Full length Research paper

Hospitality marketing students to determine the impact of activity-based teaching

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The study evaluated the accounts of hospitality marketing students to determine the impact of activity-based teaching on the learning process and learning outcomes. The qualitative study involved interviews of 36 students from 2 hospitality marketing classes, which were analyzed using typology and logical analysis. The results showed that activity-based teaching can deliver academic lessons, skills and competencies, and personal lessons. Activity-based teaching supported active knowledge building, problem resolution skills and work preparedness of students. Continuous application of the method can lead to broader and greater outcomes for students and hospitality and tourism education in general.

Key words: Hospitality marketing, activity-based teaching, problem-based learning, work-based instruction, hospitality education, tourism education, business perception.

INTRODUCTION

Connecting to actual and potential customers, to attract and sustain their interest and influence their purchasing decisions via high value responsive offers, is the bottom line of hospitality marketing (Powers, 1997). The goal of the hospitality marketing class is to impart knowledge and techniques to hone the capability of future hospitality managers and personnel in effectively connecting to the target market (Solnet et al., 2007). The readiness and competence of students reflects the effectiveness of the teaching method. Traditional instruction prepares students by controlling the lessons, pace of lessons, and learning environment (Parvin et al., 2011). Yet two issues emerge in the hospitality education and work equation. There is a gap between the priorities of hospitality educators and hospitality practitioners in Taiwan (Tsai, 2004). Firms also value technical field knowledge and good interpersonal skills (Hernandez-March et al., 2009). As such, practical competencies (Chen and Hsu, 2007) and innovative participatory learning (Qiumei, 2007) in hospitality and tourism education are important. Alternative modes of teaching can augment traditional teaching methods by involving students. Activity-based teaching is a technique targeting student participation and practical skills building. Evaluating learning outcomes in applying this technique to actual classes provides

supporting evidence.

The aim of the study is to draw empirical evidence on the impact of activity-based teaching on students' learning process and outcomes. In achieving this aim, the investigation focused on the objectives 1) to collect data on the experiences of activity-based teaching by students taking hospitality marketing classes and 2) to evaluate how activity-based teaching engaged students' business management learning process and outcomes.

In collecting data, the process focused on these questions:

1. How well has activity-based teaching influenced students' learning outcomes on business management?
2. How well is activity-based teaching perceived as class highlight to comprise the strong influence on business management learning outcomes?
3. How well has activity-based teaching influenced perceptions of in-class activity effectiveness in business management?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Activity-based teaching applies constructivist learning

theory, which envisions a learner consciously building knowledge by seeking new information from instructions and experiences to create meaning. This requires instruction that enable students to actively interact with sensory stimulus. Activity-based teaching integrates theoretical and practical knowledge-building through activities that draw the participation of students in the learning process (Levine and Guy, 2007). Problem-based instruction is a form of activity-based teaching that focuses on the use of realistic problems for resolution to foster knowledge and build skills in solving actual issues (Macklin, 2001) in the hospitality setting. Another form of activity-based teaching is work-based instruction, which recreates workplace scenarios as mode of instruction (Hawkins, 2006). Preparedness for work in hospitality firms is a goal of work-based activities. While problem-based teaching and work-based teaching comprise separate concepts, these intersperse with activity-based teaching. Activities should include realistic problems and actual workplace scenarios to develop problem-solving skills and work readiness of hospitality marketing students (Stergiou et al., 2008).

A wide range of activity-based teaching exists. The goal of the activity could be one or more of the following: improve communication and interpersonal skills, assess and innovate on services and service delivery, understand and resolve problems, analyze own or other people's performance, reflect on experiences, develop teamwork, and hone leadership skills. The activities can be individual analysis, group work, role-playing, simulation, games, field exposure, or a combination of one or all of the above (Margaryan et al., 2004). The form of activity depends on the targeted outcome given the context of the class curriculum. Creative instruction enhances the activity-based teaching experience of students.

