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Teaching organizational behavior in the bachelor of tourism through the case study method

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to design a seven-session case method intervention to be used as part of the organizational behavior course to achieve a high level of students' satisfaction. Ninety-two students took part in the case method intervention. A final questionnaire showed that participants were very satisfied with the case study method and that this teaching method should be applied in other courses of the bachelor of tourism in order to increase tourism students' satisfaction with their studies. Implications for theory and practice are discussed and directions for future research pointed out.

1. Introduction

“... In many courses we don't study anything that is related to Tourism, sometimes the teacher comes to give a talk for a couple of hours and then leaves. My perception is that many of the things that we study here, are too theoretical and won't be useful when I will get into the labor market. I feel that I learn nothing applied to tourism, this doesn't happen in all the courses, but do happens in some of them ...” Student of the bachelor's degree in tourism.

The testimony above shows a clear example of a student who is losing their motivation because of their perception of a lack of practical application of what they learn. It highlights the need of adapting teaching methodologies to student learning preferences to keep them motivated as instructors are no longer seen as mere content transmitters (Lillo-Bañuls, Perles-Ribes, & Fuentes, 2016).

In this sense, several studies (Lashley & Barron, 2006; Lashley, 1999; Barron & Arcodia, 2002) categorize tourism and hospitality students as *activist learners* (i.e., “people who learn through experience in concrete situations” – Lashley & Barron, 2006: p.555). Therefore, and contrasting theoretical expositive lessons, teaching through the case study method seems to be a good pedagogical solution in order to present students with real-life situations and enhancing both, their learning outcomes as well as their satisfaction with the course (Falkenberg & Woiceshyn, 2008).

However, there is a lack of empirical evidence that allows directly relating the case study method with hospitality and tourism students' satisfaction, and particularly in the course of *psychology of groups and organizations* (i.e., organizational behavior). Consequently, the main objective of this research is to design and implement a case study method intervention for the course of organizational behavior and measure students' satisfaction with the method.

This paper is organized as follows: following the introduction, the literature review presents the background in which this research is framed (i.e., learning style preferences of hospitality and tourism students and case study method as a teaching tool); the method section explains the instruments used and the research development procedure; results of the intervention are presented in the third section to finish with the discussion of the paper.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Learning style preferences of students of the Bachelor's degree in tourism

Learning styles refer to individual differences in learning preferences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Whereas there are individuals that prefer to learn from concrete experience, others have strong preferences for abstract conceptualization. Understanding students' learning styles preferences is crucial for instructors in order to apply the best method in their courses with the aim of improving both students' learning outcomes and satisfaction (Dale & McCarthy, 2006). Therefore, and in the specific case of students of hospitality and tourism, there has been a wide proliferation of research aiming to assess their learning preferences so that instructors can adapt their teaching strategies and improve students' learning results (Huang & Busby, 2007).

Based on Kolb's proposal (1976, 1981), Honey and Mumford (1986) developed a 80-item scale to measure students learning preferences and categorize them based on their learning style into activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. This scale has also been adapted to other languages and used to characterize students from a wide range of countries and disciplines (Alonso, Gallego, & Honey, 1997). According to Honey and Mumford's (1986) proposal, activists learn more when involved in team problem solving from concrete situations and least when adopting a passive role and solitary tasks. Pragmatists prefer to learn by applying the new information and skills to practical situations and learn least when they do not see immediate application of what they learn. Theorists learn more when concepts are part of consistent and rational theories and least when problems present ambiguity. Reflectors learn more when allowed analyzing situations from different perspective and least when there is time pressure or no planning.

Each of these learning preferences provide students with different strengths and weaknesses when facing a course and therefore, this classification suggests that there is not one and best teaching strategy that suits all students but bearing in mind their learning styles when designing and implementing teaching methodologies is an appropriate practice in order to decrease learners' difficulties when engaging in a course (Lashley, 1999).

