Realising the Educational Potential of Student Tours
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Abstract: Learning how to be a business manager has limitations if confined to the classroom and educators have long been aware that students learn best when they are actively engaged. Supplementing formal classroom activities with farm and industry visits has been used as a strategy to bridge academic learning and industry practice in management education. By taking students on tour to observe, interview and listen to practising managers opens up a whole new dimension for learning. The experiential nature of the tour has provided students with the opportunity to explore more about the concept of management, discover new things and learn more about themselves. This degree of ‘reality’ helps to engage the student in the learning process as they reflect on what happened, how it happened and why. Constructive alignment between curriculum, assessment and tour design is critical in achieving learning outcomes. Otherwise, a tour just becomes ‘a nice day out’. This paper outlines the experiential nature of the learning associated with student tours within a university management education curriculum. The paper explores not just the learning outcomes for the student but also for the academics involved in organising the tour and, very importantly, the industry co-operator that is visited. It is this tripartite involved in the ‘whole tour experience’ that creates a more meaningful learning experience for all involved.

Keywords: Student Tours, Management Education, Experiential Learning

Introduction

The improvement of learning and teaching is dependent upon the development of scholarship and research in teaching (Prosser and Trigwell 1999). This paper outlines the experiential nature of learning associated with student tours within a university management education curriculum. The paper explores not just the learning outcomes for the student but links to outcomes for the academics involved in organising the tour and the industry co-operator who is visited.

The current School of Rural Management (SRM) at Charles Sturt University, Orange has a 30 year tradition of incorporating student tours within their educational programs to visit industry co-operators on farms and in town-based businesses. This tradition began at the institution’s inception when the original rural management educators identified that a student’s learning experience would be greatly enriched through having the opportunity to learn from first hand experience, i.e. experientially. Student tours, one form of experiential learning, have thus been an integral part of the curriculum but in the past 5 years many factors have contributed to fewer tours being organised. As a response, a group of academics resolved to explore and revitalise the significant role that student tours can play in the management curriculum. The underlying premise was that ‘the greater the involvement of the participant in the learning activity the deeper will be the participant’s learning and therefore the greater the effect on future thought and behaviour’ (Beard and Wilson 2006, p7). This represented an understanding that tours could assist in bridging the gap between the formal classroom and outside world. A staff development tour was therefore organised in 2006 to major industry co-operators to determine how to maintain tours as a central component of the curriculum and to realise the educational potential of these activities.

Background

The School of Rural Management (SRM) began as Orange Agricultural College in 1973 to provide management education to rural Australia. In 1994 it became part of The University of Sydney and in 2006 joined Charles Sturt University.

Staff and courses at this institution have always maintained close links to industry and this was reflected in: the high employment rates of graduates; extensive use of tours to farm and industry co-operators to enhance the learning experiences of students; an informal system of job placements through alumni and faculty networks; and industry practice being promoted as an integral part of management studies. It was institutional practice during the 1980s and 1990s for students to demonstrate at least 12 months of industry experience before commencing their studies. This close association with industry also gave academics a sound working knowledge of the skills, attributes and values sought by industry when employing graduating students.
Academic staff at the institution represented a wide range of scientific and business disciplines and identified the importance of developing graduates, not only with generic or transferable skills that employers wanted but also graduates who were flexible in terms of mobility in the workplace and able to fulfil life-long learning goals. Allied to this was a strong and proud history of quality teaching and learning outcomes within the institution resulting from a belief that learning is a meaning-making process. In constructivism ‘learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience’ (Bednar et al. 1992, p 21). The emphasis here is on the manner in which humans interpret their world and make sense of it through sharing personal perspectives that are built on experience. Through this definition of learning the SRM placed the onus of learning on the students. It was up to them to make sense of their world and to construct their reality. It was the role of academics to assist them with this construction (Cochrane et al. 2002).

This academic assistance could be made operational through the notion of ‘praxis’. Praxis conceptualised a relationship between action and theory where neither action nor theory predominate. What predominates is the relationship existing between the two (Mezirow 1991). To address this challenge when designing tours, a praxis approach to learning became central. Significant in praxis is the development of two contrasting reasoning skills: inductive reasoning when moving from action to theory, and deductive reasoning when developing action from theory. Seeking to develop these skills in students became vital components underpinning tour preparation and subsequent tour assessment and will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent paper.¹

The Need for Tour Research

As mentioned in the introduction, a point was reached in the recent history of the SRM at the Orange campus where several staff perceived that the role of tours needed to be revitalised. In 2006, a 3 day staff development tour was organised to major industry co-operators to determine how to maintain tours as a central component of the curriculum by exploring how to realise their educational potential.

