

Problem Characteristics of Problem-Based Learning in Hospitality and Tourism Education

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Abstract

Since the first undergraduate degree in tourism was introduced by several British universities under tourism employer support in 1986 (Airey & Johnson, 1999), hospitality and tourism has had a strong vocational focus (Kirillova & Au, 2020), with Busby and Fiedel (2001) discovering that more than 34% of 112 tourism degrees highlighted the vocational imperative in their degree descriptions. Since the major objective of hospitality and tourism education is to enhance students' employability and develop students with a set of competencies that meet the industry's needs (Ghoshal, 2005; Millar & Park, 2013), many hospitality and tourism institutions have integrated problem-based learning in their course syllabus to make the student an active participant in the learning process rather than being passively exposed to material (e.g., Boer & Otting, 2011; Lin et al., 2017). As a cognitive constructivist learning approach (Schmidt et al., 2009), problem-based learning has widely been recognized as an effective education approach in hospitality and tourism education to (1) fosters active learning, (2) develops generic skills and attitudes relevant to their future career, (3) facilitates an integrated core curriculum, and (3) motivates students (Duncan & Al-Nakeeb, 2006; Martin, West, & Bill, 2008).

Despite the widely proven advantages of problem-based learning on students' learning outcomes, some scholars have doubted with its effectiveness (e.g., Albanese, 2000; Albanese & Mitchell, 1993) due to its complexity in problem design (Otting & Zwaal, 2011), because Schmidt (2012) asserted that the problem design should be tailored to the nuances of each educational context. An investigation of problem design in hospitality and tourism problem-based learning is timely for two main reasons. First, hospitality and tourism is a multi-disciplinary student field in which there are various perspectives to understand phenomenon in the hospitality and tourism industry. It becomes challenging to mimic the real business environment in the hospitality and tourism industry (Crawford, Weber, & Lee, 2020), not only because it is costly to provide real working experience for hospitality and tourism students (Rosenkranz, 2022), but also because the industry involves various stakeholders who hold different, or even contradictory, positions over its operation and development. Second, many hospitality and tourism students were found to experience a "reality shock" when they enter the industry and find out more about its operations

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after graduation (Zhang & Wu, 2004), resulting in the wastage of educational investment. This implies rooms of improvement for the hospitality and tourism education by better integrating problem-based learning into the course structure, because students are expected to slightly experience the real working environment during problem-based learning activities. In response to Crawford et al.'s (2020) call for investigations on the ways of how a problem should be designed in hospitality and tourism problem-based learning, this qualitative study aims to identify the attributes of a good problem in problem-based learning from the perspectives of hospitality and tourism learners.

Anchoring in a social constructivist paradigm and critical social theory, primary data were collected from 65 postgraduates who have completed an industry-centered marketing course with problem-based learning design in a tourism and hospitality postgraduate program, housed within a top-ranked comprehensive university that has an independent tourism and hospitality school. As an entrance requirement for that tourism and hospitality postgraduate program, all postgraduates are required to have managerial working experience of at least 1 year in the tourism and hospitality industry. Hence, the target population of this study is expected to have rich knowledge of the real working environment and thus provide insightful ideas on its connection with problem-based learning design. Specifically, each year, each year, students are required to share a real-life marketing problem they have ever faced throughout their tourism and hospitality career. After slightly modifications by the subject lecturer, the problems are then shared with students who enrolled the same course next academic year. Students in the next academic year are required to assemble themselves into small teams of five or six members and select one particular problem shared by the students last academic year to justify marketing-related solutions themselves by moving away from textbook and translate theoretical concepts into managerially sound decisions.

At the start of the in-depth interviews, the interviewer first promoted the respondents to recall their problem-based learning experience in the postgraduate course (e.g., How was your learning experience when you were attending that particular postgraduate course?) and compared it with their traditional learning experiences in other postgraduate courses (e.g., What is/are the difference(s) between your problem-based learning experience in that particular postgraduate course and any other learning experience in your postgraduate study?). Then, after presenting the intended learning outcomes of the postgraduate course, the interviewer asked the respondents to evaluate the effectiveness of problem-based learning in helping them achieve the intended learning outcomes (e.g., How well did the problem-based learning help you achieve these learning outcomes?). Since students were required to select a real-life marketing problem to tackle in the postgraduate course, the respondents were encouraged to discuss the drivers behind their selection (e.g., Why did you select that particular marketing problem to solve?; Why did you think the marketing problem worth solving?) and explain how likely their selected problem helped them achieve the intended outcomes (e.g., How did your selection help you achieve the intended outcomes?; Did you think your selected problem support your hospitality career and why?). Lastly, the interviewer invited the respondents to identify the characteristics of an effective marketing problem in problem-based learning (e.g., What is/are the characteristic(s) for

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an effective problem that supports your learning experience?). With the permission of the respondents, each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Mandarin, and translated into English for a three-stage coding process proposed by Charmaz (2006; 2014).

Data analysis proposed a theoretical framework consisting of six problem-level attributes (i.e., measurable, ethically-sound, real-worldness, innovative, theoretically-sound, stakeholder-diversified) and three learner-level attributes (i.e., peer discussion, teacher discussion, and sharing) to reveal problem characteristics in hospitality and tourism problem-based learning. Specifically, the data analysis process suggested that Tett and Burnett's (2003) trait-activation theory provides a good theoretical basis from which to further understanding the findings. Drawing on person-situation interactionism, the trait-activation theory argues that personal traits (e.g., learner-level attributes) emerge when relevant situational cues (e.g., problem-level attributes) awake their expression. In other words, if a problem in problem-based learning activities is designed to contain several specific attributes (i.e., problem-level attributes), learners are more likely to respond with particular attributes (i.e., learner-level attributes) that help maximize the benefits of the problem-based learning activities. The resultant framework substantiated the complex nature of problem-based learning design, which Eseryel et al. (2014) described as including multiple levels to stimulate learners' learning motivations and achieve effectiveness.

From a theoretical perspective, this study serves as a pioneering attempt to explore the characteristics of problems in hospitality and tourism problem-based learning activities. The identification of the six problem-level attributes (i.e., measurable, ethically-sound, real-worldness, innovative, theoretically-sound, and stakeholder-diversified) determines the 'MERITS' of problem-based learning in hospitality and tourism education from the perspective of learners. Drawing on the constructivist grounded theory, this study echoes Tett and Burnett's (2003) trait-activation theory to demonstrate person-situation interactionist phenomenon in problem-based learning, further supporting the hospitality and tourism education design. From a practical perspective, this study benefits three key stakeholders in hospitality and tourism education: (1) hospitality and tourism institutions, (2) hospitality and tourism educators, and (3) hospitality and tourism businesses by identifying problem characteristics in hospitality and tourism problem-based learning from the perspective of learners.

Keywords: Problem-based learning, hospitality and tourism education, problem characteristics, learning design, learning experience