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Etourism Course Syllabus Development and Assessment. Evaluation of Alumni Perspective

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Abstract

The role of Information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the hospitality and tourism industry and experience has called in recent years for an adequate inclusion of eTourism-related topics and skills within academic curricula. To do so in a comprehensive and useful way, transferability of learned competences has to be particularly considered, so to ensure that alumni can apply in their jobs what they have learned during their academic studies about eTourism. In this chapter, the case of a course titled "New Media in Tourism Communication", offered within a Master in International Tourism in Lugano (Switzerland) is presented, evaluating its transferability to the needs of the industry, as measured by its alumni.

Introduction

As technology and tourism are two of the fastest growing sectors in the world economy, there is an enormous demand for graduates with combined tourism, business and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) skills, making them very desirable employees. Caring for the future of eTourism – defined as the use of ICTs in the travel and tourism industry/experience [1,2] is equal to caring for balanced and adequate training practices for future professionals in tourism and hospitality field. To do so, continuous improvements and updates of the curriculum are needed. In the last years a strong necessity of developing eTourism modules and their integration into tourism and hospitality academic programs has been extensively discussed [3-8]. While a few cases of full eTourism curricula have been launched, several academic institutions around the globe have implemented single dedicated courses. As a matter of fact, most of them focus on Information Technologies and Information Systems. Nevertheless, according to recent research of Johanson et al. and Rodríguez et al. [9,10], the skills most desired by tourism enterprises nowadays are communication abilities and electronic information sharing. Students are expected to be competent not just in understanding technology, they need to be able to "analyze and interpret system data to solve problems and improve business strategy and competency" [11].

A European Union funded research – titled e-TF: eTourism Framework (www.etourism-project.eu) has recently tried to map all eTourism-related jobs available on the market, proposing five main ones: eTourism Content Curator, eTourism Destination Manager, eTourism Marketing Specialist, Tourism Online Reputation Manager, and eTourism Revenue Manager, and has described them according to the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) [12].

While vocational training might allow an easier mapping of specific job profiles, academics around the globe are still challenged to develop an eTourism syllabus that strikes an optimal balance among the triple requirements of (i) academic research, (ii) tourism and hospitality industry, and (iii) students' expectations [13,14]. In order to assess which ICT skills should be gained by tourism students through their educational career, it is crucial to solicit efforts from principal stakeholders such as future employers, educators, and alumni themselves. All previous research about ICT needs and contents that alumni should have was mainly concentrated on the requirements of two stakeholders: industry and academia [15-17], while the needs expressed by hospitality and tourism students themselves, be they current students or alumni, were not studied so far.

This research is looking at a specific eTourism syllabus that approaches the field of ICT integration into tourism and hospitality curriculum from the communication sciences perspective, and studies the experience of alumni of such course/curriculum when it comes to (i) relevance of ICTs in their professional practices, and to (ii) transferability of what they have learned on the eTourism subject to their current professional life.

This research can be framed within instructional design studies [18-20], as providing both elements of analysis – *which ICTs are used by alumni in their professional practices?* – as well as elements of evaluation of the current course – *which eTourism topics have been useful/transferable, and which others were either less useful or missing?*

On the other side, within course evaluation practices, this research tackles the "transferability" level among the four proposed by [21] in his training evaluation model: reaction, knowledge, *transfer* and impact.

Outlining the case

At the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI Lugano, Switzerland), the course New Media for Tourism Communication (42 teaching hours, accounting for 4.5 credits out of 120 overall Master academic credits) is offered as a mandatory first term course at the Master in International Tourism at the Faculty of Economics in collaboration with the Faculty of Communication Sciences. The course has been taught by several instructors since 2006. By March 2015 more than 230 students have participated in the Master in International Tourism,

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while 156 of them have already successfully graduated.

Students attending the Master in International Tourism have very different backgrounds: from economics to cultural heritage interpretation, from foreign languages to management. Few of them have a background in communication, technologies, or online marketing. Nevertheless, almost all of them use extensively the internet, social media (in more recent years), and mobile applications, and they are handy with portable gadgets in daily life.

Due to the multiple backgrounds and the nature of the Master program, students do not have a single area for future employment: alumni are active in the hotel industry in different functions, at national tourism boards, media agencies, travel agencies, event management organizations, cultural institutions, not to mention the academic field. This situation allows course instructors to present eTourism practices and case studies encompassing most of the sectors of their potential employment.

Course goals, contents and instructional design

The course has been designed taking into consideration managerial competence scenarios. As future managers, current students of the Master in International Tourism should be prepared to manage both human and other eTourism-related resources, namely they will be required to (i) fruitfully interact with ICT experts; (ii) design and evaluate eTourism projects; (iii) manage available ICT assets (people, technologies, other resources) in the most effective and efficient way.