The effectiveness of activity-based teaching relative to traditional teaching finds support from the possible limitation of traditional instruction where lessons could pass from the mouth of the instructor to the ears and hands of students but without necessarily touching the brain. Lectures and textbook seatwork provide sensory stimuli to arouse cognitive processes in students and facilitate meaning construction.

However, students respond to stimulus differently. Traditional instruction may not be sufficient to sustain interest in the subject, retain information and create meaning. Repetition, especially of weak stimulus, could also dampen students' interest in the subject (Alam and Khalifa, 2009). Moreover, hospitality marketing requires practical skills. The wide range of activities in activity-based teaching can provide additional stimulus or strengthen stimulus from traditional instruction to improve learning outcomes for students. Activity-based teaching can provide multiple and variant sensory stimulus to enhance cognitive stimulation during the learning sessions.

According to Levine and Guy (2007), the effectiveness of activity-based teaching also finds support from recognized principles of learning that align with activity-based teaching. Learning is dynamic. Students need to participate in the learning process to construct meaning. Learning is a social process. Isolation of students by making them passive learners can limit learning outcomes. Interactive learning can enhance outcomes through information sharing and meaning construction from shared experiences. Learning is contextual. Theo-ries are better understood when applied, which requires students' participation. Knowledge develops overtime. To build knowledge, students should revisit, process, and test or apply ideas through activities.

Studies on activity-based teaching in the general learning context supported the effectiveness of this instructional technique. Hung and Wong (2000) propounded that activity-based teaching in the project work of students supported problem solving skills and teamwork. Sivan et al. (2000) investigated active learning in two university programs and found that active learning facilitated independent learning and knowledge appli-cation to prepare students for the work setting. Active learning also enhanced interest in the course. Macklin (2001) studied the use of problem solving in a basic literacy course and found improvements in the analytical and critical capability of students. Chow et al. (2008) studied the use of different interactive instruction and found benefits to students including fun in learning, sus-tained interest in the topics, and ease in understanding concepts. Loyems et al. (2008) considered self-directed learning and problem-based learning and found that active participation of students gave them greater influence in the learning process leading to better learning outcomes.

A number of studies on hospitality education identified positive outcomes of activity-based learning. DeVries and Downie (2000) found that higher levels of student activity coincided with deeper learning in hospitality manage-ment. Martin and McEvoy (2003) investigated hotel simulation training in tourism and hospitality education and reported higher self-reported learning from highly involved participants. Duncan and Al-Nakeeb (2006) studied problem-based learning and found enjoyment, engagement and analytical skills as benefits to students. Two studies on hospitality education found differing results on the acceptance of activity-based learning by hospitality education students. Kivela and Kivela (2005) studied problem-based instruction in two groups of hotel and catering management classes at a Hong Kong university.

The results showed student appreciation of participatory and interactive learning, based on feed back indicating willingness to undergo this form of instruction again as well as identification of communication skills improvement and ease in learning topics as benefits.

Lashley and Barron (2006) investigated the learning preferences of hospitality and tourism students in

Australia and United Kingdom and found majority preference for concrete and active learning modes. However, students from East Asian countries influenced by Confucian values showed greater responsiveness to abstract and reflective instruction. The variance in the results of studies on student acceptance of activity-based teaching, especially relative to students in East Asia, such as Taiwan requires further research.

METHODOLOGY

As suggested by Alam (2011) this study used qualitative research to draw the accounts of students on their experiences of activity-based instruction in two marketing classes for tourism and hospitality majors. Interviews of students during a course evaluation session yielded research data. The interview involved three general questions on the learning outcomes in the marketing classes, the perceived highlight of the class and perceived effectiveness of in-class activities. There were 59 students in the two classes and 36 students provided feedback on their experiences of the classes. Typology and logical analysis were used to treat interview data. The research intended the results to present the application of a new and alternative teaching concept that could enhance higher education outcomes for hospitality and tourism students in Taiwan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study evaluated the accounts of hospitality marketing students to determine the impact on the learning process and effectiveness in influencing learning outcomes. The results have implications on the continuity of activity-based teaching in hospitality marketing classes as well as integration into the instruction method for other hospitality and tourism classes. The study also covered the acceptability of activity-based teaching by students of Confucian heritage. The study is an appropriate venue for investigating this issue further because the setting of the study is Taiwan, which is of Confucian heritage.

