

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ON MICE
EDUCATION: THE CASE OF ICES2009

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ABSTRACT

A case study of Hong Kong students participating in a two-semester real life project was used to look at how experiential learning can be applied to the meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) context. A reflection checklist in the format of questionnaires was used to collect data on 37 students' learning experience and learning outcomes. Finally, 48 interviews with key informants of the project were conducted to collect first-hand opinions and insights for experiential learning. Findings indicated a need for convention and event education in Hong Kong. Experiential learning is beneficial to students as achievements on skills and knowledge were also found matching with the instructor's pre-set learning outcomes and students' expectations.

KEYWORDS: MICE education, Experiential Learning, convention and event, training needs

BACKGROUND

The meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions (MICE) sector experienced tremendous growth during the past decades and is truly global in nature (Weber & Chon, 2002). Governments are increasingly aware that MICE activities are an invaluable means of attracting business and economic activity to regions (Lau, Milne, & Johnston, 2005). Apart from an expansion of MICE venue space, the rapid growth of Hong Kong's MICE in the past decade is also supported by the

consecutive increase of attendees. Statistics from the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) show that the number of convention and exhibition arrivals in 2006 reached 779,324, which represented a 219% increase over 1997 (HKTb, 2005, 2007). The intended per capita spending of the convention and exhibition visitors reached \$10,349 which represented more than twice the HK\$4,478 spending of the average leisure visitor (HKTb, 2005). According to figures of International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Hong Kong ranked 12 in terms of number of meetings in 2007 (ICCA, 2008). Moreover, the economic impact study conducted by the Hong Kong Exhibition and Convention Industry Association (HKECIA) showed the exhibition industry had expenditure effects of HK\$26.4 billion in 2006 which also led to fiscal impact of \$970 million while creating 58,500 fulltime equivalent employments (HKECIA, 2007). Apparently, great government supports in promoting Hong Kong as a preferable conference destination and satisfying its customers is necessary (Qu, Li, & Chau, 2000).

With full commitment to develop the high yield sector of MICE, the financial secretary also earmarked an additional HK\$150 million in the 2008-09 Budget to accelerate the efforts in MICE promotion in the coming five years with an aim of attracting more high quality and mega convention and exhibition projects to Hong Kong (Financial Secretary Office, 2008). This was a result of the Chief Executive announcing in his 2007-08 Policy Address that the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development would lead a cross-sector steering committee comprises representatives from government, convention and exhibition, travel, hotel trades and tertiary and training institutions to review and formulate development strategies for the MICE sector (Office of the Chief Executive, 2007). The steering committee supported the HKTb's workplan to launch a

"Meetings & Exhibitions Hong Kong" (MEHK) office in November 2008 to offer one-stop professional support to MICE organizers choosing Hong Kong as a destination for meetings and exhibitions, and to incorporate MICE in secondary and tertiary education to enhance efforts in nurturing and retaining MICE talent and ensure that our education and training programs can meet market needs (HKTC, 2007). To ensure a continuous supply of world-class professionals to support the rapid development of relevant industries, one of the major challenges the MICE sector faces in human resources development is the provision of training courses at various levels to meet the evolving needs to support long-term development (Legislative Council, 2008). To meet this increasing demand from the tourism and hospitality industry to train professionals, the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) also proposed a new curriculum in a proactive position to the pressing needs from the MICE sector.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR MICE

A distinct feature of this new program is that it has responded to industry needs from inception with industry involvement to ensure the curriculum mirror the realities of the changing business climate to meet the needs of the industry. The newly developed subjects would cover the broad areas of meeting planning, exhibition management, venue management, and convention sales and service. Two of the new subjects had already been incorporated into SHTM's BSc (Honors) programs in Hotel Management and Tourism Management. SHTM students enrolled in the electives, Special Event Projects I and II, were given the challenging opportunity of practising their skills in real life settings. They were actively involved in

organizing the International Convention and Expo Summit 2009 (ICES2009), held in May 2009 in Hong Kong.

One of the inherent problems in designing such a curriculum is to introduce a practical and experiential element (Digance, Davidson, & Gleeson, 2001). The emphasis of experiential learning is the hands-on practice. Experiential learning has long been an approach used in hospitality and tourism. Kolb's (1984) cycle that starts from abstract conceptualization, with active experimentation, then turn into concrete experience and through reflective observation where lead back to rethinking of the abstract concepts was the focal point for applying hospitality learning through work integrated education (Dev, 1990; LeBruto & Murray, 1994; Rainsford, 1992; Whitney, 1984). Previous studies on the learning styles also suggested that hospitality and tourism students are mainly convergers who "perceive their environments through analytic thought or abstract conceptualization and transform that information through action" (Hsu, 1999, p. 19). Asian students study in Australia and United Kingdom are more likely to respond positively to abstract and reflective approaches but negatively to active and concrete strategies (Lashley & Barron, 2006). Kolb's experiential learning cycle was suggested as a way to encourage the development reflective practice through balance learning strategies. The MICE subject area, by its nature, lends itself to a combination of formal and structure learning with hands-on experience (Lawrence & McCabe, 2001). Despite the significant growth of the MICE sector and its pressing needs in training, relatively little research has been completed in structuring MICE curriculum in responding to incorporating practical and experiential element.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge about links between MICE, training and experiential learning. To examine these links, this research has the following objectives:

