Horses for courses? A comparison of four undergraduate WIL streams in tourism

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This paper compares four WIL streams embedded in a Professional Development course for tourism, hospitality and event management students. Leximancer was used to analyse key themes emerging from reflective diaries completed by the 137 students in the course. Results highlight that learning outcomes and experiences differed depending on the WIL stream. These are explained using Aristotle’s three approaches to knowledge.

Keywords: internship, placement, executive shadowing, reflection, tourism, phronesis, skills

Background and Literature

Several studies have explored the learning outcomes of industry placements in tourism and hospitality education (cf. Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Busby, 2003; Collins, 2002; Mistilis & Harris, 2009). The most common conclusion is that tourism and hospitality internships play an important role in developing transferable skills such as communication, customer relations, networking, team work, time management and problem solving (Beggs, Ross & Goodwin, 2008; Busby, 2003; Busby, Brunt, Baber, 1997; Lee, 2008; Leslie & Richardson, 2000) or technical knowledge of the discipline or field (Busby, Brunt, Baber, 1997; Lee, 2008). However internships also provide learning benefits that extend beyond the development of skills and knowledge. Some students have reported that their internship experience resulted in increasing confidence (Busby, 2003). Crossley, Jamieson and Brayley (2007, p.312) observed that hospitality internships provided “an opportunity to have an intensive, work-based exposure to a broad range of operations within a company” while Lee (2008) reported that students developed a better understanding of how organisations function. Similarly, some authors in the tourism literature have argued that students should have the opportunity to put theory into practice to ensure a balance between vocational and theoretical content (Airey, 1996; Busby, 2003). Recent work has focussed on the impact of internships on career planning and development (Chen & Shen, 2012).

A useful conceptual framework for understanding the outcomes of learning experiences is provided by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who argued that learning is associated with three kinds of competencies: episteme, techne and phronesis. Episteme (theoretical knowledge) is concerned with knowledge that is systematic and universal across particular contexts. Techne (practical skill) refers to the skills, routines and techniques associated with making, creating and doing. Phronesis (practical wisdom) is about the development and application of experiential knowledge to specific contexts. The distinction between techne and phronesis is important. Phronesis is not just about doing the right thing, but acting in the right way, for the right reasons and at the right time (Saugstad, 2005). Phronesis extends beyond skills and technique to include reflexivity and is cultivated through experience, practice and repetition (Jamal, 2004).

While the research on internships is useful and the findings are generally consistent, other WIL approaches in tourism, hospitality and events education are rarely discussed. As Patrick et al. (2008) note, there are a variety of WIL approaches that can be designed to introduce students to the world of work within a purposely designed curriculum. In tourism and hospitality education these have included, but are not limited to, practical or student consultancy projects (Haywood, 1983; Rimmington, 1999), shadowing programs (Solnet, Robinson & Cooper, 2007), industry immersion programs (Ruhanen, Breakey & Robinson, 2011) and industry mentoring.

This paper will address this shortcoming by comparing four WIL streams embedded in a compulsory Professional Development course designed to prepare undergraduate tourism, hospitality and event management students for a professional career. These streams include:

• Industry Placement (IP) – students gain work experience within the tourism, hospitality or events sectors
• Reflection on Current Employment (ROCE) - allows students to use their current employment as the basis for their reflection.
• Tourism Regional Immersion Project (TRIP) - small teams of students live in a regional destination for 4-6 days and complete an industry-determined research project

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- Executive Shadowing Program (ESP) - students ‘shadow’ a senior manager in industry or government

Students are accepted into each stream based on their academic performance. In the case of ESP and TRIP students are also interviewed. The analysis will consider the ‘student voice’ and will attempt to situate the learning outcomes of each stream within Aristotle’s framework of episteme, techne and phronesis.

Methodology

As part of the assessment for this course, students submit a reflective portfolio about their workplace experience, focusing on what they have learnt about the industry, workplace issues, and their own job-relevant strengths, weaknesses and general career-readiness. One hundred and thirty-seven reflective portfolios were categorised according to the four workplace streams, then analysed using Leximancer, a software system that performs a type of automated content analysis of textual documents in digital format, before producing a visual display (map) of the extracted information (Baggio & Marzano, 2007). Leximancer extracts thesaurus-based concepts from the text data, codes these concepts, and then creates a concept map (Smith and Humphreys, 2006) highlighting the frequency and connectedness of concepts. From this, themes of directly related concepts emerge. The key advantage of this approach is that it systematically identifies themes that are significant across the whole data set, a particular advantage with large volumes of text. Despite automating some aspects of qualitative data analysis human intervention and validation is still required at each stage of the analysis to remove unwanted concepts, to merge similar concepts and to interpret underlying themes and linkages.

Results and discussion

The first concept map (Figure 1) illustrates student reflections across all four WIL streams. The map includes concepts (indicated by the smaller grey nodes) which are grouped into themes (indicated by the larger coloured bubbles). Leximancer groups concepts into themes based on how often they appear together in a block of text (in this case a sentence). The concept map indicates that particular concepts and themes are more closely linked to some streams than others. The closer the concept appears to the stream name, the more often these concepts are mentioned in students’ reflective portfolios. For example, the concept map shows that ESP students tended to focus on the industry as a whole, business issues, and the opportunity provided by the WIL experience, indicative of an experience where observation and shadowing of senior executives is paramount.