Concerning students of hospitality and tourism most of the research carried out on the topic to date categorize them into activist learners (Lashley & Barron, 2006; Lashley, 1999; Barron & Arcodia, 2002; Wong, Pine, & Tsang, 2000). Consequently, they are expected to learn better when involved in group assignments and also in problem and case based learning but learn least when passively attending to lectures (Shukr, Zainab, & Rana, 2013). In particular, hospitality and tourism students are more likely to reject teacher-centered methodologies such as those that involve wide theoretical expositions form instructors but to prefer active student-centered learning group task assignments. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the case study method is an adequate pedagogical strategy for students of the bachelor's degree in tourism and therefore appropriate for the course of organizational behavior.

2.2. The case study method

Case study method has been widely used in several disciplines from medicine (Kassirer, 2010) to business ethics (Cagle & Baucus, 2006). Cases are a useful pedagogical tool and consequently have been widely used in business related courses (Merseeth, 1991). The extensive application of the case study method to different courses have lead, over the last decades, to a wide proliferation of publications of course-oriented cases that even resulted in specialized journals in the field of business and management (e.g., Journal of Business Cases and Applications) and even in tourism and hospitality management (e.g., Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Cases).

Cases normally involve the presentation of a story, often through a written description that requires students to engage in a process of decision-making with regards to a particular real-world based situation (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994; Herreid, 2011). The reader often adopts the role of the decision maker, specifically, cases often propose problems for which students have to find solutions after carefully analyzing the data and information provided (Richardson, 1993; Roy & Banerjee, 2012). For example, we can confront students with the situation of a young student that has been working in the department of human resources of a hotel where the supervisor frequently adopted empowering behaviors such as constant exchange of ideas and participative decision-making processes but later in his new job he has found a new leader that restrain team members' participation by assigning tasks to workers and establishing performance goals (Dorta-Afonso & Cantero-García, 2018). Compared to a theoretical exposition, hospitality and tourism students (i.e., activist learners) are more likely to get involved in such an activity where they are working with concepts related to leadership styles theories by directly showing them the leaders' real behaviors (i.e., organizations of meetings, assignments of task, relationship with other team members, etc.) and proposing them to analyze such situations by presenting them several dilemmas.

The case study method implies the use of cases for teaching purposes in order to encourage students' active participation that improves their satisfaction with the course and benefits their learning outcomes (Roy & Banerjee, 2012). Although several limitations of the case study method have been pointed out in previous literature such as the unbalanced interaction between instructors and students (Argyris, 1980), failures at selecting unfamiliar cases for students (Chang, Kwan-Ling, Karen, Bosco, & Lai-kuen, 2005), or concerns about students' previous professional experience (Roy & Banerjee, 2012) it appears to be a good teaching method. The case study method is a suitable teaching strategy to improve learning outcomes because it is suitable to develop communicative and interpersonal skills, group decision-making and problem-solving skills, strategic thinking and analytical capabilities (Chang et al., 2005; Richardson, 1993). Although there is empirical evidence about the effectiveness of the case study method and students' satisfaction with the method in several teaching contexts (e.g., Chang et al., 2005), we know little about how the case study method applied in the bachelor's degree of tourism would impact tourism and hospitality students' satisfaction with their learning outcomes in the particular context of the course of organizational behavior.

3. Method

3.1. Research instruments

3.1.1. Course case study assignments¹

Five case study assignments were designed based on the author's academic and professional background on tourism together with the highly valuable contributions of two other professionals of different sectors of the tourism field and two experts in higher education. The activities designed represented real situations that took place in the tourism professionals' daily life that could be used to link the theoretical content of the organizational behavior course (i.e., motivation, leadership, decision making, conflict management, communication and team work) to practical applied cases. The case study intervention consisted on the five cases together with the marshmallow challenge (Wujec, 2010) to be carried out thorough seven sessions of the course (see Table 1).