1. to evaluate the learning experience of Hong Kong Chinese students of the practical and experiential elements of the MICE curriculum
2. to evaluate the effectiveness in achieving the learning outcomes through experiential learning
3. to develop and present a case study that embodies themes relating to MICE and experiential learning

METHODOLOGY

A case study of students participating in a real life project was used to look at how experiential learning can be applied to the MICE context. Through the nine-month curriculum delivery spread over two semesters, students integrated and synthesized the resources, staff, time, costs, specific skills and process to complete innovative event projects and culminate in an in-depth analysis of the project's performance. Students enrolled in the subjects and successfully planned, organized, managed and evaluated an actual international conference attended by 150 delegates from 12 countries, the ICES2009.

A reflection checklist and questionnaires was used to collect data on 37 students' learning experience and learning outcomes. Finally, 48 interviews with key informants of the project were conducted to collect first-hand opinions and insights for experiential learning. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with all the stakeholders including students, organizing committee members, Summit Co-chairs, Program Co-chairs, delegates, speakers, moderators, presenters, hotel and

venue representatives, sponsors, volunteers, media representatives and other suppliers to act as a debriefing to evaluate the experience. These informants were selected because their knowledge about and willingness to provide information for the issues of the research (Kumar, Stern, & Anderson, 1993).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the 37 reflection checklists in questionnaire format collected the students' and volunteers' evaluation of the ICES2009 and the learning experience. To understand students' achievement, evaluating the event was a way of self-reflection. Consistent to the industry informant interview findings, students also considered the Summit was successful in particular the program content. (See Table 1.) Major contributing factors to the success of the ICES 2009 as a whole are social arrangement, publicity, registration, logistic arrangements, sponsorship amount and the satisfaction of the delegates.

Table 1 Evaluation of ICES 2009 (n=37)

Components of ICES 2009	Mean*
Program content	4.24
Satisfaction of speakers and paper presenters	4.24
Satisfaction of delegates	4.16
Sponsorship amount	4.14
Program structure	4.05
Social arrangements	3.92
Registration	3.92
Production of all related materials	3.89
Publicity	3.86
Logistics arrangements	3.78
Financial management	3.5

*based on 5-likert scale; 5: excellent; 1: very poor

When evaluating the learning outcomes, students reflected in general that they obtained a valuable learning experience (mean = 4.35), learnt how to work well as a

team (mean = 4.3) and obtained knowledge on special event management (mean = 4.16). They have been satisfied with this learning experience (mean = 4.16). (See Table 2.) All elements are significantly contributive with obtained technical skills receiving the lowest mean (3.14). This relates to the subject's emphasis not mainly on information technology.

Table 2 Evaluation of the experiential learning outcomes (n=37)

Attributes	Mean*
Obtained a valuable learning experience	4.35
Learnt how to work well as a team	4.30
Obtained knowledge on special event management	4.16
Been satisfied with this learning experience	4.16
Improved my communication skills	4.00
Objectively appraised the work of others	3.97
Applied concept/knowledge learnt to real-life situations	3.95
Justified solutions made to problems	3.92
Involved myself completely in this learning process	3.89
Increased competence in special event operation	3.86
Developed better interpersonal skills	3.81
Made effective judgment during planning	3.78
Critically analyzed the feasibility of the project	3.75
Managed effectively all the available resources to achieve set objectives	3.70
Developed transferable skills to sectors other than event management	3.70
Developed skills that are necessary for effective communication in the MICE industry	3.68
Applied my creative skills	3.65
Objectively analyzed and critiqued the organization of the event	3.65
Become more confident	3.65
Enhanced my management skills	3.64
Obtained useful experience in constructing and reconstructing concepts and knowledge	3.62
Become more sociable	3.59
Changed the attitude towards my whole learning experience	3.57
Openly discussed the strengths and weaknesses of others	3.54
Become more competitive in the future work place	3.46
Changed the attitude towards working in this industry	3.46
Built up useful networks	3.27
Improved my employability upon graduation	3.22
Enhanced my future career path	3.19
Obtained technical skills	3.14

*based on 5-likert scale; 5: a lot; 1: minimal

Findings from the 18 industry informant interviews indicated a need for convention and event education in Hong Kong. Industry representatives commented that the industry growth leads to increased demand for trained professionals in Hong Kong. However, different views were recorded on the nature of the training from a formal degree, continuous training, to on-the-job training. While on-the-job trainings enhance learners in flexibility and responsiveness to meet challenges, practical experience in carrying different roles also enhances critical thinking, crisis management, and independent thoughts, problem-solving should be emphasized rather than conceptual learning. Such comments from industry representatives and delegates are similar to the core idea of experiential learning. Informants also pointed out that a gap between academic knowledge and industry application exists. However, such gap should not be the reason to deny the role of formal education in the convention and event sector as similar gaps prevail in any fields of study. Individual informants also supported that theoretical education and industry practices are complimentary to one another. To conclude, convention and event education is expected to encourage students' critical thinking and analysis, and pose advantages to students when comparing to graduates from a non-related fields.

