Title: Developing student engagement in China through collaborative action research

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Introduction

The Chinese market and society have opened since the late seventies, enabling it to transform from a closed agrarian socialist economy to an urban state and an economic force. This transformation has helped release accumulated tourism demand, which in turn has driven inbound/ outbound/ domestic tourism to unprecedented levels over a short period of time. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2013), the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP in China was CNY1, 362 billion (2.6% of GDP) in 2012. The total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP (including wider effects from investment, the supply chain and induced income impacts) was CNY4,783 billion (9.3% of GDP). Travel and Tourism generated 22,756,500 jobs directly (3.0% of total employment), with the total wider contribution to employment (including wider effects from investment, the supply chain and induced income impacts) totaling 63,779,000 jobs in 2012 (8.3% of total employment). By 2023, Travel and Tourism is forecast to support 89,550,000 jobs (11.1% of total employment).

Higher Tourism education in China

The development of the tourism industry with policy support and infrastructural development has been mirrored by the spread of university and vocational tourism courses capitalizing on new tourist demand. Whilst there were only 27 universities and colleges offering hospitality and tourism programs in 1986, the number had increased to 1097 universities and colleges in 2012. In addition, the number of secondary vocational schools with tourism programs, which stood at 252 in 1993, was 1139 in 2012. Taking together, 2236 universities, colleges and vocational training institutes have 107.34 million students enrolled, an increase from 936 institutions and 221,504 students in 1996. In 2012, the industry trained 4,468,400 individuals (Du 2003; CNTA 2013; Lam & Xiao, 2000). In theory, these numbers show that the development of tourism education in keeping pace with industry growth (Lam and Xiao 2000), with Du (2003, p. 105) noting that "higher tourism education has become one of the fastest growing sectors in China's higher education." However, volume is not the same as quality, with Du (2003, p. 106) arguing this expansion has often come from "poorly ordered, low-standard and crude scale expansion, and is inefficient in terms of economy of scale." Most of the main criticism from industry is that students themselves and higher education institutions are not fulfilling industry expectations and needs (Gu et al. 2007; Penfold et al. 2012; Zhang and Wu 2004). However, Zhang et al., (2010) points out that the issues are complex, given-Chinese culture, values and the educational system in China. If not addressed and overcome the challenges facing the China's government, tourism businesses and the education sector, the negative impact over the long term will fall on the educational system, consumers, the development of the tourism industry and students themselves (Jiang and Tribe 2009; Min 2004; Wu 2013).

Research Objectives

With tourism education is blamed for an increasing shortfall in numbers and quality, and even blamed as a barrier to recruitment, retention and quality, a form of collaborative action research emerged a large public university in north-eastern China. The authors, newly hired university lecturers became aware that students lacked behavioural and cognitive engagement with tourism as a subject and career. Given their knowledge of the situational, political, cultural and social issues that have created concerns about tourism education in China, and the university alumni office report indicating that out of a

hundred graduating students in 2012, only two had jobs connected with the tourism industry, despite an employment rate of 97% amongst graduates, the authors began looking at their own teaching. As they sought to address some of the limitations inherent in teaching and learning in China, they concluded their own practices had not adapted to students contemporary needs. Therefore, the authors conducted collaborative action research to understand the drop in engagement amongst students and take action to improve behavioural and cognitive engagement. This study is focused on action research engaged by two colleagues who shared an interest in a common problem and sought practical outcomes that could be shared with colleagues at the University.

Methods

Given that it was a great concern for the authors to motivate students throughout their learning, the research purpose was to seek solution to a lack of engagement, indicating that the study would best be informed by the collaborative action research methodology (Calhoun 1993). Action research, aligned with the interpretive paradigm, is predicated on a belief that there is not one reality 'out there,' but social worlds as emergent social process, constructed by those who inhabit it, including the authors themselves who were potential variables to the enquiry. Whilst action can be used as a form professional learning, as a form of practical philosophy research or a form of critical social science, the study was conducted by practitioners who regard themselves as researchers (McNiff 2003; McNiff et al. 2003; Noffke and Somekh 2009). It allowed the two educators to collaborate and work together to study a particular problem to learn about their own practices as practitioners; develop a deeper understanding about what they are doing, but also with the social aim of improvement in a situation (McNiff et al. 2003). Calhoun (1994) defined action research in five steps: selecting the area of focus, collecting data, organizing data, analyzing and interpreting data and taking action. The purpose of the steps was to identify initial issues, beliefs, values, feelings concerns and thoughts so that focused questions could be asked. Therefore, observations, notes, focus group interviews and survey data were collected to assist the action research project in fall 2012 and spring 2013. In sustained interactions with 320 second, third and fourth year students over six months in fall 2012, the disinterest in tourism as a study major and career was discussed in and out of classrooms.

