage student reflection to

“increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (Association for Experiential Education, 2012). Project-based learning is an instructional method in which students, over time, gain skills and knowledge through participation in authentic learning activities that encourage student interest and motivate them to seek solutions to a complex problem or question (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991).

Instructional educational tours in higher education are designed to encourage students to create realistic, first-hand connections to the theoretical concepts taught (Krepel & Duvall, 1981). When students learn concepts and ideas in a classroom setting, they are able to experience and observe tangible products and services associated with careers in Hospitality and Tourism Management, thereby encouraging further personal reflection. Through observation and perception, focused instructional educational tours have an influence on one's knowledge, perceptive aptitudes, activities, and future careers (Hutson, Cooper, & Talbert, 2011; Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009). As students associate instructional educational tours with personal experiences and classroom education, theoretical concepts become more coherent and relevant (Lei, 2010).

## **METHOD**

In 2009, the University's Chancellor announced that a small neighboring town was requesting university assistance. Located in the mountains of the Carolinas, the community was experiencing numerous business closures and a sharp decline in tourism due to the recent economic downturn. Consequently, a partnership was created to align the University's resources and faculty expertise with the community's needs.

Qualitative methodology was utilized for this research to understand an existing phenomenon experienced in a Hospitality and Tourism Management university program. Since it was a constrained organization (one university) with different contextual conditions (diverse classes), a case study was determined to be the most appropriate qualitative method (McNamara, 2009). According to Demetriou (2009), case studies play a significant role in educational research while McNamara (2009) states it may lead to an in-depth assessment of the effectiveness of a program. A case study also explores how a phenomenon is shaped, with further research addressing actual requirements (Demetriou, 2009).

One result of the partnership was the gradual integration of experiential learning activities into a variety of hospitality and tourism management courses over an eight-year period as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). For this research, it was determined that this would be an embedded single case study with a cap period of eight years and a minimum of two classes per year. More classes were added to establish triangulation during this period. Sources utilized were students, instructors, community members, and professional organizations and information was collected through direct observations, advising one-on-one, student course evaluation comments, and an increase in participation in industry certifications. Likewise, to evaluate the students' immersed and meaningful levels of learning as their level of involvement increased, reflection papers were assigned at the end of each semester to gauge the effects of the experiential learning projects.

## RESULTS

### Phase One

**year 1.** Student learning activities were added to two hospitality and tourism courses. In HT130, Introduction to Hospitality, students were required to attend the community's town hall meetings to hear merchant's and resident's concerns, conduct merchant and resident surveys, evaluate results, and present findings to the community. One student commented in his reflection paper "I think this town still has hope for tourism and these surveys are a good start to monitoring guest feedback." Other reflection papers indicated a solid recognition between the textbook, instructor illustrations, and actuality of the precarious relationships between local rural governments and the hospitality and tourism industry.

In HT 241, Special Events and Festivals, students participated in organizing and implementing the annual four-day Festival of Lights event. In her reflection paper, another student commented: "In setting up the Luminaries in this town, I was able to not only learn many new skills but also apply some of the skills I learned in my college courses to this process". A significant number of reflection papers confirmed the correlation between event planning development and relationship management to produce a viable community event.

**year 2.** Service-learning activities were added to other Hospitality and Tourism management courses. In the course Restaurant Management, HT334, students conducted tourist surveys at various community events. This enabled the students to plan and execute surveys appropriate to the demographics within the tourist region. As reflected in the student papers, the task of surveying involved forgoing preconceived notions of those visiting the area, but instead relied on industry analytics and secondary data to construct the appropriate measure. Yet again, reflection papers indicated a link between the textbook, classroom discussions, and real-world actuality.

Students also planned and worked the Appalachian Growers Fair in HT 436, Tourism Planning and Development. Reflection papers specified the diplomatic association between rural local government, tourism planning and development, and community support. This was described as conversations that were sometimes sensitive, imperious, and even pointless.

**year 3.** To give students a multifaceted learning experience, a two-semester service-learning project was planned. In the fall, the HT241 students constructed an event manual to preserve the legacy for subsequent class. In the spring, the HT436 students completed the manual. By documenting the procedures, policies, associations, and references, it was noted in reflection papers the event would improve with the information readily available for future classmates.