3.1.2. Questionnaire development

The purpose of this study was achieved with the design of a questionnaire that assessed participants' socio-demographic data, opinions about the teaching methodologies in the courses of the bachelor, and students' satisfaction with the case study method carried out in the practical part of the course. The questionnaire consisted on 14 items to be answered in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "completely disagree", 5 = "completely agree") and three open questions to get specific feedback about advantages, disadvantages and other concerns students wanted to share with regards to the case study method. Whereas seven items of the questionnaire referred to the practical part of the course in general terms, the other seven referred to the specific cases presented along the sessions. An example for the items of the general part was "concerning the practical part of the psychology of groups and organizations course, I consider that this kind of teaching method facilitates my learning outcomes". An example for the items of the specific cases was "concerning the cases that we worked in the course, I consider that I have worked aspects directly related to the tourism field".

3.2. Research development

3.2.1. Procedure

The present research started the first day of the course, about one month before students had to face the first work team practical activity. During this session, students were asked about their general perception on the bachelor of tourism and if the experience was positive so far. During this informal discussion some problems and worries concerning students' attitude towards their studies were identified (e.g., the testimony that started this paper emerged during that conversation). In particular, the main concerns detected were that students did not perceived that their learning outcomes were related to tourism and that the methods used in other courses were not satisfactory because they were not student centered. Therefore, and concerning the implementing stage and in order to make a valuable contribution to students' learning outcomes, a case study intervention was designed to be implemented during the practical team work activities part of the course. The case study intervention consisted on assignments that were highly grounded on real situations professionals of the tourism field face in their daily life. Several professionals of the tourism field as well as experts in higher education were contacted to design the intervention. Once the case study intervention was designed, it was implemented along seven sessions of the course. For each session of the course, students were explained the learning objectives of the specific case, they were given an evaluation rubric and general instructions about the timing and procedure of the class. Students had to write a case report in groups after every session and they had about one week to do it. Feedbacks on the reports were given within two or three days and shortly commented along the next session of the course. The last day of the course, once the intervention had finished, students were asked to fill in an online questionnaire that assessed their demographic data as well as several questions about the case study method applied and the method used in other courses.

3.2.2. Sampling procedures and data collection

The population of this study was under-graduate students enrolled in the course of Psychology of Groups and Organizations during the academic year 2017. A total of 92 students were enrolled in the course and took part in the case study method intervention. The sample of this study consisted of 41 undergraduate students (25 females and 16 males) aged between 18 and 36 ($M = 20.35$; $SD = 3.89$) of two different first-year class of the bachelor of tourism enrolled at a major University in Southern Europe in the course of organizational behavior. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. As for ethical considerations, participants took part in this research voluntary and received informed consent. No participants of this study were excluded for any reasons. Data collection took place at the end of the course after students already knew their marks through an online questionnaire.

3.2.3. Pilot test

Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot test was conducted with 10 students who were enrolled in the course of organizational behavior. Following a typical procedure, the main purpose of the pilot test was to refine the language used in the questionnaire as well as to assure that questions were correctly understood (Park, Yoo, Kim, & Lee, 2018). The pilot test revealed no ambiguity or

¹ All of the assignments belonging to the case study intervention have been doubled blinded reviewed and presented in specialized conferences and/or published in books and journals.

Table 1

Used assignments for the case study method intervention. Sessions with their corresponding assignments, course content topic, published reference and brief explanation of the purpose of the activity.

Assignment and session	Topic	Reference	Explanation
First Assignment – First session of the course	Motivation	(Dorta-Afonso, 2018)	Adopt the role of a human resources selection worker of the tourism industry and design a job offer
Second Assignment – Second session of the course	Leadership	(Dorta-Afonso & Cantero-García, 2018)	Adopt the role of the worker in a hotel facing empowering and directive leadership styles in different departments
Third Assignment – Third and fourth sessions of the course	Decision-Making	(Dorta-Afonso, 2019)	Adopt the role of a destination management organization aiming at distributing the budget for communication campaigns
Fourth Assignment – Fifth session of the course	Communication	(Dorta-Afonso, Cantero-García & Granada-Peinado, 2018)	Adopt the role of a hotel manager dealing with a very negative opinion of a client thorough TripAdvisor
Fifth Assignment – Sixth session of the course	Conflict Management	(Dorta-Afonso et al., 2018)	Adopt the role of several workers in tourism industry dealing with controversial situations with problematic clients
Sixth Assignment – Seventh session of the course	Work Teams	Wujec (2010)	The marshmallow challenge consists on a group activity to carry out a building task with certain given materials.

misunderstandings in the items but some word selection errors. Therefore, the final questionnaire was prepared bearing in mind concerns that emerged during the pilot test.