Findings

The many barriers to engagement were detailed, with students, for example, noting the importance of parents, who while strongly recommending them to finish the degree in order to get a qualification from a well-regarded university, persuading them seek work in areas such as banking. Parents often perceive tourism-related jobs as badly paid, unstable, and unhelpful for elevating their social status, since working at a hotel or tourism agency is seen as a unskilled, blue collar occupation (Jiang and Tribe 2009; Wong and Liu 2010). While, there are many factors that contributed to students' level of engagement, with teachers having little control over many (Lumsden 1994; Thaliah and Hashim 2008), during the spring and summer of 2013, the authors in their respective classes trialed a number of teaching and learning techniques in and outside the classroom environment to engage students.

The authors invited four guest speakers from five star international hotels, and took students to hotels for a tour, providing numerous opportunities to interact with hotel managers and staff. The students provided written feedback after lectures, an evaluation

report after hotel visits, and were invited to attend focus groups. Students claimed that they did not want to go through tough times as experienced by some of the speakers, and did not wish to take an unskilled entry level position upon graduation. The students in their evaluation and focus group interviews were alarmed by how much time and effort they would need to spend to spend in achieving a managerial position. While impressed by hard work, resilience, toughness and perseverance (a Chinese term is 吃苦 or a willingness to "eat bitterness") and achievement, they were not motivated do follow a similar path towards a managerial level. However, the students were engaged by one speakers 'life' experiences and high position, and many send internship requests immediately after the lecture. The students also noted one speaker's quick managerial journey, and her focus on the need for language skills in their career development. Students also appreciated the hotel tour opportunity, and asked to take up placements over the summer vacation. Ten students, after a competitive interview, were chosen, and worked for seven weeks over the summer break in 2012. The content of the placement was designed by the industry partner in conjunction with the authors, to support positive learning. As a bridge between theory and practice, placements can complement theoretical knowledge (Ge and Wu 2005) with Velde and Cooper (2000) noting how the students grasped the opportunity to gain "hands on" experience, and a "headstart" to employment. All of the student interviewed, post placement, noted that they learned a lot and were eager to gain more practical experiences. The students were more attentive in class and believed they learned skills required to survive in 'real world'.

Conclusion

Despite the large number of graduating students in tourism programs, tourism education in China has not entered a golden era, with institutes, by and large merely addressing the industries need for more workers, without intervening critically and creatively in tourism education so as to engage students. Whilst Chinese policy changes and infrastructural investment will create the world's greatest inbound, outbound and domestic tourist markets; educational reform has by and large not taken place, with the authors noting that the decline in students' engagement with tourism as a subject and career at a large tourism program in China. While traditional research methods such as quantitative approach has been used in educational research to develop and test hypotheses, action research involving teachers, administrators, supervisors, other staff members, students and often parents, attempts to explore more practical problem and guide action planning. Without seeking the ultimate truths behind teaching and learning, the authors, in their concern over engagement, found that, students expressed their belief that field trips, guest speakers, and internship opportunities not only helped generate a more realistic picture of contemporary tourism, but motivated them to reflect and explore the generally held assumptions and stereotypes reigning about a career in tourism. The authors, in their evaluation of their informed action, or "action planning," found the barriers to a career in tourism noted by researchers can be broken down by teachers providing a good preparation for students' future careers. However, this study does offer some findings concerning the Chinese social, economic and political transition. Without curriculum reform and school reform by local government officials, university administrators, teachers and others to establish teaching and learning mechanisms to cultivate students' talents and "bottom-up" social transformation involving the many sectors make up the

industry to develop a respect for tourism and interests in a tourism career, the students may fail to enter the industry, despite achieving grade success.

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