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The effects of outdoor training on the development of emotional intelligence among undergraduate tourism students



Manuel Ángel Fernández-Gámez, Ana Rosales-Pérez*, Jesús Molina-Gómez, Lorena Mora-Lucena

University of Málaga, Campus El Ejido s/n, 29071 Málaga, Spain

1. Introduction

The recent development of the tourism industry has brought with it an important change in the skill levels required of professionals (Chung, 2000; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Otting, Zwaal, & Gijsselaers, 2009). The literature recognises the decreasing relevance of the professionals' technical and operational skills and the increasing relevance of their emotional skills (Lashley, 2008; Suh, West, & Shin, 2012). Brownell and Jameson (2004) points out the great importance of leadership, teamwork, and stress management skills among professionals in the tourism industry. Kay and Russette (2000) obtained similar results, highlighting the importance of leadership and interpersonal skills. Gursoy and Swanger (2005) demonstrated that communication, leadership, conflict resolution, and teamwork were the most important competencies for industry professionals. Chung-Herrera, Enz, and Lankau (2003) and Tas, LaBrecque, and Clayton (1996) note that technical skills cannot be considered of utmost relevance in training for general professionals in tourism, since tourism offerings usually rely on technical specialists and, in any case, technical skills can be learned on the job. However, flexibility and adaptability in a changing environment are often related to the personality of the individual, and so leadership and cognitive skills are highly important.

The tourism industry is service-based, and so professionals are expected to handle volatile situations skillfully, with the least possible interruption to clients and employees, while taking into account the needs of the people involved. Professionals should also be able to precisely evaluate situations involving negative comments and to control their emotions (Scott-Halsell, Blum, & Huffmann, 2011). Thus, there is now a strong consensus on the relevant role of emotional intelligence (EI) among tourism industry professionals (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002; Carmeli, 2003; Scott-Halsell, Blum, & Huffman, 2011). However, there are significant differences between undergraduate tourism students and industry professionals in all the dimensions of EI (Scott-Halsell et al., 2011; Scott-Halsell, 2006). Considering the above arguments, the aim of this paper is to analyse whether the differences between the levels of EI of tourism industry professionals and those of tourism undergraduate students can be rectified using experiential learning techniques like Outdoor Training (OT). To our knowledge, no effort related to this specific topic exists in the literature. To address the issue, we first checked whether the IE gap between students and tourism professionals is also verified in the Spanish educational environment, since there is no previous work other than that of Scott-Halsell et al. (2011) to support this situation. Precisely, Scott-Halsell et al. (2011) point out that student participants in their study were limited to those at four universities in the U.S., and consequently, the study sample may not be representative of all hospitality undergraduate students. To that end, we focused on a sample of undergraduate tourism students and tourism industry professionals in Spain. Second, once the results confirmed that there was a gap between the groups in the level of EI, the sample of students then participated in OT, which had a demonstrated effect in increasing their levels of EI and in reducing the EI gap.

* Corresponding author.

2. Theory

2.1. Emotional intelligence and professional training

Salovey and Mayer (1990) introduced the concept of EI as the ability to control and understand one's own emotions and to understand those of others, and then to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions. Goleman (1995) popularized the concept of EI, its limits, and its benefits. Subsequently, two main conceptual models of EI were developed. One of them is the ability model, which is based on the ability to perceive, comprehend, and manage the information given to us by feelings and emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The ability model is based on emotional reasoning as a method to help to develop individuals' ability to make decisions on their own and in the correct context (Cobb & Mayer, 2000). The second model is the mixed model and includes a combination of variables which are not strictly related to skills or intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000). This model is composed of four stages, each of which is built on the basis of the skills achieved in the previous phase. In this way, as the individual matures, these abilities are refined, and the range of emotions that can be perceived increases. Experience says that most adults control their emotional responses better than young people, and that as people get older, they better master their feelings and gain greater emotional stability (Goleman, 2011). In the mixed model, EI is understood as a series of personality traits, socio-emotional competences, motivational aspects, and diverse cognitive skills (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 2000; Goleman, 1995). The ability model forms the basis of the teaching method most easily accepted by adults and has been demonstrated to be the most reliable model for all of the dimensions of EI (Caruso, Mayer, & Salovey, 2002).