Extent of learning in marketing class

A review of the accounts of hospitality marketing students over their experience of activity-based teaching gave rise to three themes on learning outcomes, which are content or lessons learned, skills and competencies, and personal lessons.

The students reported learning basic concepts. Explicitly mentioned lessons are definitions of marketing and concepts, theories of marketing, marketing models such as the marketing mix or the 4Ps (product, price, place, promotion), the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and marketing strategy. All of these comprise of basic lessons in marketing. Some students also mentioned that lessons in marketing were explained mostly in the context of hospitality and tourism. The tie-up between marketing lessons and the course context expresses the extent that students were

able to create meaning from the learning process. Marketing lessons gained meaning when students were able to connect these to their course or career direction.

The students also reported learning to apply basic marketing concept and models to real life situations. A few students mentioned the usefulness of in-class practice lessons in possibly setting-up their own businesses in the future. A student also explained the applicability of practical lessons to the family business by citing a potential distribution site for a product and the means of targeting the high-end and middle to low-end market segments. Other students mentioned specific practical lessons on product development, service innovation, good communication, and effective presentation to sell ideas to superiors and the market. These accounts indicate the ways of applying basic marketing knowledge in the real world. These are evidence of the practical lessons gained by students from activity-based teaching.

The students also expressed learning skills and competencies from activity-based teaching. The students identified various skills and competencies and expressed these in different ways. These were grouped into a number of encompassing skills and competencies. One is analytical thinking with some students explaining the need to work-out their brains in thinking of good ideas, understanding issues and discovering solutions, and organizing thoughts to achieve coherence. Another is creativity. Some students explicitly mentioned creativity and imagination in applying marketing concepts to scenarios. Communication is another skill learned by students. Some of the students identified learning the importance of using appropriate language to make the audience understand them, selecting the mode of expression to ensure effective delivery, being aware of the audience, and making an attractive presentation using IT tools. Still another is teamwork. Students described working with other students in brainstorming ideas, organizing ideas, and assigning roles. Last is leadership. The students recounted having to select a presenter for the group. Leadership also applies in integrating ideas and ensuring completion of group work within a given time frame. Although students expressed difficulties in the in-class activities and reported varying levels of participation, there was agreement over the capability of the activities to build these skills and competencies. Continuity of activity-based instruction in other classes could further help students enhance these skills and competencies.

Personal lessons also emerged from the students' responses. These lessons relate to the other learning outcomes but were classified separately by relating to personal learning. One is having a better awareness or sense of oneself and other people. A number of students identified being able to do self-assessment, identify weaknesses, and recognize areas for improvement. A student identified opening one's mind as a personal lesson from class. Some students referred to coping with

stress as personal lessons. Taking responsibility also emerged as a personal lesson from the student responses. Activity-based instruction is able to facilitate multi-dimensional learning outcomes.

Perceived highlight of the marketing classes

The question on perceived highlight of the marketing class indicated the factor that students consider to be the strong influence on the learning outcomes previously mentioned. The students expressed appreciation of the class activities or in-class activities as well as activity-based instruction. A number of students explicitly mentioned class activities or in-class activities as highlight of the class in their accounts. Some of the respondents referred to the class in the general sense. However, since the accounts were reviews of two hospitality marketing classes, the classes were considered to refer to activity-based instruction used in class. The students expressed positive perspective of the in-class activities in the accounts of their experiences. A student expressed appreciation of the active teacher to imply positive perception of the mode of teaching as applied by the instructor. A number of students experienced pressure and stress in participating in in-class activities for the first time. A student also identified difficulties with the time limit. However, after completing the class, the students described the in-class activities as new, challenging, stimulating and even exciting and fun. Some students described their class experience as fulfilling by being able to hurdle the class activities and others felt proud of themselves.

