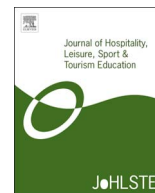


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Critical Perspectives

The role of digital technology in tourism education: A case study of South African secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how Information and Communication Technology (ICT) supports tourism teaching in South African secondary schools. The researchers conducted an in-depth case study with 24 participants. An analysis reveals that teachers recognise ICT as essential in exposing students to the tourism industry. This is especially the case in under-resourced schools, where learners do not have the financial means to participate in tourism activities. However, ICT is still limited in its integration as a pedagogical support tool. The major obstacles toward integration include: technology anxiety, lack of training, availability of resources, and learner resistance to use their personal mobile devices.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is often introduced as a subject in formal education curricula because of the significant economic contribution of the tourism industry to the private and public sectors. This is especially the case in emerging economies in Asia and Africa (Cuffy, Tribe, & Airey, 2012; Hsu, 2015; Mayaka & Akama, 2015). The setting for this study is South Africa, an emerging/developing country with a growing tourism industry. According to the [World Travel and Tourism Council \(2015\)](#), the total contribution of travel and tourism to South Africa's GDP in 2014 was 9.4%; a figure estimated to increase to 10.4% by 2025. Moreover, travel and tourism in the country now accounts for 9.9% of total employment (1,497,500 jobs) and is expected to increase to 11.5% by 2025 (WTTC, 2015). According to the South African Department of Tourism, the country welcomed a record number of foreign tourists in 2013 (10 million visitors): a 4.7% increase compared to the previous year. South Africa reports a much higher tourist arrival growth (7.4%) compared to the global average (4.5%) for the period between 2011 and 2013 (South African Tourism, 2014).

Ultimately, tourism in South Africa is recognised as a key economic sector with potential for continuous growth. With its multi-sectoral supply chain, tourism is considered one of the most important sources of job creation in the country. Tourism growth in South Africa therefore demands a skilled and professional workforce. This implies that the local workforce should be aware of the nature and role of tourism, and should be able to evaluate its potential critically. Various strategies could be initiated to raise tourism awareness (Van Niekerk & Saayman, 2013); one of them is the introduction of tourism as a school

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subject. At secondary level, tourism has been widely introduced at schools throughout South Africa since 2000.

Furthermore, coupled with the widespread impact of the South African tourism industry, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)¹ has rapidly penetrated the public sectors of the country. ICT affords novel opportunities for social and economic development, and this has especially been observed in the fields of both tourism and education (Anwar, Carmody, Surborg, & Corcoran, 2014; Vandeyar, 2015). Yet, the many uses and implications of ICT for tourism education in South Africa are unclear and under-theorised as a research area (Adukaite, Van Zyl, & Cantoni, 2016; Adukaite & Cantoni, 2016). Tourism education alone warrants sufficient research attention. For these reasons, the authors undertook a qualitative case study to determine the extent to which ICT supports tourism education in South African high schools. Additionally, the authors aimed to identify the barriers of ICT integration in tourism education. The study was designed as an exploratory analysis, based on 24 in-depth interviews with high school tourism teachers (n = 19), as well as tourism subject planners and advisors at the governmental level (n = 5).

The following sections present the research context, with specific focus on tourism education as well as ICT integration in the South African education system. The authors then present their theoretical framework and methodology, followed by a discussion of the most significant findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn, before stating some limitations, policy implications, and future research directions.

2. Context

2.1. Tourism as a high school subject in South Africa

With the advent of constitutional democracy in 1994, the South African government gradually introduced more practical and vocationally oriented subjects such as Tourism, Hospitality, Business Studies, Agriculture, Information Technology and related subjects for grades 10, 11 and 12. Post-apartheid South Africa lacked skilled human resources and faced major unemployment; more vocationally oriented high school subjects were expected to help address such issues (Chili, 2013). Furthermore, tourism as a subject was expected to stimulate domestic as well as international tourism markets. This was because tourism awareness would be created among both students and their parents. Indeed, children can play an important role in the travel decision making process within a family (Van Niekerk & Saayman, 2013). Pilot studies had been introduced in several schools as early as 1996, but gradual roll out at the national level happened from 2000 onwards (Umalusi, 2014).

Since 2000, tourism as a subject has seen significant growth in terms of the number of schools where it is taught, as well as the number of learners selecting it. The subject has grown from 120 schools and 2968 learners in 2000 to 2887 schools and 118,904 grade 12 learners in 2014 (Umalusi, 2014). To date, tourism is one of the most popular electives in high schools: up to 20% of all high school students select the subject (Allais, 2014). Furthermore, tourism is taught in all types of schools: from well-resourced private schools to under-resourced rural and township schools, even if it was expected that the subject would mainly benefit learners from (previously) disadvantaged communities (Shalem & Allais, 2014).

Tourism is an elective subject and is taught through grades 10–12, for four hours per week. Ten main topics are covered in the three years: (1) Tourism Sectors, (2) Map Work and Tour Planning, (3) Tourism Attractions, (4) Culture and Heritage, (5) Green Tourism, (6) Foreign Exchange, (7) Tourism Trends, (8) Communication and Customer Care, (9) Regional and Domestic tourism, and (10) Marketing of Tourism Products. Moreover, the subject involves a practical project (Practical Assessment Task or PAT), which makes up 25% of the final certification mark. The National Department of Basic Education requires that the host school supplies the learners with necessary textbooks, maps, brochures and travel magazines in the classroom. Tourism teachers are requested to have access to internet resources in order to keep up with dynamic industry developments. The Department also recommends access to audio-visual resources and computers (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

2.2. Academic research on tourism education in South African high schools

There is limited academic research on tourism education in South African high schools (Chili, 2013, 2014; Kuze, 2013; Pawson, 2002; Punt, 2010; Van Niekerk & Saayman, 2013; Van Niekerk, 2004). According to Chili (2013: 34), there is a “total disquiet with a particular literature in South African tourism education in schools. [...] it's so scarce that it's an area for concern [...]”.

Van Niekerk and Saayman (2013) conducted a controlled experiment with two high school student groups: the research group contained students and parents that had tourism as a subject, while in the control group, no students or parents had the subject. Results indicated that the travel patterns of families with children studying tourism were influenced; moreover, students who opted for the subject were likely to pursue a career in the travel and tourism sector. Chili (2013, 2014) conducted qualitative research with principals, teachers and learners from South African township schools. He observed a

¹ While there are some variations of the term, we use it interchangeably with digital technology, to refer to the array of electronic technologies that afford rapid information transfer and multimodal communication.

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