Up to this point, different staff had provided their own perspectives and insights into how to most effectively use the praxis approach for designing student tours and even though tours had been part of the curriculum for thirty years, very few of these experiences had been clearly documented. This staff development tour organised by two academics in the School of Rural Management was an experiential learning activity for staff. It sought to have current and former staff share their knowledge about approaches to tour management and to learn how tours can contribute to making the best use of industry case studies. There was a pressing need for this documentation and development as much of the accumulated knowledge and experience in this area existed with staff soon to retire or with those who had recently retired. Furthermore, new courses and redeveloped courses were seeking to utilise industry case studies more extensively and to develop student investigatory and problem solving skills within authentic contexts.

The key objectives for the tour, from a curriculum action research perspective (McKernan 1997), were to:

- Allow academics to keep abreast of recent developments in practice and for academics to update their training in this area
- Determine how to best organise the curriculum to serve the varied needs and interests of students
- Learn from one another – the purpose of an academic is not only to educate students but other academics as well
- Incorporate the notion of research into teaching methodologies as being crucial for improving the art of teaching and for advancement in pedagogic outcomes and learning
- Allow for critical exploration of tour practice and to help academics reflect both individually and collaboratively

Time during the tour was allocated to reflect on past tour experiences and to debate the future role of tours within the curriculum. Facilitated discussions and small group work sessions were held during the tour. These reflections, discussions and debates were monitored and recorded.

Outcomes

The main outcomes achieved from the tour included:

- Determining the ‘place’ of tours within the curriculum – they are to be an integral part of course and curriculum design through careful constructive alignment and they are not to ‘sit apart’ from the rest of the curriculum.
- Recognising that university staff, students and industry co-operators are the main stakeholders in the tour process and that they each have an important role and influence in achieving successful educational outcomes
- Identifying and discussing how to meet the needs and overcome the fears of the major stakeholders involved in the tour process

¹ Watson G K and Bone Z
• Enhancing the educational potential of tours through staff working together collegially and collaboratively
• A tour ‘best practice’ manual to be produced – a practical and logistical guide on how to design, plan, operate and evaluate a tour
• Academics learning how espoused theory becomes theory-in-use.

The Place and Role of Tours in the Curriculum

Staff were presented with two models to critically evaluate in order to determine the ‘place’ of tours in the curriculum. Model 1, represented in Figure 1, showed the course program comprising twenty-four separate subjects with tours sitting apart on the periphery of the curriculum. Model 2, represented in Figure 2, placed tours in the centre of the three main stakeholders (university staff, students and industry co-operators) and having an integral role and central place in the image, and perceptions of the course program.

Despite this appreciation by staff the number of tours actually run across the curriculum had been declining in recent years. Staff identified that there were a number of factors contributing to this decline. Whilst they recognised strong academic support for the theories of experiential learning, constructivism and praxis, the constant pressures of time, larger class sizes, diminishing budgets and academic capability in being able to link theory to practice contributed to a less than desirable level of congruence when designing student tours. Morgan and Cox (2005) found that staff, who had played active roles in tours, strongly supported the positive outcomes that were achieved, while other staff had come to view student tours as an easy time for students and staff particularly if there was no assessment directly associated with the tour. The tour was perceived by them as a ‘junket’. Two staff members questioned whether or not the educational potential of tours had been realised in the past:

...tours have been informative but I would question whether the students learned anything. They had a good time but what did they learn? Who does the learning on the tours? If staff do all of the organising and preparation then the benefit could be more for staff than the students.

These comments highlighted the need for further reporting and sharing of ideas regarding tours.

Other staff commented that over time, many tours had been marginalised and the ones that were taken out were largely subject-based with few, if any, linkages to other subjects. There had been some collaboration where tours had been part of a subject which had a multi-discipline teaching team but there had been very little or no cross-subject sharing of information.

Figure 1: Model 1 – One Position of Tours within the Curriculum where Tours Sit ‘Outside’ the Subject Stream
Staff unanimously supported Model 2 as representing where they thought tours ‘should be’ in relation to other components of the course curriculum and promoted the perceptions and image of the course with industry. Staff agreed that the central placement of tours maximised their educational potential and suggested that if this model was kept in mind when staff were designing subjects, then the tour experience would be improved for all stakeholders. Tours needed to be an integral component of subject design, and assessment associated with tours needed to be constructively aligned with subject learning outcomes.