Perceived effectiveness of in-class activities

The literature identified factors expressing the effectiveness of activity-based teaching, which are conscious knowledge building of students (Levine and Guy, 2007; Chow et al.,   2008), problem resolution capability (Macklin, 2001; Al-Nakeeb, 2006; Loyems et al., 2008), work preparedness (Sivan et al., 2000; Hawkins, 2006), and acceptability to students (Kivela and Kivela,   2005; Lashley and Barron, 2006). Student perceptions of the effectiveness of in-class activities were drawn   from descriptions and comments on their marketing   class experience.

Active knowledge building requires sensory stimulation of cognitive processes to achieve meaning construction and have students actively seek out knowledge (Levine and Guy, 2007). There were indications of active knowledge building by hospitality marketing students based on the descriptive words and phrases used. Creativity, imagination, openness to new things, brainstorming, self-thinking, practice, attention to details, and use of own words are expressions of sensory stimulation of cognitive functions as well as conscious knowledge-seeking of students. Practical learning outcomes expressed meaning construction. Active knowledge building is a continuous process. It is hoped that students will be able to develop independent learning as a habit.

There was evidence of problem-solving experience of students. Problem resolution, according to the accounts of students, involves multiple considerations. The students needed to focus on the problem and its solutions. They also had to consider process factors such as getting and synthesizing ideas from group members as well as resolving differences in opinion. The group members also had to consider time and context limitations. In practicing on problem-solving activities, the students expressed understanding of the multidimensionality of problem resolution. A student explained being able to know how to handle problems similar to those practiced in class.

Work preparedness relates to technical field knowledge and interpersonal skills, which hospitality firms value (Hernandez-March et al., 2009). Application of marketing principles to establishing own business in the future or to an existing family business as well as doing marketing proposals and plans for presentation in class support practical knowledge building.

Group activities requiring brainstorming, completion of group output, and reporting indicate practice on interpersonal skills in dealing with different group members.

Acceptance of activity-based teaching can be seen through the learning preferences of students (Lashley and Barron, 2006). Appreciation of the in-class activities and active teaching from the accounts of students support the use of activity-based teaching. Some students even went further by indicating preference for activity-based teaching in hopes of having similar classes in continuing the course, wanting   to have the same instructor and instruction for the next semester,   being excited to see what activities will happen in the next semester, and having more fun   than in other classes while learning a lot.

A student expressed not being used to the mode of instruction even after the end of   the class. With one semester of using activity-based teaching, there was collective appreciation of the technique. Some openly expressed preference for this technique but others may still prefer the traditional method.

Continuing the technique in succeeding classes and evaluating student experiences can provide more insight to find the optimal place for activity-based teaching in hospitality and management education at the university. Activity-based teaching is acceptable to students in Taiwan but individual preference could differ, depending on personality.

Conclusion

The study   expressed   a long   stride for   hospitality

marketing instruction and students' learning as a new and alternative teaching method. Previous studies identified the benefits of activity-based teaching. These were reflected by the accounts of student who experienced activity-based teaching in hospitality marketing classes. The results showed that the application of a new and alternative teaching concept could enhance higher education outcomes for hospitality and tourism students in Taiwan. A range of academic lessons, skills and competencies, and personal lessons were experienced by students. Descriptions of the in-class activities as highlight of the class expressed the encouragement of students to create and continue creating, imagine and continue imagining, and make great ideas and continue making them. Activity-based teaching can support active knowledge building, problem resolution skills building, and work preparedness of students. Applying activity-based teaching in two classes is only one step. More widespread and greater outcomes could be achieved in more strides, such as by using this to augment traditional instruction and using the technique in more hospitality classes.

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