

Students, studies and styles: an analysis of the learning styles of leisure, tourism and hospitality students studying generic modules

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[The report below is a summary of a longer document. For further details, please contact the authors. In particular, in the interests of brevity, a review of the research on learning styles and also detailed focus group evidence have been edited from this report.]

Background and rationale

The generic module approach

The aim of the research was to investigate the different learning styles of leisure, tourism and hospitality (LTH) students who were studying generic modules. Anecdotal experience of the research team has shown that students on LTH courses have a range of learning styles that influences their overall performance. Within the LTH department generic modules are taught across all the disciplines (i.e. leisure management, tourism management, hospitality management). The nature of these disciplines is such that they are underpinned by core concepts, theories and perspectives that can be learnt by all students. These modules are both crucial in equipping students with the necessary skills to enhance their employability upon graduation and enabling economies of scale to be gained from maximising physical and human teaching resources. However, students embarking on leisure, tourism and hospitality courses are often of a disparate nature and have varied learning needs and styles.

Learning styles

Since we all learn in different ways (Honey and Mumford, 1992), and the differences between individual learners regarding their learning styles are perceived as important in the learning process (Sadler-Smith, 1996), teaching and support staff have a responsibility to identify, be aware of and respond to each student's individual learning style (Briggs, 2000). Lashley (1999:2) suggests the "the design of programmes, lecturer support for students and the delivery of learning experiences all need to be shaped to students' learning preferences...". In his study considering hospitality management education Lashley (1999) also states that if educators are to meet objectives to achieve general standards of gradueness they need to understand the students' learning preferences.

Studies conducted by the Nottingham Trent University and Leeds Metropolitan University suggest that hospitality management students "have strong preferences to learn from concrete, action based situations. These tendencies are so strong that, if not addressed, they can create difficulties in the development of reflection and theorising" (Lashley, 1999:2). Thus, Lashley (1999) argues that in an endeavour to meet the needs of industry, "reflective practitioners" need to be developed.

The research

To enable a comparison of results with Lashley's study, Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) was used to initially diagnose the learning styles of leisure, tourism and hospitality students. The LSQ was distributed in the first three weeks of semester one to levels 1, 2 and 3 leisure, tourism and hospitality students studying generic modules. The questionnaires were completed in the taught sessions. Some difficulties were found in this process, including the comprehension of questions by international students, the length and time consuming nature of the questionnaire and the influence of peers when answering the questions. The data was analysed using SPSS.

The results found that generally LTH students all have strong reflector style tendencies. This counters previous research by Lashley (1999) who found that hospitality students are predominantly activist in their approach. However, there are differences in learning styles between the different cohorts of students as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 – Preferred Learning Style by Course

Course	Preferred Learning Style
Leisure	Reflector pragmatist
Tourism	Reflector theorist
Hospitality	Reflector activist

This, to some extent, confirms the anecdotal evidence that acted as the original motivation for the project. However, due to the marginal differences in learning styles between courses, the research project team felt it necessary to further explore learner preferences through a series of focus group discussions. Consequently five focus group interviews with students from across the LTH programmes were conducted. The focus groups were selected from the different cohort levels and were gender mixed. Students were questioned on their thoughts on the use of generic modules and also their experience of the learning, teaching and assessment approaches adopted across the respective modules and courses. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The outcomes

(Detailed student data from the focus groups has been edited from this section. Please contact the authors for further details)

The focus group discussions around generic modules produced some enlightening research data. To begin with students are adept at reflecting on their own learning and the learning of others. This would appear to confirm the findings of the questionnaire survey that students have strong reflector style tendencies. The research found mixed opinions. Some students perceive generic modules as enhancing their learning experience and giving them the opportunity to gain new experiences from different subject areas, while other students find generic modules negatively impact upon their learning experiences as the following comments illustrate:

“when you're with people from hospitality and tourism and you're discussing things, they bring different examples...when you're in a leisure module and it's just leisure people it's always an example of leisure... but when its different examples, like tourism, you look at it at a different angle”

“you get to meet new people, whereas if you're just in a leisure group or a tourism group you just get the same people all the time...whereas you get to meet other people and you get to know their different backgrounds and culture that you might not if you were with just leisure”

“I think there’s sometimes like a clash of interests in what you do...you’re going to have tourism people, hospitality people and leisure people and if someone in hospitality is interested in going into the hotel industry and someone in leisure is more interested in recreation then there’s two aspects in what you aim to do, going completely in different directions”

However, students do clearly identify with their cohort of students and the cultural norms that prevail with that cohort. Indeed, students have a heightened sense of the “other” when identifying with different cohorts of students:

“It’s quite fascinating to see the different types of people and different courses...you definitely can go in a room and you know who’s a leisure student and you know who’s a tourism student”

Different learning behaviours

From the focus group research, different types of learning behaviours were apparent. These were not necessarily unique to individuals themselves but were apparent in the responses that the students gave and the approach they take towards their learning. These learning behaviours have been classified into four different learning approaches: activist, instrumentalist, autonomous and perplexed.

