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Redressing the balance: Inverted hierarchies in the tourism classroom

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ABSTRACT

The research evaluates a collaborative case study to co-create the curriculum for a tourism undergraduate module. In three course design team (CDT) meetings, students selected and discussed topics and learning styles. Qualitative analysis revealed that the students involved strove to be independent learners. They favoured active learning styles and 'non-vocational' aspects of tourism. However, university bureaucracy represents a block in the design process. The paper concludes by advocating a more equal relationship between students and tutors. This involves a shift in power relations, inverting traditional hierarchies in which teachers act as gatekeepers of knowledge and students are passive recipients.

1. Introduction

Increasingly, managerial approaches dominate higher education discourses and practices, from curriculum development to everyday teaching. This phenomenon reflects greater inter-university competition and a growing focus on student recruitment, target achievement and on the development of professional skills (Ayikoru, Tribe, & Airey, 2009). In the case of tourism, it is also associated with a focus on tourism as an industry, as opposed to other conceptualisations stressing its role as a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). The increased focus on performance, efficiency and industry has led (not only in the tourism discipline) to greater control of teaching and learning practices through the enforcement of (course/module) learning outcomes, quality benchmarks and professional body accreditations. Whilst this approach may have improved consistency, critics have pointed out the loss of autonomy of both academics and students (Barnett, 2003; Tribe, 2007), and the danger of prioritizing business values over wisdom, understanding and critique (Belhassen & Caton, 2011). As a result, a growing number of university educators are calling for a shift towards more 'democratic and emancipatory learning agendas (...) valuing multiple worlds and knowledge experiences in the classroom' without which, arguably, students cannot develop into critical thinkers (Pritchard, Morgan, & Ateljevic, 2011: 955).

The present research aims to evaluate how the co-creation of learning curricula contributes to strengthening student engagement and encouraging a critical and reflective approach to learning and teaching. It achieves this by analysing a case study whereby students and tutors collaborate to devise the curriculum for a selected tourism undergraduate module/ unit. This approach involves a shift in the approach to education, suggesting a change in the student's role within the classroom from passive object to active, critical subject (Shor, 1980, 1992). This idea resonates with widely accepted pedagogic approaches such as student-centred learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In the UK, the Higher Education Academy is starting to recognise the importance of students' active engagement, as reflected in their recent publication 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education' (HEA, 2014). Students' engagement could – and should – include the students' active participation in designing key markers of their learning experience, such as curricula and assessment. However, many educators still reject a potentially

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threatening shift in power relations between teacher and student and HEA guidance, though welcome, is still sufficiently vague that it does not challenge the status quo. Common concerns include uncertainty about the appropriateness of students' subject knowledge, the need to meet professional bodies' requirements, and difficulties in developing equal student/staff partnerships (Bovill et al., 2014). These fears are certainly not unfounded, and the practical challenges of a highly structured and monitored university curriculum will be discussed. As a result, student engagement may happen with varying degrees of impact and student empowerment; from consultation (for example, through course committees, periodic course reviews and satisfaction surveys) to direct involvement in curriculum and module design. Consequently, the experience of curriculum co-creation may be implemented with students featuring as 'unequal partners' (Healey, 2014).

2. A critical approach to tourism education

This research finds its roots in three related theoretical approaches: critical theory, critical pedagogies, and the academy of hope. Critical theory has a long tradition as a research paradigm and social theory, having been first developed by the Frankfurt School of Habermas and Marcuse almost a century ago. It distinguishes itself from other scientific traditions, such as positivism and interpretivism, by its focus on values, moral issues and desirable ends (Tribe, 2007). Questioning and addressing tacit inequalities thus becomes one of its core objectives. Its origins as a pedagogical approach date back to the works of Freire (1970), Shor (1980) and Giroux (1983), amongst others. Critical pedagogy theorists denounce the shifted role of schools from places where civic leadership is nurtured to capital-driven institutions where technically trained professionals are created to satisfy the needs of the marketplace (Giroux, 2001). Crucially, advocates of critical pedagogy envisage a schooling system where all members participate on equal terms and where learning becomes an instrument of transformative social action.