When it comes to different levels of knowledge, the course considers both explicit and tacit knowledge [22] students should (i) know current etourism applications, technologies and successful practices; (ii) *know how* to plan, run and evaluate eTourism related activities, as well as how to interact fruitfully with ICT experts, especially when it comes to expressing their own needs (user requirements); (iii) be aware of the crucial role played by ICT within the tourism and hospitality sectors, both in the travelers' experience as well as within the industry at large.

Table 1 matches those goals with a sample of actual course contents and adopted by course instructor's strategies. Besides ex-cathedra lessons, course teaching strategy encompasses industry cases presentations, testimonies by experts and leaders in the field, and group projects. In particular, group projects are designed to provide students with real (or highly realistic) hands-on projects: for instance they are involved in online promotion of events, or in benchmarking

given online business models, or in doing usability analysis of tourism/ hospitality websites or mobile apps. Practical experiences in group projects are supposed to increase the transferability of acquired knowledge to actual professional contexts. Such transferability is further ensured through a constant tutoring activity, where learners are helped to design their activities according to adequate theoretical models and best practices, and to reflect on their current experience accordingly [23].

Learners have to sit a written exam, awarding 60% of the final mark, while the group project accounts for 30%, and a summarization exercise done in turn by a group of students in order to recap the previous lesson of the course accounts for 10%.

Those students, who are more interested in the topic, are given the chance to write a Master thesis in the eTourism field under the supervision of the course instructor.

Etourism Course Syllabus Development and Assessment of its Transferability

The main research objective of this study is to assess the adequateness and transferability of the eTourism course:

- Is there a gap between what alumni need at work and what they learned in the course?

- Are they able to use in their job the content they have learned during New Media for Tourism Communication course?

Research design

In order to understand if current course design is valuable, an online questionnaire was mailed to 176 Master in International Tourism students (all alumni and students of the 2nd year) with an invitation to participate in the study. Data was gathered in fall 2014 and was elaborated using descriptive statistical analysis. The online survey accounted for thirteen questions in total with a further possibility to leave additional comments (Q14). They covered demographic information and current employment situation (Q1-Q5), the role of ICTs in their current professional activities (Q6-Q7), how they upgrade their knowledge/skills in the eTourism area (Q8), the relevance of the eTourism course they attended during the Master for their current professional needs (Q9-Q12), the interest in eTourism they had during while attending the Master and now (Q13). Several questions were

Knowledge level	Sample of contents	Strategies
Know current eTourism technologies and successful practices	- Definition and map of eTourism - Website communication model (WCM) - Online content quality criteria - Search engines (Search Engine Optimization and Search Engine Marketing) - Web2.0 - Business models in online marketing - Mobile applications eLearning in tourism	- Ex-cathedra lessons - Summarization exercise done by students - Reference materials and course reader - Written exam
Know how to plan, run and evaluate eTourism related activities, as well as how to interact fruitfully with ICT experts, especially when it comes to express their own needs (user requirements)	- Diffusion of innovations - Online promotion - Usages and usability analysis - Online reputation analysis	- Collaborative projects - Case studies - Presentation of Master and PhD theses done within eTourism field
Be aware of the crucial role played by ICT within the tourism and hospitality sectors		- Meeting testimonials/experts - Possibility to attend ENTER-eTourism Conferences as volunteers and/or social media reporters

Table 1: New media for Tourism Communication course goals, content and adopted learning strategies.

designed in a form of Likert-scale responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Even if the online questionnaire is able to give crucial insights, due to the auto selection of the respondents the results should be cautiously generalised to the entire population of the Master in International Tourism alumni.

Sample structure and demographics

Overall, 61 persons out of 176 answered the survey, yielding to a 34.7% response rate. 47 respondents out of 61 are currently employed either while working (38 respondents) or pursuing their internships (9). Only these respondents were considered for this study, as they could test the *transferability* of the concerned eTourism course. Respondents are active in the following sectors: 9 in the academic field, either being PhD candidates, assistants or lecturers. Further distribution of current occupations is: Travel Agency/Tour Operator (7), Destination Management Organization (6), Event Management Organization (5), Consultancy (5), Hospitality business (4), other tourism/hospitality companies (4). Seven respondents are currently working outside of the tourism field in the following industries: banking, web marketing, television, NGO, and software development.

Female respondents prevailed, accounting for 72.3%. This number is fully aligned with the general demographic structure of the Master in International Tourism students. As for the age of the respondents, the following distribution can be seen: respondents were from 24 to 48 years old, with the average being 29 years old.