Further debate highlighted how to achieve these outcomes and while the ultimate goal of the educational process was to produce graduates who were able to be independent and constructivist learners, it was important that the students were eased into this process. Central to the debate here were strategies for active interaction with real world management contexts and student tours were viewed as being able to achieve this interaction. Staff acknowledged however, that there needed to be a collaborative push to restore tours to being a central focus of course design. It was agreed that learning was enhanced when there was constructive alignment between the course design, a subject’s learning outcomes, its teaching methodologies and the assessment. Student tours could provide the link between formal theory and its application within real world practice. Morgan & Cox (2005) identified that students are more motivated to participate in group tasks on tour if these tasks formed part of their assessment. They could then see the relevance of the assessment task in relation to their assessment progress.

Main Stakeholders in the Tour Process

Situated learning places special focus on the role of authentic contexts in the process of knowledge development (Lave & Wenger 1991). Advocates of situated learning argue that meaningful learning requires engagement between the learner, the learning community and authentic practice.

- The learning community (the university and academics) – Staff are the main educational designers but they should not operate in isolation when planning student tours. All stakeholders have a contribution to the process and each stakeholder can benefit from the tour process. Learning is not just the domain of the student. Staff members were positive about tours and comments included:

  - You cannot put a price on the tour experience and its capacity to help students to understand human activity systems.
  - I love tours because of their experiential nature.
  - It is the importance of understanding people and underlying values.
  - We have no choice but to have tours. There is enormous benefit from tours – seeing is believing.

- The learners (students) – Overall, course reviews have indicated that students rate tours as a very positive and enjoyable experience. In fact, for some students the tour experience rated above any other experience at university. But for some a tour can be challenging from a ‘social’ point of view or from a financial perspective. For some students it may mean forgoing paid work that may be crucial for their economic survival at university. must be relevant and meaningful otherwise students will not engage. Some staff suggested that to gain more ownership, students could assist in the planning and organising of the tour. In the past, when students have suggested...
businesses to visit this has resulted in the students appearing more engaged and motivated.

- **Authentic practice (industry co-operators)** – student tours can also be challenging for the co-operator as their business/property is exposed to outsiders and they can fear being intimidated by academic ‘experts’. The vast majority of co-operators that volunteer to host student tours see the event as positive and one way that they can ‘give back’ to the industry and to support the future of their industry. Industry co-operators have made the following comments regarding student tours:

> Yes, it is always good to challenge your thinking and part of the process of explaining why you do what you do is a challenge to your own thinking.
> Obviously it’s a very interactive role. They need to have an understanding about a business and things that are important to us in making our business work so they are trying to get a picture of where we are at, where we are trying to get to -(and) pretty quickly they ask lots of questions to try and make sense of it all.
> It’s encouraged me to keep learning about agriculture, one, because I love it but two, because the students come out and they want to know specific details about the industry and its future. It has helped me because you sit down with the students and you are actually forced, to a degree, to discuss maybe uncomfortable issues. You’ve got to confront the sustainability of your industry, financially and economically and that sort of thing raises a lot of difficult questions and you have to vocalise those thoughts.
> I’m learning too you know. There are always new things in agriculture all of the time ... they may ask curly questions which you’ve probably never heard of.
> Actually I get ideas too and the satisfaction of doing something.
> I am particularly interested in getting involved because I believe the practical side of understanding by the students is very important.
> Just want to give something back to the industry.

Morgan & Cox (2005, p70) identified another aspect to involving industry co-operators in the tour process. Exposure to industry co-operators on tour can result in an ‘informal evaluation of the knowledge base of the academic, the commercial relevance of the course curriculum, and the learning methodology used by the academics and their educational institution’.

- **Meeting the needs and overcoming the fears**

One major outcome from the staff development tour was the realisation that maximum benefit from any tour can only be achieved when the needs and fears of each of the three main stakeholders are taken into account at all stages of tour development. Many staff have avoided going on tours because of negative experiences in the past or from a fear of the current litigious climate in which Australian society now operates. Tours take much time and effort – before, during and after the event. On tour, staff are on duty 24 hours per day. Students must understand the relevance of the tour to their study as to attend the tour they often have to juggle other studies and work commitments. Industry co-operators can often feel challenged when their business is put under close scrutiny by staff and students from the university. These needs and fears are further explored in a paper by Watson and Bone (2007).

