How can experiential learning contribute to students’ understanding of the link between theory and practice?

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Abstract
The theory of experiential learning has been used in higher education during the past 3-4 decades as a dynamic theory that is built on Kolb’s learning cycle. Overall, the theory is based on converting learners’ experiences to knowledge through reflection in 4 steps. In this paper we analyse the use of experiential learning in a workshop, which is part of the module ‘Industry Knowledge’ and included in the Academy Profession Degree in Service, Hospitality and Tourism at Lillebaelt Academy. This paper points out some benefits of using experiential learning in the learning process, as a tool to get a better understanding and knowledge by the students of what is needed to perform better service and hostmanship in the service industry. The paper also points out some suggestions for improvements in order to optimize the learning outcome.

Keywords
Experiential learning, tourism education, learning cycle, hostmanship, student motivation, service industry


**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to discuss, if the use of experiential learning at the Academy Profession Degree in Service, Hospitality and Tourism Management (AP Degree), Lillebaelt Academy in Denmark, can improve the students’ understanding of how service theory can be applied in practice and assist in improving their future performance in the service industry.

The purpose of applying experiential learning is to make students more involved and thereby potentially increase the learning outcome as well as the student motivation (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016:159). The paper’s point of departure is a specific learning situation - called the Hostmanship workshop, in which the learning objective is to give the students a thorough understanding of the host-guest relationship. A good host is able to identify and meet the key drivers of the guests - their needs, wants, and expectations, and high-performing service organisations are those organisations that focus intensely on the key drivers (Ford, Sturman, & Heaton, 2012:477; Fottler, Ford, & Heaton, 2009:30).

In recent years, tourism education has changed its focus into equipping graduates with a new set of skills in order for them to be innovative, creative and able to stage experiences (Morgan, 2004:91). Co-creation is essential, when making experiences memorable (Sørensen & Jensen, 2015:338), and with the purpose of teaching the students how to co-create as well as for the Hostmanship workshop to be memorable itself, we have applied the basic principles of co-creation. This choice is supported by research findings, which states that the student satisfaction is improved, when co-creation is used in higher education (Elsharnouby, 2015:244; Ribes-Giner, Perello-Már, & Díaz, 2016:74). Research also indicates that when students consider themselves co-producers of knowledge/education, they agree to take responsibility for their own learning, and the learning outcome is much more successful than if the students did not actively participate (Elsharnouby, 2015:244). A better learning
outcome increases satisfaction, and since satisfied students are more likely to co-operate as well as to give feedback, this development represents a positive spiral (Elsharnouby, 2015:247).

**Background**

Historically seen, teaching has been focusing on passing on information and knowledge from teacher to student, and there has been an assumption that the more knowledge the better the teaching. In recent years the role of the teacher has changed and can be seen as similar to that of a facilitator or moderator, and the focus has shifted towards learning rather than teaching (Niemi, 2009:1). This also means that learning is now more about teachers providing the tools to problem solving rather than offering the solutions to students - according to Niemi, it means ‘empowering people through learning’ (Niemi, 2009:1). It is no longer a matter of instructing the students, but rather to create an environment, in which the students are able to discover and construct knowledge, and the teacher is no longer simply instructor and possessor of knowledge and the students no longer the ones to receive instruction and knowledge, but rather that all are seen as learners (Fear et al., 2003:152). In different social perspective theories, the theorists all assume that learning is the result of social interaction (Niemi, 2009:2), which means that learning is part of a social context, and that knowledge develops from the participation in social activities (Reynolds, Sinatra, & Jetton, 1996).

Not only the role of the teacher has changed, but also the perspective in tourism education from a focus in the 20th century on developing service skills and business competencies to include the need today for ethical and moral skills as well (Dredge et al., 2015:340). Originally, tourism education was designed as specific training courses with a production-line approach for industry professionals, but due to a need to formally educate potential managers
for the tourism sector, the courses grew to include undergraduate and postgraduate education (Morgan, 2004:91-93). According to Morgan (Morgan), this means that tourism education is now more facilitating a process, in which the student learns and develops the skills needed in the industry (Morgan, 2004:93).

Even though learning is often defined as a change in behaviour (Barron et al., 2015:406; De Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013:631), for our purpose we chose to use the definition of learning as an active individual process, where the knowledge base is constructed by each student individually (Niemi, 2009:2).

