



Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

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



Academic Papers

A study of the relationships among effective learning, professional competence, and learning performance in culinary field

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Professional competence
Learning
Culinary

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the relationships among effective learning, professional competence and learning performance for college hospitality students. We found a significant correlation among variables in culinary professional competence and effective learning. There was a positive correlation between effective learning, professional competence and learning performance, which included measures of job satisfaction, course satisfaction, practice scores and semester GPA. However, there was no correlation between number of certifications and culinary management skill. We also found that culinary professional competence was a mediator for effective learning and learning performance.

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1. Introduction

The food and beverage industry requires intensive human capital contributions as well as concentrated technical proficiencies; labour and human resource capabilities are key factors that typically account for as much as 90% or more of the success or failure in this industry (Hwa, 2008). Chefs are the quintessential component of human capital necessary for successful hospitality operations and their importance cannot be overstated; indeed, their presence may constitute the essential factor behind any successful hospitality enterprise. The first post-graduation experience for some hospitality students will be as line cooks, for which they should have been prepared by their hospitality education; post-matriculation job readiness is ensured by the development of the basic skill set required of a professional chef, through professional course offerings, such as applied culinary techniques, food theory, management, and communications, as well as an internship (Hornig & Wu, 2002; Jenkins, 2001). The American Culinary Federation (ACF) implements certification surveys of students' chef competencies through written tests and skill verification, wherein only those students reaching specified levels of professional competency receive certification. Such certification is valid only for a period of five years before it must be renewed to maintain its credibility (ACF, 2007). Feather and O'Brien (1986) also observe that high individual professional competence helps to ensure successful accomplishments in the post-graduation workplace, contributing to long-term success in this career field. As Saks (1995) pointed out, "the development of professional chefs, by assuring empowerment through access to and attainment of professional competencies, cannot but help to prove conducive to positive formation of chef self-confidence ensuring successful hospitality operations".

Learning is essentially a psychological process that involves personal cognition, understanding, memory, motivation and other emotional factors, all of which are utilised within one's learning environment, which in itself constitutes a very important factor (Gagne, 1985). Factors that influence effective learning and the realisation of a student's full creative

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potential are diverse and include the student's intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation, cognition, and age; additional factors include the school and family environments, courses, faculty, teaching methods, the presence or absence of a supportive atmosphere and the social climate (Lin, 1999). These factors can be more or less conducive to learning, at times posing impediments to learning that must be addressed through learner strategies that ensure productive learning outcomes, such that learners not only develop a "knowledge of the what", but also an "understanding of the why". How the brain works to effectively process and transmit information, as well as its techniques for reprocessing information as additional knowledge is acquired, have become critical concepts underlying our understanding of effective learning (Wu & Lee, 2007).

Currently, students enrolled in higher education hospitality courses must contend with a curriculum that over-emphasises theoretical discussions. However, in the quest for both "knowledge of the what" and "understanding of the why", appreciation of theory should be gleaned through applied learning that develops students' abilities to solve real-world problems (Ko, 2007). Becket and Brookes (2008) found that course development has been unable to keep pace with industry needs and the diversity of student backgrounds, and that the overemphasis on the academic credentials of faculty has resulted in a dearth of relevant professional experience. This lack of experience causes many difficulties for both teaching and learning, thus inhibiting an honest appraisal of the appropriateness and quality of education offered. Teng (2008) found that the factors exercising the greatest influence on student satisfaction levels are course offerings, teaching, and the results of guidance on career placement and planning, specifically noting that schools need to enhance the learning opportunities available to their students to ensure their preparation for future jobs. This study examines the relationships among effective learning, professional competence, and learning performance; additionally, we survey students' effective learning to assess which factors may exercise mediator effects on student learning outcomes. It is hoped that these results will generate useful indicators to contribute to culinary arts curriculum development and teaching. Thus, this study involves many areas of critical practical importance that are worthy of serious consideration.

2. Literature review

2.1. Effective learning

A university education is not merely concerned with transmitting knowledge, but also with imparting a mature appreciation of how to learn and instilling higher-order cognitive abilities, ultimately ensuring the successful practical application of the acquired learning strategies (Wu & Lee, 2007). Mayer (1988) proposed that during the learning process, any method or activity that effectively stimulates learning should correctly be seen as an appropriate learning strategy. Weinstein and Underwood (1985) argued that there are four main categories of learning strategies: (1) information processing strategies, which relate to learner knowledge achievement, retention, and recall; (2) affective learning strategies, which involve reducing learner nervousness, enhancing attention, and scheduling programmatic learning; (3) typical reading strategies, which include important key concepts and test preparation; and (4) metacognitive strategies, which are concerned with learner objectives, the selection of learner strategies, and the review and evaluation of learning effectiveness.

"How to learn" reflects a multidimensional holistic concept of learning involving effective learning tactics, including cognitive, metacognitive, and resource management learning strategies (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith, 1986). Of these strategies, cognition emphasises understanding the significance of learning materials, while metacognition emphasises appreciating one's personal cognitive development. Individuals exhibit metacognition by being mindful while engaged in learning activities, allowing them to appreciate the content and knowledge that they have acquired and to exhibit practical understanding that permits them to successfully engage in applied problem-solving (Carroll, 1993; Wang, 2010). Maribeth and Jill (2002) argued that "how to learn" really refers to an efficacious and efficient attitude that signifies the proper use of metacognitive understanding and skills, ensuring an awareness of what one has learned as well as the concomitant ability to apply this learning while self-monitoring appropriately. Wu and Lee (2007) examined both theories in a study designed to evaluate a scale of learner efficacy for university students, which resulted in their elucidation of seven major relevant conceptual areas. These areas include learner attitude, information acquisition, knowledge template construction, recall enhancement, exhibition of understanding, reflective learning, and body-mind connectedness. Integrating cognitive and metacognitive influences on effective learning can not only improve cognitive understanding, but can also lead to better control over one's mental status, ability, and recall (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006).

2.2. Professional competence

Professional competence refers to the repertoire of skills needed in the workplace, including individual skills required for the successful completion of job responsibilities. One's occupational skill level can be evaluated by monitoring specific behavioural abilities that relate to work efficiency and that can be improved and enhanced through training and development. Professional competence integrates knowledge, special characteristics, motivation, social standing, and interpersonal relations, resulting in outstanding on-the-job performance (Perdue, Ninemeier, & Woods, 2000; Kane, 1992). Additionally, Litchfield, Oakland, and Anderson (2002) argued that professional competence should also include higher-order skills, such as critical thinking, and long-term learning resources. Ko and Hsiao (2008) proposed that professional

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