• The Activist Learner

Activist learners like to be actively engaged in their learning. Activist learners prefer learning and teaching strategies that offer them a “hands-on” approach to their studies and have opportunities to engage in practical and vocational experiences. A typical activist learner comment illustrates this:

“last year, all hospitality had a one year placement...we can really learn in a placement and so it helps on this year’s assignments”

Activist learners are not receptive to a didactic approach to learning and teaching, which affects the student’s motivation to learn:

“The one I enjoyed there was a lot of lecturer-student communication. It wasn’t how most of the lectures go where someone talks and you listen. There was a lot of put your hands up and ask questions and giving relevant examples to what the lecturer meant in the outside world”

Activist learners prefer tutors who take an activist approach to their learning and teaching strategies and with whom they can easily communicate and relate. Activist learners can clearly differentiate between the teaching approaches and styles of different lecturers and this has a big impact upon their learning. Such learners also express a preference towards more interactive modes of assessment, particularly presentations.

“I think it helps if you know the lecturers and get on with them, it’s like if you don’t know who they are, you find it quite hard to understand what they’re saying.”

“With one of my lectures last semester, I had a man for the first four weeks, it was brilliant what we did, it was great and then we had a student teacher for about 3 weeks and it was awful because it was all text book, word for word. Then he came back and it was brilliant again and it showed the difference between the two because we had PowerPoint, we had videos, hand-outs and it made it made it a lot more interesting”

• The Instrumentalist Learner

One of the major findings of the focus group research was the instrumentalist approach that students took to their learning. Though not exclusively, this was particularly the case at level three and amongst the male students who had become adept at “playing the system” and knew how to “get the grades”. This type of learner has devised the process to attain their given goal/objective and this approach predominately exhibits itself in the type and format of assessment students prefer.

“Presentations...because you can do the work in a day and get a good grade”

"Everyone can work to their sheets, if say he isn't very good at getting up and speaking then they can do the introduction where you only have to do 2 minutes and introduce it"

Instrumentalist learners are grade driven. When asked what students focus on when their assessed work is returned, it is almost always the end grade. Hence instrumentalist learners prefer those modules that are directed towards the achievement of the end assessment.

"the fact that like I look at my grades and see what I've got and half of the time I don't really pay attention to the feedback if it's like been a grade that I've wanted...sometimes I don't even read it."

"we're here to get grades. If you look at it, most people come to Uni probably not to learn 100%, they want to get a good grade to get a good job, their employer to see that grade...so hopefully they have good careers"

The selection of modules can influence the instrumentalist learner in their pursuit of the most straightforward way to achieve a desired grade. The research also revealed that instrumentalist learners are motivated by the "stick" approach to learning. That is they are driven by deadlines and like to fully understand the consequences of not completing an assessed piece of work.

• The Autonomous Learner

Creating the independent learner is hotly debated topic amongst the academic community. This research would suggest that students can demonstrate independence in their learning and use this to further their understanding of the subject matter. This is particularly the case at level three where arguably students have become adept at understanding what is required as illustrated by the discussion of the "instrumentalist learner".

"I was the one with the highest in the class and I didn't attend the lecture...I know it's quite disturbing that I got the highest in the class...for me it was motivation... if I went to lectures I wouldn't have got that grade, I definitely wouldn't have done".

Learners can also be autonomous in the way they learn from feedback and who they discuss their feedback with which was described by one focus group member as "a girlie thing". That is, it is often girls who will discuss between themselves their grades and feedback comments.

"I reckon sometimes the way it's worded can be like one teacher last semester, it was worded in a way that you could see like what you needed to add into it or what you could add in the next assignment to make it better"

Autonomous learners also like other learners to be committed to their studies. However, it is not the case that all learners are autonomous. Some recognise that they find learning a chore and need to be motivated to learn.

"sometimes you don't want to do the activities because if people go home and I've just sat here for half an hour in lectures and half of my the group have gone home, what was the point in me staying, I may as well have gone home and caught the last of Des and Mel in the afternoon!"

