

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste

Critical perspectives

Teacher interventions in a problem-based hospitality management programme

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 February 2016

Received in revised form

29 July 2016

Accepted 1 August 2016

Keywords:

Problem-based learning
Learner-oriented approach to teaching
Tutor interventions
Tutor style
Teacher identity

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to investigate to what extent tutor interventions in a problem-based learning environment are in line with a learner-oriented approach to teaching. Using extensive observations, this study demonstrated that the seven tutors in our sample apply predominantly teacher-oriented interventions. There was limited evidence that the seven tutors challenged and encouraged students to diagnose, monitor and evaluate their own learning strategies. The findings suggest that a number of actions need to be undertaken to stimulate tutors to apply more learner-oriented interventions. The developed observation instrument can support tutors to gain insight into their tutor interventions.

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1. Introduction

To cope with the complex and rapid changes in their future profession, hotel management students should develop conceptual and analytical competencies (Otting, Zwaal, & Gijsselaers, 2009). Students have to acquire skills to apply various learning and thinking strategies to contribute to the development of innovative hospitality concepts (Association Dutch Hotel Management Schools, 2011). Next to these learning and thinking strategies, other competencies are required to be successful in the hospitality industry. Suh, West, and Shin (2012) invited hospitality managers to rank the most important skills for future hospitality managers. Professional skills like listening, tolerance for change, openness to new ideas, personal integrity, interaction with superiors, peers and guests were ranked as most important.

The conventional teacher-oriented approaches to teaching are focused on knowledge transmission, on knowledge reproduction and on individual learning, which makes them less suitable for the development of competencies that hospitality students need in the 21st century (Otting et al., 2009). A learner-oriented approach to teaching seems more appropriate to support students to engage in a higher order of learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 2004). This approach to teaching focuses on self-directed learning skills, knowledge building and collaborative learning and enables students to integrate hospitality-specific knowledge building with various learning strategies (Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010; Chng, Yew, & Schmidt, 2011; Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2008; Savery, 2006). Experiential, situated, inquiry-based, project-based, team-based and problem-based learning are examples within a learner-oriented approach to teaching (Valcke, 2010).

This study focuses on problem-based learning (PBL). PBL is an excellent example of a learner-oriented approach to

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teaching (Dolmans, De Grave, Wolfhagen, & Van der Vleuten, 2005; Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006) and stimulates the development of higher order learning and skills (Hung, 2015). The starting point of PBL is a real-life problem derived from the hospitality industry. Contextualisation of the problem enables students to link theory to practice (Zwaal & Otting, 2010). Students collaboratively analyse problems in small groups. They search for and use relevant information and critically evaluate this information with the goal to construct knowledge (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006). Students take the responsibility for their own individual and collaborative learning process. In addition to knowledge building about the problem content students also acquire a range of interpersonal competencies. Students learn to listen to viewpoints, formulate their own opinion, improve their collaboration skills and develop themselves as independent learners. Schmidt, Van der Molen, Te Winkel, and Wijnen (2009) demonstrated that students from a PBL curriculum rated their own interpersonal skills, especially their communication and collaboration skills, higher than students from a conventional curriculum.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learner-oriented teachers

The teacher-oriented approach to teaching focuses on knowledge transfer, knowledge reproduction and individual learning (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2007; Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen, 2009; Meirink, Meijer, Verloop, & Bergen, 2009). In this approach the teacher takes the directive role of information provider (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). Contrary, the role of a teacher in a learner-oriented approach to teaching is guided by other learning principles: self-directed, constructive, contextual and collaborative learning (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2007; Dolmans et al., 2005; Hoekstra et al., 2009; Meirink et al., 2009). Teachers have a supportive role as facilitator, activator, diagnostician, challenger and evaluator (Hattie, 2009; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). This implies that teachers are able to support students' self-directed learning by stimulating them to take responsibility for their own learning process. Teachers facilitate contextual learning by using real-life cases. Moreover, teachers support constructive learning by activating students' prior knowledge, by stimulating students to connect prior knowledge to new knowledge and by challenging students to construct new concepts (Hoekstra et al., 2009; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007; Trigwell & Prosser, 2004). Another important task of teachers is to stimulate and monitor students' collaborative learning process (Barrett & Moore, 2011; Chng et al., 2011; Lee, Lin, & Lin, 2013; Moust, Van Berkel, & Schmidt, 2005).

2.2. Tutor interventions in problem-based learning (PBL)

The teacher in a problem-based learning is known as a tutor. Tutor interventions in a PBL session are of great importance because their verbal and non-verbal expressions influence the quality of the PBL process and are vital for the students' learning process (Aarnio, Lindblom-Ylänne, Nieminen, & Pyörälä, 2014; Barrett & Moore, 2011; Chng et al., 2011; Hung, 2011; Zwaal & Otting, 2010). The tutor functions on a meta-cognitive level, stimulates the development of students' domain-specific knowledge and supports the students' thinking and learning process (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Barrett & Moore, 2011). A tutor adds meaning to this learning process by asking open, relevant and critical questions (Schmidt, Rotgans, & Yew, 2011; Williams, 2011). A questioning approach of the tutor activates students to explore concepts, stimulates students to link theory to practice, encourages students to explain their findings in their own words, supports students to give evidence for their findings and challenges students to analyse and compare the different aspects of concepts (Aarnio et al., 2014). Tutors act as a role model by using critical questions (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2008). The goal of modelling questions is to scaffold students' learning process and to activate students to ask these questions themselves (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006). When using these questions themselves students improve their self-directed learning skills. Effective tutors give students sufficient time to answer their questions and support students to explore the problem (Williams, 2011). The biggest challenge for a tutor is the timing of the interventions: When and how should the tutor intervene in the learning process? (Maudsley, 2002; Moust et al., 2005; Williams, 2011). Both too many and too few interventions would interfere with the students' learning process. When the tutor intervenes too often it may frustrate self-directed learning and when the tutor refrains from intervening students may feel lost (Neville, 1999).

2.3. Teacher identity

Problem-based learning requires a change in a teachers' approach to teaching (Moust et al., 2005; Trigwell, 2011). Although many teachers endorse learner-oriented beliefs about teaching and learning, research shows that teachers often find it difficult to perform as a supportive teacher in a learner-oriented curriculum (Dolmans et al., 2005; Donche, 2005; Hendry, 2009; Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006; Hung, 2011; Meirink et al., 2009; Oolbekkink-Marchand, Van Driel, & Verloop, 2006; Windschitl, 2002). Teachers struggle to integrate their beliefs into their teaching behaviour (Bolhuis, 2000; Postareff et al., 2007). Changing teaching behaviour implies a shift in the professional identity for many teachers. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) define teachers' professional identity as a continuous dynamic process of making sense of teaching experiences. A teacher's professional identity consists of multiple sub-identities and plays a pivotal role in the change to a more learner-oriented approach to teaching (Aangenendt, Kuijpers, & Sanders, 2012; Lengelle & Meijers, 2015). However,

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