**year 4.** Based on the assessment from student course evaluation comments and reflection papers, it was perceived by the instructors that experiential learning added value to the courses and subsequently, their resume. When presented with the opportunity to add necessary certifications to specific classes (Crowd Control, RASP, and others), instructors and students realized the augmented value to the B.S. degree. This was evident in the reflection papers, advising appointments, and the increase in student participation in certification exams. Therefore, it was determined the program would continue to encompass a required experiential

learning component and include industry certifications in four Hospitality and Tourism Management courses to strengthen student experiential learning and resumes.

## Phase Two

**years 5, 6, & 7.** A partnership was created between Habitat for Humanity (HfH) of the surrounding counties and HT436 to initiate an annual festival in the community to promote tourism and raise HfH awareness. The project-based learning activity spanned two semesters. In the fall, HT241 students introduced festival planning; in the spring, HT436 students finalized plans and implemented the festival. The two semester experiential learning activities provided a deeper learning experience as one student noted “There is a complete difference between seeing an event and actually planning it. There is also a difference between learning what it takes to plan an event and actually be a part of it.” Although the first HfH Bloom and Build festival attendance was small in year 6, the event raised over a thousand dollars in donations. In year 7, the second annual HfH festival continued to grow with increased attendance and donations.

During years 5-7, registration in the HT 241 and HT 436 continued to grow through positive word of mouth feedback. As HT 241 was an elective class, this indicated the desirability of the class directly correlated to the experiential learning component, with the added benefit of the mandatory certification.

## Phase Three

**year 8.** The third HfH Bloom and Build Festival continued to grow with investment in new festival components, increased attendance, and stable donations. As students registered for other HTM classes, instructors were met with frequent questions of the various certification and learning opportunities available. Yet again, these areas were largely addressed in the student reflection papers and course assessments. As a result, industry certifications were incorporated into Club Management, HT336, as a value-added feature. As an area prominent with upscale country clubs and numerous students working in the industry, this was deemed a natural progression in expanding industry certifications for students to add value to their learning and their resumes. Additionally, in HT 336 aligning a student chapter of a professional industry association created further opportunities for experiential learning in terms of field trips, guest speakers, and national conferences. Course assessments, student reflection papers, advising appointments, and certification exam proctoring indicated an increase interest in these opportunities.

To further enrich student learning, a Living Learning Lab was created from the concepts presented in HT 130. Travel and Tourism, HT 238, was re-designed to focus on instructional educational tours. These tours consisted of students researching the industry and location site beforehand, procuring an on-site visit with management/employee interaction and facility tours, and a required executive summary and personal reflection paper. Once more, students indicated the increased experiential learning opportunities created greater satisfaction in learning course materials and understanding the hospitality and tourism industry as specified in course evaluation, advising, and reflection papers.

## DISCUSSION

Through the use of experiential learning, faculty and peers have observed students' increased interest in subject matter, the relationship between tourism and economic development and the potential for experiential learning projects to help support it in rural tourism areas. As signified in student reflection papers, course assessment, and advising, there is a heightened sense of awareness and purpose with students seeking further opportunities to observe, participate, and research.

The next phase is to align the Hospitality and Tourism Management course experiential learning activities with the proposed offering of micro-credentials in Hospitality and Tourism Management courses and the creation of campus-wide Living Learning Laboratory experiences. Micro-credentialing, or digital badging, provides students the opportunity to gain knowledge in skill-specific areas such as event planning, bar and beverage operations, and club management. According to Portfolium (2019) higher educational institutes that do not incorporate digital badging into the curriculum will be outdistanced by other schools. Offering micro-credentialing along with certification and experiential learning promote student success and career readiness.

