

# Educational Tourism Empowerment: Implications for Flexible Learning and Digital Equity

Joyce Pittman\*

Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

## Abstract

This paper discusses the main characteristics of critical factors commonly associated with how educational tourism foundations might empower individuals and economies in global communities in a digital age society. Educational tourism is a lifeline to empowering individuals, world economies and educational communities. What factors or conditions are associated with supporting empowerment through educational tourism? The central question is what is the empowering connection between educational tourism, flexible learning and digital equity? The purpose of this narrative is to describe critical factors commonly associated with how educational tourism empowers individuals and economies in world communities in a digital age society. This affirmation is expanded in this article to include a potentially disenfranchised segment of groups who may be unintentionally cut-off from the benefits of educational tourism in an increasingly digital society. Before digital equity can evolve, basic access to information technology must flow to or be diffused into educational tourism systems and communities within poorer societies, thus emerges the conceptual role of educational tourism. Educational tourism involves events that are aligned with the World Tourism Organization definition. Educational tourism enables flexible learning, which in turn empowers individuals by enacting the principles of digital equity. Transformational leadership and resource management are fundamental to expand flexible learning and equity through educational tourism in a digital society.

**Keywords:** Flex learning; Empowerment; Educational tourism; Digital equity; Leadership

## Introduction

Educational tourism is a powerful means to increase social and economic capital and empowerment for learners and host communities worldwide [1]. But what factors or conditions are associated with supporting empowerment through educational tourism? More specifically, what are the connections between educational tourism, flexible learning and digital equity?

## The problem

While research has probed into some areas of the economic and developmental effects of educational tourism, and the influence of technology within this area has been studied, a comprehensive, systematic model of how these elements interact has remained elusive, even as the understanding such a model would provide has become more valuable.

In the realm of digital equity, in the decade since Rogers and Shukla [2] suggested information technologies were creating dramatically different societies, particularly in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the resulting changes themselves have become a new constant worldwide. The nature of access and its utility has changed. Dean et al. [3] noted that shifts in the technological center of gravity from fixed to ubiquitous use, from passive to active applications highlight significant dislocations within and between countries, economically, socially and politically.

Despite advances in technology and its applications in learning, educational travel is playing an increasing role for learners and the communities they visit, particularly in the British Commonwealth. Ritchie [4] diagrams the interactions between the environment and social resources, destination impacts, organizations and prospective educational tourists in a manner useful for those interested in further study.

Within this dynamic, flexible learning could provide a framework

within which host communities and visitors can realize the greatest results from expanded educational tourism initiatives. With the advent of m-learning, hosts can leverage ubiquitous handheld technology to acquire, apply and supplement high value knowledge and skills, while visitors can employ it to complement their on-site learning. One such example of augmented reality in learning is the recreation of the “virtual Berlin Wall”, currently in use to help visitors and learners envision the impact of the former barrier between East and West [5].

## Methodology

The conceptual framework is represented visually in Figure 1 (Educational Tourism Empowerment Conceptual Framework). Page and Czuba's [6] definition of empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain the requisite experiences and skills to exercise control over their own lives, both individually and within their community.

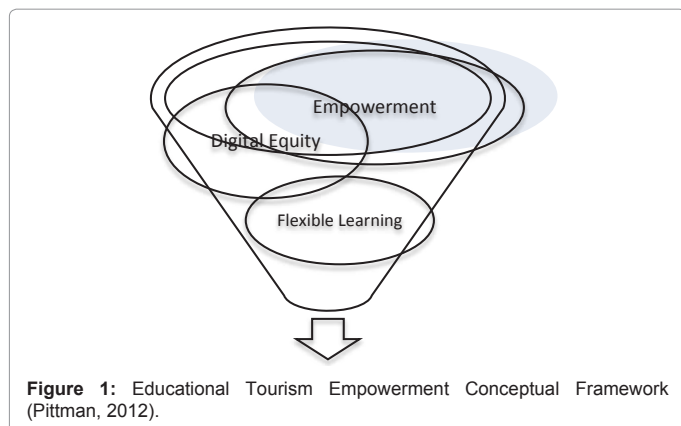
Digital equity for learners as defined by McLaughlin R [7] has these characteristics: providing educators and learners with access to technology resources, culturally responsive content of high quality, preparing and upgrading educators' skills to apply these resources and providing opportunities for learners and educators to create their own content. While the environment may not always be a formal classroom learning situation, the presence of adequate training, resources and support are still just as important.

\*Corresponding author: Joyce Pittman, Professor, Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA, E-mail: [joyce.a.pittman@drexel.edu](mailto:joyce.a.pittman@drexel.edu)

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## Arguments for Research

While limited studies have been conducted in ecotourism and sustainable tourism, very limited research has been conducted in the educational tourism field. The World Tourism Organization defines educational tourists as “individuals or groups who travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for more than twenty-four hours and not more than one year” for purposes including study, business, leisure and other activities.

Research on the interplay between digital equity, empowerment and flexible learning in an educational tourism environment could yield greater understanding on how these factors influence learners as well as the communities they visit, especially communities experiencing social or economic hardships, which have significant populations of disenfranchised people, or are in remote areas [8].

## Conclusions and Afterthoughts

This paper is limited in focus because this research does not include empirical studies, and is dependent on available literature and personal experience of the author.

Yet, the results establish rationales and incentives for researchers, educators and business leaders to develop a greater appreciation for the role that educational tourism can play for their respective constituencies, and accord it greater priority.

Particular foci would include (but not be limited to) how educational tourism can support the development of career paths in host communities, the application of flexible learning, and development or adaptation of existing and future technologies to be of more equitable service to further economic, community and individual development.

Transformational leadership and innovative resource management at firms, agencies and institutions is fundamental for them to expand and benefit from flexible learning and equity through educational learning in a digital society.

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