Another issue to consider is the shift in the global economy from services to experiences, which has made it necessary for business executives to consider new options in order to create value for their customers (Pine II & Gilmore, 2014:24). This shift has encouraged the transformation from giving good service to customers to being good hosts for guests (Boswijk, Peelen, & Olthof, 2012). The guest-host relation is in literature often referred to as hospitality (Brotherton, 1999:166), but we choose to use the definition ‘hostmanship’ by the Swedish organization Värdskapet (Värdskapet AB, 2007:8), where hostmanship is defined as ‘the art of making people feel welcome’ (Värdskapet AB, 2007:8) – i.e. treating customers as guests. As a consequence of the increased importance of the guest-focus, Lillebaelt Academy has included hostmanship in the curriculum for service, hospitality and tourism education at the academy.

**The learning experiment**

*Experiential Learning*
The concept of Experiential Learning was first suggested by David A. Kolb and Ronald Fry in 1974 (Kolb & Fry, 1975), and in 1984 expressed as ‘knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb, 1984:38), and later on a more modern definition was suggested by Patrick Felicia as ‘learning through reflection on doing’ (Felicia, 2011:1003), and as such related to other forms of active learning; e.g. action-learning and service-learning (Itin, 1999:91-92). These types of learning are striving to directly involve the students in the learning process (Bonwell & Eison, 1991:9), which is also the goal of the Hostmanship workshop. Experiential Learning is a very old approach to achieve the best way of learning. Aristotle in 350 BC said ‘For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them’ (Callan, 1988:144). In modern times, David A. Kolb developed an updated perception of Experiential Learning, which focuses on the individual learning process and in 1984 he suggested a four-step Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984:42):

![Figur 1: Theory model of Kolb’s experiential learning (Kolb, 1984:42)](image)

Since Kolb first launched his idea about experiential learning in 1984, the world has changed a lot and so have the school system and the teachers and students within it. But some critics
argue that sometimes, and maybe most times, the 4 stages happen randomly and sometimes at the same time (Jeffs & Smith, 2005). This means that when you have a larger group, you can’t control at which stages the students start, and when the stages happen, and it might cause confusion regarding the very important stage of reflection. If the students reflect at different times during the classes and the learning process, this might result in bad cooperation during group work, as the students learn from each other by discussing their experiences and reflections (Jeffs & Smith, 2005). Other authors criticise Kolb, because his model does not take into account that there are at least three different dimensions of how we learn; Cognitive, Emotional and Social (Illeris, 2004). Furthermore, Kolb does not consider that in a classroom the students represent different learning styles; e.g. Visual, Aural, Verbal, Physical, Logical, Social and Solitary (Rogers, 1996:110).

The Experiential Learning Model has been further developed by Kolb, by adding different learning styles to it: feeling-watching - they are diverging; watching-thinking - they are assimilating; doing-thinking - they are converging; and doing-feeling - they are accommodating (Kolb & Kolb, 2005:203; Kolb, David A. & Kolb, 2008:6).

We, the authors, recognize the criticism, but believes that if these critical arguments of Kolb’s experiential learning, is taken into account when we plan the process of the workshop, it will make Kolb’s theory more valuable.

**Hostmanship Workshop**

The Hostmanship workshop is part of the module ‘Industry Knowledge’ for the new students at the AP Degree (Lillebaelt Academy, 2016). ‘Industry Knowledge’ is a start-up module that in 3 weeks introduces the students to the service and tourism industry, because the
understanding of service is central for the whole AP Degree and their future employment in the service industry. The main aim of the Hostmanship Workshop is to let the students work with hospitality, service design and implementation of service concepts as well as supply them with tools to understand the difference between bad service, good service and hostmanship. In this context, Hostmanship is based on the definition by Värdskapet (Värdskapet AB, 2007:8).

The workshop starts with a general introduction to the service industry. Based on their own experiences and previous case studies, the students then have to define the differences between bad service, good service and hostmanship. The students work in groups across classes - a combination of Danish and international students. Furthermore, they are introduced to different tools in order for them to work actively with hostmanship, from both staff and guest perspective. Small assignments are included in the workshop with the purpose of letting the students get accustomed to working with the tools and theories and relating them to practice. The last half of the workshop is dedicated to field studies, where the students are told to identify and analyse different kinds of service experiences and hostmanship examples in companies of their own choice. Included in the field study is a task of preparing an illustration of the findings and experiences in the shape of a big drawing or cartoon that tells their story about how they experienced hostmanship in different situations during the field studies. The workshop ends with a vernissage, where the students present their drawing or cartoon to their fellow students.