![Figure 1: Concept map of student reflections in all four WIL streams](image-url)
TRIP students were involved in small group projects in regional areas, working closely with their project supervisors. In these students’ portfolios, concepts relating to the project, teamwork, meetings, other people and emotions were dominant. For ROCE students, who could use their current employment as their WIL experience, emotions and teamwork rated highly while for IP students, whose positions and responsibilities were many and varied, relationships were less clear. The portfolios of IP students tended to reflect upon specific tasks, duties, management and the hotel, probably due to many students in this stream being placed in hospitality positions.

To better explore whether there are differences between the four streams of WIL and whether these represent any important implications, individual concept maps were produced for each stream. For the ESP stream (Figure 2), concepts centred on work issues such as time management, their thoughts, and management approaches; the industry, particularly in relation to their careers, future and the opportunity to meet people; and the learning experience itself – skills, what’s important and what they had gained from the experience. These findings match the nature of the experience, as ESP predominantly involves observing, meeting and learning from industry leaders. Teamwork, being managed and emotions were less important for this group but, again, this reflects the observational and individual nature of the ESP experience. As ESP is a competitive stream (based on academic results, relevant work experience and interview performance), it was not surprising that the importance of interviews also featured in this map. ESP students benefit from gaining a managerial perspective of the workplace, enabling them to better understand the practical requirements of being a manager as well as reflect on the relevance of theory learned during their management degree studies. However, these students are not necessary learning by ‘doing’, so the emphasis tends to be on developing a knowledge of the industry and reflecting on the role of being a senior manager. Aristotle’s notions of episteme and phronesis are most evident in this type of experience.

![Figure 2: Concept map of student reflections in the ESP stream](image)

Students in the TRIP stream complete team projects in regional areas, in response to regional tourism operators’ needs (eg, designing tourist experiences, data collection, accommodation audits, etc). Figure 3 illustrates that for these students, issues related to teamwork - dealing with team members, reflecting on their abilities, research tasks - were paramount. Closely related to this were concepts linked to work – their feelings, their beliefs and the job itself. As TRIP students produce a research report as part of their immersion experience, ‘report’ concepts rated highly. Operators also featured, particularly in relation to communication skills, though the concept was less important than expected given that TRIP students had to work closely with local tourism operators. The outcomes of this stream show a strong emphasis on the development of technical skills (techne).
The IP map (Figure 4) indicates a somewhat diverse range of concepts – work, particularly in relation to management and hotels; skills, which incorporates aspects such as communication, understanding, learning and knowledge; industry issues such as management, opportunities, beliefs and experiences; feelings and time management. This diversity is not surprising considering the variety of placements on offer, the fact that most students are participating in their first ‘real’ industry placement, and that a significant proportion are international (NESB) students. Figure 4 provides an indication of issues graduates with little ‘in-the-field’ experience are likely to face when entering the workforce, and skills that should be developed via tertiary-based WIL experiences. There is a strong emphasis on ‘doing’ and developing skills (techne) but also on reflexivity (phronesis).
The themes emerging from the ROCE concept map (Figure 5) largely focus on specific tasks and duties related to work such as training, managers and staff, guests and service, hotels and careers in hotels; and management. Interestingly, concepts such as learning and feelings do not feature strongly in this group’s portfolios although this is not entirely unexpected when considering the reasons students select ROCE, i.e., convenience of working in a familiar job along with the capacity to continue earning income without working voluntarily, elsewhere. This suggests that WIL experiences that allow students to remain working ‘within their comfort zones’ may not ‘add value’ to professional career-readiness. While these students have undoubtedly already developed important skills (techne) and technical knowledge (episteme) through their current employment, ROCE may not add much value as a learning experience, other than providing students with an opportunity to reflect on their workplace.

Figure 5: Concept map of student reflections in the ROCE stream

Conclusions

Aristotle’s concepts of episteme, techne and phronesis have been used as a broad framework for situating the key themes that emerge from students’ reflections. The content analysis highlights a number of thematic differences in the reflective discourse of students who have completed each stream. The ESP stream appears to be most successful in developing episteme and technical knowledge of being a manager in the tourism industry. The strength of TRIP is that it clearly develops project management and interpersonal skills that are valuable for career advancement in the tourism industry. IP is also useful for developing skills but the focus is more strongly on interpersonal skills. Arguably, while the experience itself may not develop phronesis in all streams, the requirement for all students to reflect on their experience does provide a learning opportunity once students return to the formal university setting. The results indicate that while a different pattern of knowledge and skills outcomes is apparent for each stream, all four streams offer valuable learning experiences which achieve the broad learning outcomes of the course. Future research might extend the approach used in this paper by analysing in more detail the qualitative text found in student reflections. This type of approach could also be applied to other disciplines to explore similarities or differences between various WIL options.
References


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