Results and Dicussion

For the question (Q6) *How much do your working activities involve the use of Information and Communication Technologies and the internet?* On a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) up to 5 (always), no one selected the first option, and only 15.2% selected "2" or "3", while 84.8% chose either "4" (21.7%) or "5 – always" (63.1%), which supports the statement that ICTs are playing a significant role in the daily working life of Master in International Tourism alumni.

While answering the question (Q7): *Please, indicate which technologies you use the most in your current working activities?* The most common answers were the internet, search engines, Google services (Analytics, AdWords), eMail, mobile applications, and social media tools such as Hootsuite or Sysomos, followed by professional tools, such as content management systems, hotel booking engines, e-commerce systems, or travel review websites.

In addition, ICT does play a major role when it comes to upgrading knowledge/skills in the field of eTourism (Q8) by alumni of the Master in International Tourism program. They do so through one or more of the following strategies: following specialized websites/blogs/mailing lists (51.1%), reading books/magazines (40.0%), attending seminars/conferences (33.3%), following professional groups on LinkedIn (31.1%), following Twitter (17.8%), and attending a further Master/Postgraduate Course/MBA (6.7%). It is important to note here the blend of strategies, which suggests a wide adoption of digital means and at the same time does not exclude at all offline/in-presence tools. This is fully in line with research in the field of eLearning and the young population, which stress such a combination of learning strategies (Rapetti and Cantoni, forth), and can be found in other analyses of tourism professionals [24-25].

While answering the following question (Q9) *Do you think the course New Media for Tourism Communication has been important considering your current activities?* the vast majority of respondents

(82.0%) answered that it was either important or very important for their daily working tasks (values from "3" to "5"), while only a few answered that it is not at all relevant (4.4%), or only somehow (15.6%). This provides a clear indication that knowledge/skills acquired through the course are being transferred to their current activities, at the same time confirming previous research on the value and the role of ICTs in current tourism working environment [1,2].

The question (Q10) *Which topics – if any – of the course have been more relevant for your current activities?* has been answered by 21 respondents (44.7%), who provided up to three topics each. The most popular answers were: search engines (both search engine optimization – SEO – as well as search engine marketing – SEM), online promotion, internet advertising models, reputation in online media, mobile strategies and applications, and web-analytics.

Former students were also asked to suggest topics to include in the syllabus (Q11), which could be fruitfully transferred to their current professionals activities: 45.5% of the respondents provided suggestions. Their answers included:

- More practical hints on how to use Google tools in order to improve business (analytics, AdWords, etc.),

- More cases on IT companies and their innovative business models, which are changing the way both industry players and customers approach online search and pre-post stay.

- Alumni also suggested extending the place devoted to presentations of more recent trends in eTourism, such as SoLoMo (Social-Local-Mobile) and gamification.

While it should be noted that some of suggested contents have been already integrated within the course in recent years, these requests suggest a particular interest in "applied" presentations, which are easily transferable to everyday professional life.

As for the proposal on indicating content of the course that might be eliminated from the program (Q12), very few answers were received. One suggested further reducing technical details. Question # 13 was intended to assess possible changes in their interest vis-à-vis of eTourism. While about half of respondents (47.7%) declared that during the course they were "equally interested as now", 29.6% have increased their interest, and 22.7% have reduced it.

Conclusions

Thanks to the collected feedback from alumni, both (i) relevance of ICTs in their professional practices, and (ii) transferability of what they have learned in the eTourism course to their current professional life were evaluated.

This study has shown that alumni of the Master in International Tourism do make an extensive use of ICTs, and are quite satisfied with the proposed syllabus of the course New Media for Tourism Communication, due to the fact that covered topics have proved to be relevant to their professional needs. The vast majority of them declare that the course is important for their current activities. Among the most important topics, they listed: Search Engines, Web 2.0, Online Promotion, and Google Analytics. They have also provided important suggestions in order to improve the course, and to make it better attuned to current professional needs. In particular, they suggest to cover more extensively new trends, competences connected with highly diffused online marketing tools, and to offer more cases' presentations.

Findings of this research can be useful to hospitality educators in

making sure that the ICTs-related skills needed by the job market are duly covered by the overall curriculum and course(s) syllabus.

The following limitation of this study should be mentioned: as this research is based on a single case, it cannot be generalized without extreme caution, while its methodology, on the contrary, can be fully – and, as we hope, fruitfully – replicated in similar cases. A further limitation is that both authors have been and are still involved in designing and running this course. While every effort has been done in order to avoid biases, this remains a limitation that the readers need to be aware of. Further empirical studies are required in order to provide comparable data about other eTourism courses globally, as well as to collect similar data in the future, so to be able to compare data in different periods of time. Furthermore, as eTourism related jobs will be more specialized, the evaluation of specific curriculums (e.g. Tourism Online Reputation Manager or eTourism Revenue Manager) might be brought on the agenda of future research activities.

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