The workshop design is based on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (see fig. 1), and the four steps in the model can be explained as follows: In step 1, the learner is having a Concrete Experience, e.g. hostmanship or bad service. This will, in step 2, be followed by observation
of and reflection on this concrete experience (Reflective Observation). In step 3, the learner will analyse and conclude (Abstract Conceptualisation) on the experience, if it was good or bad, thereby learn from the experience and by that, make up a conclusion of what hostmanship is. This will lead to step 4, where the learner will test this conclusion in other situations or experiences, which will result in a new experience (Concrete Experience) and then the circle will be complete. Literature points out that the learner can enter the circle at any point, but in order for the learning to be effective, the learner has to complete all four stages of the model (Chan, 2012:406). So Kolb and Fry (1975) views the stages of the model as integrated processes, where each stage is equally supportive to and leading into the next stage (Kolb, 1984:42).

As explained above, Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model has been developed further by adding different individual learning styles. But during the planning of the workshop we chose not to use the extended model - partly because this was not the purpose of the workshop, and partly because it would have demanded much more time than was available to perform the tests of each individual participants in order to identify their individual learning styles. Instead we decided to use Kolb’s more overall conception of experiential learning that focuses on transforming experiences into knowledge (Kolb, 1984:38). The reflection stage is considered the most important part of the process, because it is here the emotional and cognitive mechanism mediate the students performance outcomes (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2014:26-28).

**Results and discussion**

The purpose of the workshop was to give the new AP Degree students in service, hospitality and tourism at Lillebaelt Academy a thorough understanding of hostmanship, and to illustrate
what constitutes the difference between good service and hostmanship by the use of experiential learning. Furthermore, an additional learning objective was to provide the students with an understanding of how the education in general and the knowledge of hostmanship in particular provide the students with important vocational skills. The use of experiential learning was intended to improve the learning outcome of the workshop as well as to increase the students’ engagement and motivation during the workshop.

The workshop was evaluated verbally with the students at the end of the day, and the module ‘Industry Knowledge’, including the workshop, was evaluated as well at the end of the three weeks by the use of a short standard questionnaire applied at all teaching modules at Lillebaelt Academy. Approx. 120 students participated in the workshop, but unfortunately, only a few of them were willing to share their experiences in the plenary evaluation. This can be due to different reasons, which we did not have the possibility to look into, but since the workshop is held at an early stage of the education, based on previous experience we are well aware that some students might still be uncomfortable with speaking in plenum or in a different language than their native language, and this affects the quality of the responses negatively. Furthermore, the workshop was not evaluated specifically, but instead included as a part of the overall evaluation of the module, and only when students made specific comments about the workshop, we were able to learn about their opinions. Similar to difficulties often experienced in tourism research, where the validity and reliability of data is influenced by people’s behaviour and attitudes (Veal, 2011:46), our data used are challenged by several factors. Even though a standard questionnaire is used for evaluating the module at each first semester, the students’ responses are affected by e.g. the composition of the class, the team of teachers, the university facilities (Lillebaelt Academy moved to a brand new campus in September 2016), and the other parts of the module. The reliability of our data is
therefore not high, as it is impossible to repeat the evaluation under the same circumstances next time. Furthermore, the teachers’ experiences will also affect the reliability negatively, as the experience from one workshop will be build into the next similar to the development in the hermeneutical spiral (Holm, 2013:96), and the starting point for each workshop will therefore be different. The validity of the responses to the questionnaire is low as well, since we have used a standardised questionnaire, which is not focusing on the workshop specifically, but the module in general. Despite the above-mentioned limitations we have chosen to use the comments from the students regarding the workshop, as this after all will give us a better starting point for planning the next workshop.

One student responded:

‘Information was adapted to the current hospitality environment, both in Denmark and internationally. The mixed class (Hostmanship workshop) we had with the Danish students was very interesting and challenging.’

Other comments were:

‘The workshop was fun and relevant. I liked that we worked so much in groups and that all classes were together’

‘We were too many students for the workshop, and the schedule was very tight’

‘It was cool to attend a course, where the focus was on getting to know each other and to learn how to be the best student. Cool topics with focus on learning the service trade’

‘The timetable for the classes in Hostmanship was a bit too tight - I would have liked to work more into depth with the subject’

‘Besides, I liked that we didn’t just have ordinary classes, but were told to go and find places, where we could meet experience economy ourselves’
'I had been looking forward to the Hostmanship workshop, but I was a bit disappointed, as I felt that our assignments required a more detailed follow-up.'