3.3. Course context

The course “Psychology of Groups and Organizations” is a 6-ECTS course students take during the second semester of the first year of the bachelor's degree in tourism with the following content: the group as an object of knowledge, the experimental study of groups and organizations, groups structure, and groups processes (leadership, communication, work-teams, conflict management and decision making). The evaluation consisted on a theoretical final exam accounting for the 70% of the final mark and practical work team assessments carried out thorough the whole term accounting for the 30% of the final mark.

3.4. Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the quantitative data obtained through the online questionnaire. Descriptive analysis was calculated with regards to the 14 items included in the online questionnaire. Concretely, the results section presents both mean scores as well as standard deviations for each item. Additionally, the proportion of the study sample that agree or totally agreed with each sentence was calculated.

For the three open questions of the questionnaire, a qualitative analysis was performed, following a similar procedure performed in other research studies conducted in related topics (e.g., Benjamin & Kline, 2019). First, the author of this study and an expert in higher education individually coded participants' answers to the open questions. Next, both coders grouped together similar codes and identified themes and frequency of appearance (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).

4. Results

Table 2 shows the items of the questionnaire that assessed students' opinion about the practical part of the course, with the average score, the standard deviations and the proportion of the sample that agreed or absolutely agreed with the statements (i.e., gave a “4 = I agree” or “5 = I completely agree” to the formulated statements). Similarly, Table 3 shows the same result for the items that assessed students' opinions concerning the specific cases belonging to the case study method applied along the seven sessions.

Table 2

Students' pinions about the practical part of the course: means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*) and % of the sample who agreed or totally agreed (% *agree*).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% <i>agree</i>
1. I consider this method facilitates learning	4.29	.73	89.5%
2. The fact that the instructor encouraged work team was useful for my learning	4.28	.56	94.9%
3. I consider the case study method useful for my learning	4.26	.72	84.6%
4. My satisfaction with the work done and with my mark is appropriate	4.28	.76	87.2%
5. I think it is interesting to work cases related to tourism	4.56	.75	97.4%
6. I would recommend to work tourism-related situations in other courses of the bachelor	4.51	.82	92.3%
7. I think that courses from the bachelor's degree in tourism should adopt a more practical approach framed in the tourism sector	4.59	.59	94.9%

N = 41 students

Table 3

Students' opinions about the specific cases belonging to the case study method applied: means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*) and % of the sample who agreed or totally agreed (% *agreed*).

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% <i>agree</i>
1. I consider I have worked aspects directly related to the tourism field	3.77	.81	69.2%
2. I consider the difficulty was appropriate	4.05	.69	84.6%
3. I consider that assignments were useful for my learning	4.13	.86	87.2%
4. I think it is a good way to see aspects from psychology of groups in a practical way in the tourism field	4.08	.81	87.2%
5. I think it is a more fun way of work compared to the expositive method (theoretical expositions and final exam)	4.44	.88	87.2%
6. I think it is a way or not forgetting about the course until the exam	4.31	.83	87.2%
7. In general, I am satisfied with the approach of the cases and with the weight in the final mark of the course	4.18	.85	89.7%

N = 41 students

As can be seen in Table 2, the vast majority of students that took part in this research considered that the method applied was good for their learning outcomes in terms of both, working through cases and working in teams. Besides, almost all of the students that took part in this study considered that they would recommend the case study method to be applied in other courses of the bachelor's degree in tourism. In addition, students considered that it was interesting to work tourism-related cases along the course and that this should be done in other courses of the bachelor. Most of participants were satisfied with the work done and with the mark obtained.