- The staff tour realised the following educational benefits for staff:

  Teaching strategies relating to expressed teaching philosophy. Incorporating small group work on tours to provides a learning process which engages the student in a dialectic interaction between:

1. real world experience and practice (industry case studies and visits)
2. conceptual and abstract thinking (e.g. tutorial discussions and debates and ensuing written and oral reports).

The case study of an actual business allows the student to identify, locate, construct and apply new and existing knowledge to a real world situation: thus achieving alignment between the philosophies of constructivism and teaching practice.

*Professional and personal development* – the aim of the staff development tour was to enable the academic participants to work towards their own view of professional management teaching through conscious and informed reflection on their practice. The staff tour sought to provide a structure that supported individual learning and a sense of community among the academics involved which could in turn contribute to higher morale, greater self-confidence and improved self-esteem. The timing of this staff tour was particularly important since a number of staff were facing the reality of impending retirement and the threat of redundancies.

*Strengthened collaboration* – A danger for experienced educators is the potential of losing
the ability to learn ‘something everyday’. Beaty (1997, p10) stated that ‘we may stop feeling like a learner and rely solely on our current skills and knowledge’. The support and challenge of peers is crucial to professional development and this staff tour allowed academics from differing disciplines to collaborate with each other and reflect on how they had conducted tours in the past. More importantly, it also gave them the opportunity to discuss the future of tours and the prospects of working more closely together to achieve enhanced learning outcomes.

**Future Challenges**

Nothing will replace careful planning and consultation with various stakeholders when deciding to lead a student tour. Staff agreed that a ‘best practice’ manual outlining key planning and logistical information as well as teaching and assessment strategies would be useful for the future.

The attitude of management and other academics is also crucial to the effectiveness of student tours. Diminishing resources are currently being allocated to higher education. In Australia ongoing pressure (mainly financial) is occurring from university management for staff to teach larger groups and to have fewer academics involved in the delivery of subjects. Tours can be expensive to run – from the time factor and form the monetary perspective and an economic rationalist approach to learning can actively discourage student tours. Since education managers are continually looking for ways to balance budgets, commitment therefore has to come from the top as well as from the staff directly organising the tours.

If tours are to be successful, all involved staff need to become ‘tour champions’ but this in itself is problematic. For example, not all staff participated in the staff tour and some staff within the institution have never been involved in a student tour. For these staff, the student tour concept is peripheral to their perceived main task, that of teaching and assessing students in more traditional ways. Tours can disrupt timetables and in some cases tours may ‘cut’ into the teaching time of other staff. An integrated tour servicing several subjects of study is one strategy to address this situation.

One of the greatest challenges to the future role of tours in our current institution is that many staff who have led tours are retiring or have retired in the recent past. The loss of this experience and industry networking is very significant. One of the major outcomes from this staff development tour was the ability to ‘capture’ the tour experience and to learn from each other in a collaborative manner. As one staff member commented:

_We need to practice what we teach._

**Conclusion**

This paper has drawn upon an experiential based approach to learning about improving teaching by university staff, referring specifically to student tours and their role in the curriculum. While student tours are largely ‘bottom-up’ activities, stimulated by the academics concerned, there are resource implications for management.

Students gain educational value through well constructed and relevant industry tours. Students need to understand the value of the tour and where it fits within their curriculum. Constructive alignment between the learning objectives and the assessment associated with the tour can lead to this understanding. Industry visits and student tours enrich learning outcomes through engagement of learners with authentic contexts and management practitioners. The learning benefits of such engagement are supported by situated learning research. This literature argued that the engagement of the learner and the context is a critical process in the attribution of meaning and for the acquisition of the social-cultural qualities required to practice within a particular professional domain (Eiseman 2001, Lave 1988, Brown et al. 1989, Lave and Wenger 1991).

Results from research into a staff development tour produced outcomes where participating staff argued that meaningful learning from tours requires engagement between the learner, the learning community and authentic practice. The typical on-campus process of university education is largely separated from authentic contexts and practitioners. University students are often given knowledge and skills in the classroom and then subsequently apply this learning in authentic contexts on completion of their studies. By bringing these experiences into the university curriculum, students have the opportunity to interact within real world managers and situations during their studies. Thus, a well designed student tour can play a key role in achieving educational outcomes, as well as providing the student with a rich and lasting experience.
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