In line with findings from the 30 student interviews, industry informants also stated that convention and event education can provide students with background information, intellectual skills, knowledge, and professional terminologies required in the MICE industry. Graduates with such background are considered with faster and more effective progression in the industry and enhancement of further learning and knowledge reconstructing. The hands-on learning helps cultivating students' interest before stepping into the industry. This is especially true for students who did not enroll in the related subjects before organizing ICES as they found it was more

difficult and time-consuming to pick up the knowledge when working. Although a few students thought the education was challengeable to apply to reality, they still found some theories could be applied to situations with modification. Some students indicated that their interests were built up during their study and experiential learning activity gave them a real touch on their interest.

In terms of the role of experiential learning, all informants stated that experiential learning is critical for a convention and event education. Some informants further emphasized the majority of all programs, but not only MICE program, should base on experiential learning because of its role in hands-on experience and advanced experience. Through experiential learning, students can access to industry personnel, feel the industry and find the interests, re-construct knowledge learnt, and enhance maturity in thinking. Experiential learning is useful especially with good supervision which allows students to adapt a trial-and-error approach to learn from the mistakes. As a process, practical experiences strengthen the solid elements to the framework of knowledge learnt. Similar to the findings of industry informants, students also considered the usefulness of experiential learning. Comparing to other course projects, students regard the experiential learning activities are closer to reality which help testing their knowledge learnt and modify their knowledge to different situations. Such process is consistent to Kolb's (Kolb, 1984) learning cycle.

Students reflected positive changes they noticed on the perspectives of skills, knowledge and attitude. In terms of skills, communication is the one skill which all informants named, followed by interpersonal, computer, organization and management skills. One unexpected skill that the students observed improving was leadership skill, especially for students who took part as the coordinators of the sub-

committees. Students also expressed that the knowledge used is most often unintentional. Both the knowledge obtained from MICE-related and other subjects were applied including marketing, accounting, customer relation management, consumer behavior and human resource management. The theories learnt from the previous subjects provided a framework for the real experience, and in return concepts were reinforced and enhanced with important elements within the framework. Through experiencing the concepts and theories, these pieces of knowledge were modified based on the real situations and better retained. Some hidden knowledge was also rediscovered. The key idea was that students realized the knowledge learnt needs to be adjusted to the real cases and be applied flexibly.

In terms of attitude, while some students did not consider the subjects as pure academic subjects in the first place, others had an attitude change towards the end of the subjects. A higher level of involvement, sense of responsibility and seriousness were experienced with no exception. Attitude towards the industry was also changed because they had a more in-depth understanding of the industry. Such understanding contributed to students' interest in working in the industry in different directions. When reflecting on the attitude towards other student committee members, a sense of bonding was experienced. They explained that after knowing the different working styles and personality of the student committee members, cooperation and communication were improved. Such relation between bonding and working relation also reflect the real world. The achievements on skills and knowledge were also found matching with the instructor's pre-set learning outcomes and students' expectations.

Furthermore, consistent to the findings of the reflection checklist, all the students stated in the interviews that the skills learnt were mainly soft skills which will also be

transferable to other industries while these skills could not be obtained through other method learning alone. Some students further explained that such learning method is more appropriate as it encourages students to gain knowledge through self-exploration with stronger retention of such knowledge. To conclude from the students' perspectives, experiential learning is beneficial to achieving the learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the need for convention and event education in Hong Kong, the ICES2009 was considered both by the students and stakeholders as a valuable experience in experiential learning and convention and event education. Convention and event education is expected to encourage students' critical thinking and analysis, and pose advantages to students when comparing to graduates from a non-related fields. Students' interests were built up during their study and experiential learning activity gave them a real touch on their interest. Students also realized that the knowledge learnt needs to be adjusted to the real cases and be applied flexibly. Experiential learning is also beneficial to students as achievements on skills and knowledge were also found matching with the instructor's pre-set learning outcomes and students' expectations.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The research result can serve as the foundation for understanding the innovative education approach in hospitality and tourism. This study also provides the foundation for experiential learning on MICE in Hong Kong. Further research with a

larger sample size to include more projects enhances the generalization of experiential learning of the Asian practice. Other approaches, such as questionnaires, can be combined with the qualitative approach adapted in this paper to examine training needs and methods from a holistic perspective. The findings of this paper can serve as a lead to design other data collection efforts by providing guidance on the target audience and the types of questions for further research.

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