As can be seen in Table 3, most of students were satisfied with the specific cases designed for the intervention as they were framed in the context of tourism real situations, the difficulty was appropriate, and they considered those cases useful for their learning outcomes. Students considered that the specific cases designed were useful to understand the different concepts related to organizational behavior, it was a more fun way of working compared to the theoretical expositions, and also useful in order to not leave everything until the exam date but to work daily. Overall, students were satisfied with the approach of the cases and with the weight in the final mark of the course.

With regards to the three open questions, they corroborate and complement results from the quantitative items in several ways. Concerning the advantages of the method applied, the coding of the open questions revealed that students commonly referred to one of the following four topics: benefits of the case study method compared to the theoretical expositions, usefulness of facing real-life situations in class, entertaining way of learning, and advantages of working in teams. Concretely, results show that: 1) 34.1% of participants highlighted the benefits of learning through concrete situations compared to the isolated theory "it is much better to learn in this practical way than only theory because you don't know how to apply it afterwards"; 2) 29.3% of the participants in this study claimed about the usefulness of dealing with real tourism-related situations "very useful to be in real-life situations" "it is a great way to get to know situations that could happen in the future and to know how to deal with them"; 3) 26.8% of the sample suggested several advantages of working in teams "group cohesion as we were often in touch to do the assignments, respect for other people's opinion" "it prepares you for the future because you learn to collaborate with others and not only to work alone"; 4) 24.4% of the sample pointed out the fact that is much more fun for students to learn using case studies "it is not boring, it is a way of turning the class into more fun and entertaining" "it is not boring as in theoretical lessons".

With regards to the disadvantages of the case study method, the coding of the open questions revealed the following four topics: noisy atmosphere, difficulties of the faced cases, higher workloads, and negative aspects of working in teams. In particular, results showed that: 1) 14.6% of the sample suggested that some of the work assignments were not easy and the objectives and procedures were not clear "some of the assignments were difficult", "sometimes assignments were difficult to understand"; 2) 12.2% of the participants referred to the negative part of working in teams "my workmates did not work", "problems of working in teams such as coordination, delays, etc."; 3) 9.8% of the participants in the study highlighted the fact that a big amount of people working in limited space results in a noisy atmosphere "much noise in class when working in the assignments"; and 4) 7.3% of the sample noticed that the method results in higher workloads "sometimes there are many assignments", "many assignments but it is normal". Additionally, the 22% of the sample explicitly highlighted that there were no disadvantages associated to the case study teaching method.

The coding of the third open question showed that when students had the opportunity to give extra information they expressed their satisfaction with the case study method applied (34.1%) "in my opinion everything is perfect", "go on", "great job", "I am happy with this course" but pointed out the fact that, although it was supposed to be a teamwork activity based on collective discussion and consequently people is expected to participate and talk with classmates, there should be some control so that the atmosphere does not get too noisy (12.2%) "speak louder so that people will be less noisy", "show authority so that people won't be loud and therefore it is more comfortable to work in class".

From the values of the fourteen items that assessed different aspects of the case study method applied and also from the open questions that allowed students to add information according to their experience, there is enough evidence to support the benefits of the designed cases of the case study method concerning students' learning outcomes and students' satisfaction.

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the designed case study intervention was a good pedagogical solution that outperformed

other teaching methods in terms of learning outcomes and student satisfaction as highlighted in related literature (e.g., Harkrider et al., 2013; Herreid, 2011; Penn, Currie, Hoad, & O'Brien, 2016). In particular, this research aligns with other studies encouraging instructors to use student-centered teaching methods such as problem-based learning (e.g., Kim & Davies, 2014; Zwaal & Otting, 2015) emphasizing the benefits of the case study method. Similar to other studies, this paper provides empirical evidence that teaching through cases is beneficial to keep students engaged along the course as well as to keep them motivated in class (e.g., Kim, Phillips, Pinsky, Brock, Phillips, & Keary, 2006; Setia et al., 2011). Besides, it seems that it was a useful teaching tool to enhance students' knowledge of organizational behavior as suggested in related literature (Atkinson, 2008). However, there are other advantages of the case study method that did not emerge here, such as the development of students' critical-thinking (e.g., McWilliams & Nahavandi, 2006). In this sense, although students claimed about the benefits of this method to work as a team as well as to deal with real-life problems, future research could consider including specific scales to measure the extent to which students develop their particular skills.