"like one module at the moment, I've got loads to do and now I've got an exam and it's, suddenly I need a kick up the backside"

• The Perplexed Learner

Although some learners can be adept at understanding how to get grades and to "play the system", for others it can be confusing. This is particularly the case for the grades achieved and the feedback given. The following comments illustrate the feelings of the perplexed learner and their wish to be guided in how they can improve their learning ability particularly when it comes to feedback:

"It's funny how the ones that I really, really, really try on, I ended up getting the worst grades but I can then do an essay... and get a top B or a C"

“a lecturer might say I got a good point in there and say it’s referencing for one and then I go to another module and I do referencing exactly the same they’ll put me down on that”

“Even though it was an exam, she actually went over the average grade and where we did wrong and she was a bit disappointed that no one mentioned this thing as we did it in class. And you thought yeah fair enough, we did forget that...I did find that helpful”.

Benefits

The research has provided a better understanding of the different learning approaches of leisure, tourism and hospitality students. Though the initial learning styles questionnaire revealed few significant differences between students and courses studied, the subsequent focus groups offered an insight into the learning behaviours of students. This illustrated some marked differences in learning behaviours across disciplines. This is largely due to the gender bias of particular courses, which to some extent has influenced the outcome of the research.

A number of benefits can be derived from the project. Firstly, when designing programmes, generic modules should be used in moderation to enable students to learn the common concepts and theories and to gain from the shared experiences and perspectives of other students. Generic modules should not dominate the respective subject discipline and students should be able to identify clearly with the core subject they are studying. Where possible, workshop groups should be discipline-focused to enable students to understand the application of the core principles to their subject context. This will also encourage the transferability of learning skills to vocational arenas and thus develop “reflective practitioners” that meet the needs of industry (Lashley 1999).

Secondly, a range of learning and teaching strategies need to be developed that address the needs of a diverse array of students who have different learning behaviours. Though didactic methods are often used for lecture situations, this research has highlighted that didactic methods do not simulate the majority of learners. Activist learners engage with hands-on activities and demand opportunities where this can take place. It is also important that lecturers “get to know” their students better and create a learning environment where a flow of communication is facilitated. Students will then be more receptive to the learning objectives that are being achieved. Indeed, there needs to be greater consistency in teaching methods and approaches amongst lecturing staff as students can clearly differentiate between different teaching styles and what they like and dislike. A working environment where learning and teaching practices can be shared will enhance this level of consistency amongst teaching staff. This research also confirms the findings of Ottewill (2003) that instrumentalism is a feature of the higher education system. Students need to be informed of the intrinsic value of learning as opposed to merely achieving a desired goal. However, the outcome driven philosophy and culture of modern day higher education underpinned by quality benchmarks and assurance processes can make this difficult to convey. The research has also highlighted how some learners need further guidance and support on understanding their learning processes and expectations. The personal tutoring and personal development planning will enable students to understand what they are achieving and set benchmarks for future learning achievements. Indeed, the project findings suggest that students are increasingly consumerist in their approach to their learning expectations. Students know what they want to achieve and what they need to do to achieve the desired outcome. They therefore demand that the education they receive enables them to achieve these desired outcomes.

Evaluation

The research has found that students demonstrate strong reflection skills on their own learning ability and the learning of others. This research reiterates the shortcomings of Honey and Mumford’s (1992) LSQ as it could be argued that the LSQ tool, though useful

in determining individual learning characteristics, fails to understand the behavioural processes that students engage in when studying. Though the study has enlightened the research team to the learning approaches of LTH students, the gender bias on particular courses could have skewed the empirical data. A wider sample of students from across the LTH programmes would enable these differences to be explored further. It has to be acknowledged that this research is localised to the University of Wolverhampton students studying LTH programmes and cannot be generalised across other programmes of study both in this institution and externally. To offer further validity, further research would need to be conducted to see if these learning behaviours and approaches were representative of other related and unrelated courses at the University of Wolverhampton and the wider HE sector.

Future developments

The project has enabled a greater understanding of the learning approaches of LTH students and will inform the development of the departments' learning and teaching strategies. Further research could be conducted into the learning approaches of a wider sample of students on LTH programmes. As instrumentalist learning behaviour was clearly apparent amongst many of the students it would be interesting to explore whether this is merely a feature of "vocational" degrees or is also apparent amongst students studying traditional "academic" qualifications (e.g. sociology, philosophy etc). It could also be argued that this type of learning behaviour is a product of the way the higher education system is structured in terms of the achievement of learning outcomes. This is an area that is worthy of further research. A future research project could also involve a longitudinal analysis of student learning behaviour, exploring how students' learning behaviour develops throughout the duration of their studies and whether any changes in learning behaviour take place.

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