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How to establish a creative atmosphere in tourism and hospitality education in the context of China

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to develop an analytical framework for understanding and measuring how educators' professional competencies influence the process of establishing a creative atmosphere within the tourism and hospitality education context of China. Six hypotheses are developed and tested among a survey sample of 771 tourism and hospitality students from four universities. Our research findings support the mediating effects of theatrical enhancement and empirical learning, indicating that these two factors positively affect the relationship between educator competency and the development of a creative atmosphere.

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1. Introduction

The introduction of creativity concepts into school education is emerging because it is a determinant of student's future competitive advantage in the dynamic employment market (Chien & Hui, 2010; Craft, 2010). By introducing new creativity concepts, universities may present empirical learning with hands-on experiences, such as field trips or site visits (Kim, Lee, Youn, Eom, & Lee, 2015), and encourage students' intrinsic motivation to solve problem in a creative or novel manner (Inui, Wheeler, & Lankford, 2006). A key premise in the tourism and hospitality literature on creativity concepts is that the development of the creative environment is a function of encouraging an individual's self-awareness of their motivation, imagination and creativity (Morgan, 2004). Mayfield and Mayfield (2010) divided the research on creative environment perceptions into several streams or approaches. First, there are studies that center on how a creative environment is based on awareness regarding an individual's competition, training, and instruction. This effort's focus has been more on the internal attributes of investigating an individual's perceptions of an environment's atmosphere than on measuring objective climate attributes, such as the perception of support for the development of creative abilities (Peterson, 2001). The second stream has a more external orientation and emphasizes empirical learning from management practices, product development, resource allocation and novel idea creation to fit both the present and future customer needs (Davies et al., 2013).

There is an important symbiosis between these streams for future education course design. For example, foundational theoretical pools of integrated existing knowledge from the literature can be enriched into new thinking or know-how by using knowledge from basic theory to develop new ideas to solve problems. In addition, this new thinking or ideas must lead to the development of new services to provide value for changing needs (Paulsson & Sundin, 2000). Thus, theoretical

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education influences the extent to which new thinking is created, and the new ideas that are formed are transformed into new methods or new services to solve existing problems and meet customer requirements. Further, [Lau \(2012\)](#) suggested that creating environmental and learning from real cases or empirical experience stimulation to facilitate students' creative thinking may change students' behavior and social-cognitive beliefs, such as attitudes. Furthermore, in examining those relations, course designers' professional competency plays a critical role because the competency not only helps develop students' internal and external motivation to pursue new techniques and skills but also encourages students' learning outside the classroom ([Sawyer, 2011](#)). This research examined the relation between professional competency and both theoretical enhancement and empirical learning mechanisms and how these mechanisms influence and can be influenced to develop a creative atmosphere.

We pursued three unsolved research questions in tourism and hospitality education: (1) how does the professional competency of teachers impact theoretical enhancement and empirical learning, (2) how does the theoretical enhancement and empirical learning affect the success of the development of a creative atmosphere, and (3) how does professional competency influence the creative atmosphere through theoretical enhancement and empirical learning? To investigate and identify critical attributes for education, we focused on the professional competency held by the course designers and on the delivery creativity and entrepreneurship concepts for students participating in knowledge or skills training. The experience and theory are accessible, and guidance is provided through the appropriate design of a theoretical and empirical learning climate. Examining the creative atmosphere, we emphasize the tourism and hospitality students' real feedback to identify important constructs of the learning process ([Lin & Wong, 2014](#); [Peterson, 2001](#)).

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. *The effects of professional competency on theoretical enhancement and empirical learning*

Professional competency refers to the invisible knowledge and skills that reside in the mind, which reflects the self-regulation and self-control capabilities that are required to perform tasks successfully ([Agut, Grau, & Peiro, 2003](#)). From the competency-based perspective in the education field, well-trained course designers are considered a primary and valuable repository; this reflects an individual's capacity to act, which can encourage students' motivation to learn and absorb new knowledge, practice new technical skills and maintain competitive advantages with others ([Crosbie et al., 2002](#)). In the theoretical learning process, a teacher who is familiar with expertise and professional knowledge may be better able to manage heterogeneous theory, integrate different concepts, execute reactive course adjustments and, thus, be better able to effectively execute related theoretical transfers ([Apostolopoulos, Leivadi & Yiannakis, 2013](#); [Paulsson & Sundin, 2000](#)). Therefore, we argue that educators need to strengthen their professional competency if they want to develop and enhance students' theoretical foundations and applications during the knowledge transfer period in the classroom.

Professional competency also consists of specific areas of expertise such as marketing analysis, financial and accounting, customer service and behaviors. Course designers or educators with technical knowledge and skills that enable them to increase their ability to guide students focus on system thinking and applications that fit the industry and the changing customer needs ([Sánchez, 2013](#)). Further, the prior industrial experience, skills and service that educators may possess are likely to increase their ability to communicate and interact with students, foster empirical knowledge and provide more information for future employment ([Cantwell & Scevak, 2004](#)). Consequently, educators with more experience and higher levels of professional competences may lead or direct students toward creative thinking and guide them as they analyze complex problems in classrooms ([Dewey, 2007](#)). Thus, it is arguable that educators with industrial experience are most conspicuous and have systematic concepts to equip students with the skills required to manage people and organizations. Accordingly, professional competency in the form of knowledge and skills embedded in the educator is expected to provide positive contributions to empirical learning for the students.

Hypothesis 1. The greater professional competence a teacher has, the more likely this is positively associated with theoretical enhancement.

Hypothesis 2. The greater professional competence a teacher has, the more likely this is positively associated with empirical learning.

2.2. *The effects of theoretical enhancement and empirical learning on creative atmosphere*

Theoretical enhancement emphasizes practical application rather than solely addressing the theoretical in prior literature ([Street, Gold, & Manning, 2013](#)). The theoretical enhancement process is referenced by [Brown and Stitzman \(2011\)](#) for more extensive discussions regarding the relations between learning theories and new skill development. Within the social learning literature, theorists postulate that skills and new idea generation advance along a continuum that ranges from the early stages of accumulating task-specific knowledge from literature and integrating that knowledge into individual knowledge stocks, to the later stages in which existing knowledge is transformed into mental schemas that support new skilled development activity ([Mezirow & Taylor, 2011](#)). [Göranzon and Josefson \(2012\)](#) suggested that theoretical knowledge

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