Utilizing a Living Learning Laboratory approach offers students the opportunity to combine academic instruction with experiential learning through service learning, project-based learning, and instructional educational tours. Living Labs have been known to constitute new or specific sites, partnerships, research opportunities, and strategic planning. For example, Portland State University (2017) utilizes a joint venture between the PSU Campus Sustainability Office, Facilities and Property Management department, and Institute for Sustainable Solutions. Additionally, Princeton University (2017) employs a website to promote the campus as a Living Lab to create a directory of academic research opportunities and sustainability projects. Likewise, the University has initiated a proposal to establish a Living Learning Lab that aligns its 2014 Master Plan with its 2020 Strategic Plan Vision (Bishop, Coburn, Cruz & Whitmore, 2017). Further research on Living Lab startup will be conducted with on-site visits, collaboration with industry partners, and HT Board of Advisors support.

In summary, guided by community support and student feedback from course evaluations and reflection papers, the Hospitality and Tourism Management curriculum was reinforced through a gradual process of aligning industry-related experiential learning projects to highlight specific course content. Industry certifications were introduced as value-added components to reflect the current environment. Students acquired realistic work experience, stronger skill sets through industry certifications, and opportunities to connect course concepts with real-world experience. Furthermore, this community's tourism exposure increased, and university-community relationships were strengthened.

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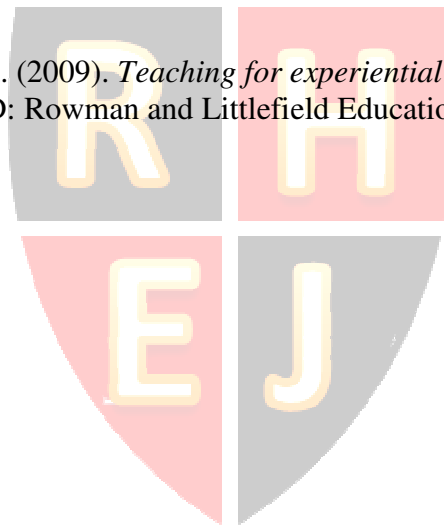
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**APPENDIX**

**Table 1**

Time Line of value-added components incorporated into HT courses

<b>Year:</b>	<b>Course:</b>	<b>EL Activity:</b>
<b>Phase 1</b>		
2009-2010	HT130 Introduction to Hospitality HT241 Festivals & Special Events	SL- Survey SL- Luminaries event workers
2010-2011	HT334 Lodging and Resort Management. HT436 Tourism Planning & Development	SL- Tourist Survey SL- Appalachian Growers Fair
2011-2012	HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT436 Tourism Planning & Development HT337 Meetings & Conventions HT437 Bar & Beverage Operation	SL - Project spans 2 semesters. HT241 (fall); HT436 (spring) SL-Pinnacle Event student consultant SL-Full Spectrum Farm Fundraiser student volunteers
2012-2013	HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT337 Meetings & Conventions HT436 Tourism Planning & Development HT437 Bar & Beverage Operations	EL - Required EL component and industry certifications added to four HT courses.
<b>Phase 2</b>		
2013-2014	HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT337 Meetings & Conventions HT437 Bar & Beverage Operations	EL – Activities adjusted based on student & community feedback. New value-added components offered.
2014-2015	HT241 Festivals & Special Events (fall - initial festival planning) HT436 Tourism Planning & Development (spring - final planning/implementation)	PBL - First annual HfH Bloom & Build Festival. The PBL activity covered two semesters in two courses.
2015-2016	HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT436 Tourism Planning & Development.	PBL - Second annual HfH Bloom and Build Festival
<b>Phase 3</b>		
2016-2017	HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT436 Tourism Planning & Development. HT336 Club Management HT130 Introduction to Hospitality HT238 Tourism	PBL - Third annual HfH Bloom and Build Festival PBL - Industry certification added PBL –Main Campus IET - initiated at satellite campus
2017-2018	HT130 Introduction to Hospitality HT238 Tourism HT241 Festivals & Special Events HT337 Meetings & Conventions HT436 Tourism Planning & Development HT437 Bar & Beverage Operations	LLL - Plans to integrate HT curriculum EL activities into LLL model

EL = Experiential Learning  
 SL = Service Learning  
 PBL=Project-based Learning,  
 IET =Instructional Educational Tours  
 LLL=Living Learning Lab