Goleman (1998) considered that the intelligence quotient of an individual is relatively resistant to change, whereas EI can be improved through instruction, coaching, and practising new behaviours and positive thinking. Appropriate training in EI can be as flexible as training in other skill sets (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Bagshaw, 2000; Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002; Brownell & Jameson, 2004). From this point of view, EI reflects a person's potential to learn personal and social skills, whereas EI skills indicate to what degree this potential has been fulfilled, learned, mastered, and converted into work-related skills (Goleman & Cherniss, 2001).

Goleman (1998); Downey, Lee, and Stough (2011); and Law, Wong, and Song (2004) pointed out that high levels of EI lead to high performance among employees. In this sense, educators and companies are joining together in the view that technical skills alone do not create a productive employee, and that overall EI is a determining factor in a company's success (Carmeli, 2003; Caruso & Wolfe, 2001; Langhorn, 2004). Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) showed that professionals with a high level of EI are more able to control the image they project to others, use these impressions to achieve established goals, and guide their subordinates. They also facilitate higher levels of employee satisfaction among their colleagues and subordinates (Dasborough, 2006; Lewis, 2000; Sosik & Megerian, 1999).

In tourism research, several authors have demonstrated the positive influence of EI on the development of the workforce. For example, Kim and Agrusa (2011) found that EI can have an impact on how employees treat customer complaints and take action quickly to solve the problem. Jung and Yoon (2012) found that a higher IE positively impacted the behaviour of food and beverage employees in hotels.

Scott-Halsell et al. (2011), Ashkanasy et al. (2002), and Carmeli (2003), among others, have emphasised that EI skills are needed for professional success, and that these skills include empathy with subordinates and the ability to evaluate one's own emotions and those of others. These skills allow strategies to be established to maximize results, communicate enthusiasm, and create constructive relationships with employees. Several authors have divided EI into different dimensions that group the EI skills (Bar-On, 1997; Goleman, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). In this article, and according to the EI metrics used, we have considered four dimensions (Happiness, Self-control, Emotionality, and Sociability), which together cover 15 skills. Fig. 1 shows the relationships between dimensions, skills, and EI.

According to research conducted by Harper, Brown, and Irvine (2005), tourism industry professionals believe that general management skills are more important in the tourism syllabus than traditional tourism-specific skills. Raybould and Wilkins (2006) identified such general management skills as interpersonal emotional skills, problem solving, and self-management as highly relevant for tourism industry professionals. Other research has demonstrated the need to improve university tourism programmes, which should include a specific level of training in EI with the objective of better preparing future leaders (Scott-Halsell, 2006). Furthermore, there are significant differences between tourism industry professionals and undergraduate tourism students in certain dimensions of EI, particularly in motivation and the ability to express emotions and empathy (Scott-Halsell et al., 2011). It has been proposed that undergraduate tourism students should receive better training in EI through the use of qualitative research methods, using focus groups or personal interviews of industry professionals who possess high levels of EI (Scott-Halsell et al., 2011). University tourism syllabuses tend to be very focused on teaching students the technical skills, which they need to perform particular functions in the industry; however, there are fewer opportunities for the students to learn and practice human interpersonal and conceptual skills (Scheule & Sneed, 2001; Scott-Halsell et al., 2011; Solnet, Kralj, Moncarz, & Kay, 2010).

2.2. Outdoor training and experiential learning

Experiential learning is an active methodology and is based on involving participants in order to provide them with tools to handle specific problems (Hawkins & Weiss, 2004). Many researchers have supported experiential learning as a method of linking academic knowledge and practical skills (Bower, 2014; Ruhaneu, 2005). According to Jiménez and Gómez (2008), experiential learning allows people to build an experience parallel to their daily one, thereby breaking down initial personal resistances. This approach is called experiential because of the role played by experience in the learning process. Experience is related to reflection,

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