Comments were both positive and negative, but even though we were not able to generalise due to the low response rate, it seemed that the international students were more likely to give positive feedback than the Danish students. In addition to the students’ comments, we made our own observations during the workshop, and it was clear that some of the students engaged actively in the different steps of the model, but others decided to take a more passive role, which is consistent with Kolb’s different learning styles (Kolb, 1984:42).

One distinct observation we made was that when the students had to transform the experience they had during the field study into a drawing or cartoon, many of them were able to create a link between what they learned in the classroom and their own hostmanship experiences as part of the field study. This is a clear example of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model, where the students transform experience into knowledge, and thereby develop their own perception of what good hostmanship means (Kolb, 1984:42). The most important stage here is the reflection stage.

At the end of the workshop, it was clearly evident that the most useful learning experience was obtained from the field studies, not in class. In the field, the students could observe how hostmanship was working in real time and at the same time, they were connecting their own knowledge to what they saw and experienced, and finally transformed it into new knowledge as described in stage 2 and 3 in Kolb’s model (Kolb, 1984:42). Due to the lack of student responses, our conclusion is primarily based on our own observations. Both the responses we received as well as our observations made it clear that the workshop was not totally a success.
We planned the workshop based on the principles of Experiential Learning, but we did not allow for the students to be an active part of the planning, so the methods and theories were chosen by us and therefore not necessarily the best option seen from the students’ perspective. In retrospect, we were too ambitious when designing the program, which made the schedule very tight. We also failed to ensure that the students were prepared for experiential learning and therefore felt the resistance to active group work that was also experienced by Tomkins at a student seminar (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016:162). The workshop was successful, though, in the sense that the students obtained a clear understanding of hostmanship. It was also successful in enabling the students to see a connection between the theory of hostmanship and its applicability in the service industry, so the main objectives of the workshop were fulfilled. The result of the workshop would most likely have been different, if we had incorporated Kolb’s different learning styles in the preparation phase in order to obtain more knowledge of the students and enable us to act accordingly.

Based solely on the students’ evaluations, we are not fully able to meet the aim of this paper, as the response from the students did not reflect if the students’ achieved a better understanding of how service theory can be applied in practice. We were able to observe, though, that the students through the taught service theory, their practical experience and reflection upon the experience combined with their previous knowledge gave them a new perspective on hostmanship, and how it is performed. The improved understanding was visible at the vernissage that ended the workshop.

**Future research**

It was decided by the authors of this paper not to include any thoughts on cultural differences - both the fundamental differences in cultures, but also differences more specifically in relation to the use of teaching methods. In the Hostmanship workshop exemplified above both
international and Danish students participate, and therefore it would be highly relevant to include the cultural aspect in further studies, as we expect culture to affect the outcome. According to Hofstede, problems in the teacher-student relation can originate from four areas (Hofstede, 1986:303), and these areas need to be taken into consideration when planning learning activities for a mix of Danish and international students.

The workshop is held during the first few weeks of the AP Degree, and the international students have presumably not, at this early stage, adapted to the Danish form of studying, which might be different from their home countries. We expect that past school experiences influence the behaviour of international students in a Danish classroom, and what might be interpreted as lack of interest and engagement is more likely a sign of respect and a willingness to listen (Lin, 2006:67), but further research would be needed.

It also needs to be investigated, if the choice of language is an issue for the Danish-speaking students, since the workshop - obviously - is held in English. The workshop might be perceived as a threat to their egos and images, since some of them are afraid that their English skills are not sufficient, and therefore the emotional part of learning has a huge influence on the participation and the learning outcome (Niemi, 2009:2-3). Knowledge can be viewed from different angles - depending on the student’s background, and information is interpreted according to that background (Niemi, 2009:7), which obviously has an impact on the learning outcome.

Furthermore, it has to be researched further, whether experiential learning is the most suitable learning method for the workshop. In this context it would be very interesting also to look into Kolb’s four learning styles, which will have an impact of how the students approach the
reflection upon their experiences, when they are transforming the experiences into knowledge. Therefore, it would be relevant to test the student’s learning style as part of the workshop. At the same time, it would be relevant to explore, how the students experience this type of experiential learning, and one useful method would be to do focus group interviews before and after the project.

References