Many criticisms voiced against the increasingly market-driven nature of university education were developed before tourism even entered the higher education curriculum. However, they are possibly even more relevant to tourism, a subject traditionally dominated by vocational training and largely sold to prospective students on the basis of future growth and jobs (Ayikoru et al., 2009). Ayikoru et al. (2009) explore the dominance of neoliberal and managerial ideologies in tourism education discourses, noting the important role played by such ideologies in framing and informing what tourism students learn. Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) reminds us that tourism – far from being merely an economic activity – has transformative capacities including positive impacts on individual wellbeing, education, cultural and environmental protection, and peace. On the other hand, the potential negative impacts of tourism are even better known (Buckley, 2012). This highlights the important role of tourism education in contributing to the pursuit of social justice and sustainability. It also confirms the risks associated with the dominance of a neoliberal approach to tourism education.

Drawing on bell hooks' visionary idea of a 'pedagogy of hope' (hooks, 2003), Pritchard et al. (2011) propose the concept of 'hopeful tourism' as a value-based transformative approach to tourism inquiry and practice, underpinned by principles of partnership, reciprocity and respect. Interestingly for the present research, hopeful tourism also plays a role in informing tourism pedagogy. One of the values it promotes is the transformation of the traditional hierarchies of pedagogic practice, and the advocacy of equality in the classroom. In a similar vein, the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) was developed in recent years with a mission 'to be the leading, forward-looking network that inspires, informs and supports tourism educators and students to passionately and courageously transform the world for the better' (Dredge et al., 2014: 2).

Critics have pointed out the excessive focus on negativity in much critical pedagogy discourse. According to Van Heertum (2006), critical theorists, in the attempt to raise consciousness and unmask ideology, have overlooked that 'critique alone has never led any revolution' (p. 45). Ellsworth (1989) questioned the effectiveness of critical pedagogy in addressing power relations in the classroom. She argued that some of the key concepts celebrated in critical pedagogy, such as empowerment, student voice and dialogue, are 'repressive myths' which in the daily context of a classroom actually perpetuate relations of domination. A fundamental flaw of critical pedagogy literature is, according to Ellsworth, a consistent failure to link theoretical constructs with practice.

Two key developments in critical pedagogy since then have, however, attempted to address such criticisms: 1) An increased focus on the (positive) transformative power of education rather than on the (negative) critique of existing ideology, and 2) A slow movement towards a demolition of in-class power relations and of the deep-rooted assumptions as to 'who produces valid knowledge' (Ellsworth, 1989). Whilst the first of these key developments has been embraced by part of the tourism academy (for example, through the concept of hopeful tourism and the TEFI), the latter remains largely neglected. In the next section, we review existing evidence of teaching experiences where traditional tutor–student hierarchies were significantly transformed. Interestingly, Lambert (2009) notes that critical educational methods, which problematise traditional binary divisions and hierarchies (between student and teacher, audience and artist, appearance and reality, etc.), reflect similar trends seen in other spheres of cultural experience such as the arts (Featherstone, 1991) and, indeed, tourism (Larsen, 2008). While such practices have been documented by academics in education studies, we found no published records of similar experiences in the tourism field. The present research aims to contribute to bridging this gap, by exploring an example of teaching practice where traditional tutor–student hierarchies are abolished in a tourism higher education context.

3. Students as co-creators

Contrary to the outdated perspective that views students as passive, empty recipients to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1990 in Lambert, 2009); as '*demanding (and potentially litigious) customers whose position is adversarial to that of staff, or as a burden on the time-poor, research-active academic*' (Lambert, 2009: 299), there is currently a shift in higher education towards viewing

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