However, the main disadvantage emphasized by students was that assignments were sometimes difficult, which may be related with the ambiguity of the information provided inherent to the case method (e.g., Brennan & Ahmad, 2005; Correia, Mayall, & Australia, 2012). Although this problem was not overcome in this intervention, a good plausible solution may be to simplify the information provided and emphasize key concepts (Harkrider et al., 2013). Nevertheless, this disadvantage was only highlighted by a small number of students (14.6%).

Although this research was pioneer in the design and implementation of a case study method intervention in the course of organizational behavior of the bachelor's degree in tourism, it was carried out under the assumption that students that took place in the intervention were activist learners as that was the case of most of the students of hospitality and tourism in previous research (e.g., Barron & Arcodia, 2002). In this sense, future researchers should consider measuring students learning preferences with the specific scale before engaging in the intervention designed here (Alonso et al., 1997; Honey & Mumford, 1986). Besides, future research should consider measuring students learning preferences both before and after the specific case study method is applied in order to find out if the case study method contributes to improve students learning preferences for theorist and reflectors modes demanded in the industry (Lashley, 1999).

Although the case study method proved beneficial as a teaching method in the course of organizational behavior for hospitality and tourism students enrolled in the bachelor's degree of tourism, future research should consider replicating this study across different courses of the bachelor to confirm students' satisfaction with the method applied in other subjects. Additionally, although the valuable contribution of this study, it is important to highlight that findings are based on students' opinions and future lines of inquiry should consider other sources of information, such as objective measures of the development of students' skills.

6. Conclusions

This study builds from previous research in students' learning styles that characterized hospitality and tourism students learning preferences (Lashley, 1999; Barron & Arcodia, 2002; Lashley & Barron, 2006; Wong et al., 2000) and directly relate it with the acknowledged benefits of the case study method highlighted before (e.g., Herreid, 2011) to design a case method intervention for the bachelor's degree in tourism. This study contributes to the body of research that has characterized hospitality and tourism students as activist learners (e.g., Lashley, 1999) and provide empirical evidence that supports this notion by highlighting students' satisfaction with the carried-out intervention. In addition, the findings here align with most of the case study method literature (e.g., Roy & Banerjee, 2012) supporting the benefits as a teaching tool for students enrolled in the bachelor's degree in tourism in the specific course of organizational behavior.

This pattern of findings suggests several useful ways for instructors in charge of courses in the bachelor's degree of tourism in order to improve students' satisfaction and learning outcomes. In particular, instructors in charge of teaching hospitality and tourism courses should bear in mind their nature as activist learners and act accordingly by considering the use of the case study method in their courses. However, there were some difficulties that instructors should bear in mind when applying the case study method to their own courses. Specifically, one of the main perceived disadvantages encountered by students of my sample is that they felt sometimes that they do not know what they had to do to successfully solve a case study. A plausible explanation might very well be that case studies often present students with complex scenarios that characterized the ambiguity of real-world situations (Pearce, 2002). Consequently, students faced assignments that represented real tourism-related contexts in which more than one solution was possible and the information provided was limited. Instructors should clearly explain students, especially if they are not familiar with the case study method (e.g., first year students), the characteristics of the method so that participants will try to propose one solution for the proposed problems instead of finding the only solution.

Bearing in mind students' learning style is of crucial need for instructors in order to apply the best teaching tool to their courses. In this line, the preferences of hospitality and tourism students to learn from concrete real situations implies that the case study method results in high levels of students' satisfaction with their learning outcomes as well as with the perceived fun and participative atmosphere in which they learn.

Declarations of interest

None.

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