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Reflective practice

Using active learning strategies on travel and tourism higher education programmes in Ireland

Noëlle O'Connor*

Department of Sport, Leisure and Tourism, Faculty of Business and Humanities, Limerick Institute of Technology, V94 EC5T, Ireland



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective paper is to investigate the active learning strategies used in travel and tourism higher education programmes in Ireland. These programmes have undergone substantial adaptation in their delivery over the last Academic Year (2020-2021) due to COVID 19 which has presented many challenges specifically to the delivery of modules with an active learning approach has frequently formed the basis of delivery.

Due to the nature of the travel and tourism industry a very active approach is deemed critical in the module delivery within related programmes. Therefore, the main aim of the reflective paper is to examine the use of active learning strategies on travel and tourism higher education programmes in Ireland, specifically Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT). The results of this study can be adapted on other travel and tourism programmes both in Ireland and abroad.

Finally, this reflective paper which concentrates on the active learning strategies used in travel and tourism higher education programmes in LIT will be beneficial through contributing to the body of information on this topic, consequently paving the way for future research. Proposed areas of future research based on the discoveries of this paper are also highlighted.

1. Introduction

Støckert, Bergsland, Fasciani, and Jensenius (2020; 612) suggest that travel and tourism higher education is facing disruptive changes in many fields most recently due external issues such as enforced remote and/or online teaching, COVID 19, BREXIT and the global economic recession. Students want to have the option of learning anywhere, anytime and in any format. As a consequence, many Irish higher education institutes are investigating new ways of collaboration and sharing resources to cater to the demands of students, industry and society particularly within their travel and tourism programmes (Støckert et al., 2020). The literature on engagement reinforces its importance in online teaching and learning, although Bowen (2005) suggests that there is a lack of consensus about what engagement means in practice. Much of the literature relates to online engagement incorporates the three key areas of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reeve & Tseng, 2011) as they affect students attitudes and motivations. Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, and Kestina (2019) maintain that students learn more when they are actively engaged in the classroom than they do in a passive lecture environment. As the success of active learning crucially depends on student motivation and engagement, it is of paramount importance that students appreciate, early in the academic year, the benefits of struggling with the material during active learning (Deslauriers et al., 2019). Trowler and Trowler's (2010,

* Corresponding author:

E-mail address: noelle.oconnor@lit.ie.URL: <http://www.lit.ie>.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.100326>

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9) goes so far as to suggest that the value of engagement is no longer questioned. [Siburian, Corebima, and Saptasari \(2019\)](#) argued that the need for the 21st century in the curriculum of educational institutions is oriented to create productive, creative, innovative, and effective generations through the integration of attitudes, abilities and knowledge with life skills ([Andrini, 2016](#); [Taghva, Rezael, Ghaderi, & Taghva, 2014](#)). Irish higher education institutions have made various efforts to improve their quality, in order to produce professional travel and tourism students, because critical thinking education is a process that involves all levels of education in all disciplines namely travel and tourism ([Unlu, 2018](#)). Therefore the main aim of the paper is to investigate the use of active learning strategies on travel and tourism higher education programmes in Ireland, specifically Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) as governments are increasingly interested in measuring student outcomes ([Zepke & Leach, 2010](#)) and suggestions that student engagement can act as a proxy for quality ([Kuh, 2009](#)), consequentially a clear understanding of this vital construct is essential.

2. Academic research

[Mooney \(2013\)](#) suggests that active learning is teachers nurturing inquiry for students of all abilities, rather than passively providing information from a textbook ([Mooney, 2013](#)). Another interpretation of active learning is [Huber \(2005\)](#) who suggests that fostering the intellectual art of making, recognising, and evaluating sound, meaningful connections across different concepts, cases, or experiences is what integrative learning is all about ([Huber, 2005](#),). That brings us to the concept of reflective learning, [Colomer, Serra, Cañabate, and Bubnys \(2020\)](#) argue that reflection is recognised as one of the most important transferable competences in lifelong learning and affects continuous personal and professional development. Reflective learning is becoming increasingly relevant to meet the challenges of a technologically advanced world and to develop the ability to adjust to ever-changing environments. As reflection allows for contemplation about new experiences and their association with past experiences in different contexts and focuses on future transformations, it offers ways in which, through active methodologies, reflective learning can change a personal awareness and ability to act in different contexts ([Colomer et al., 2020](#)).

[Caetano dos Santos, Fagundes, Ferreira Barbosa, and Santiago Barreto \(2020\)](#) ascertain that traditional practices are teacher centred, disregard students prior knowledge, and do not stimulate critical and reflective behaviour. These practices are not appropriate in meeting the challenges and demands of contemporary society to educate professionals capable of acting according to social reality and diversity. Active learning is a group of methodologies attempting to fill the gap left by traditional teaching practices. These are innovative teaching-learning processes that underpin professional travel and tourism education by prompting prior knowledge of students and peer observations, and by stimulating critical thinking through surveys and investigations on the local reality for the purpose of individual or collective decision making. Active learning seeks to make students aware of the reality in their future fields of practice, so that they are equipped to resolve situations that arise, and develop competencies and skills required in their professional lives ([Caetano dos Santos et al., 2020](#)).

Active learning provides opportunities for meaningful academic activities which has a positive impact on retention especially of first year students ([Aji & Khan, 2019](#)). Group-work and peer facilitates helps learning and learning is multi-faceted as student engagement has been noted to be a useful proxy for what happens in the learning environment ([Zepke, 2013](#)). As active learning is seen as an educational process where students become vigorously engaged in assimilating the material being explored, rather than passively absorbing that taught by others ([Ryan, 2021](#), p. 7). This reinforces that active learning is anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes ([Felder & Brent, 2009](#), p. 2). [Dale and Lane \(2007\)](#) carried out an investigation of student engagement with a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with the intention of enhancing student engagement with online learning through the development of learning and teaching strategies. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted not all students will engage with a module (however interactive) to the same extent ([Hart & Rush, 2007](#)) and that motivating factors are needed to encourage engagement. [Dale and Lane \(2007\)](#) suggest that as student motivation is largely assessment-driven it would be a sensible approach to link VLE based activities with assessment ([Holmes, 2017](#)) to promote an active learning environment. Travel and tourism programmes in institutions of higher education are confronted with unique challenges namely COVID 19, BREXIT in preparing students for the complex world. Coupled with dynamic changes in the ever-changing global mobility landscape, the characteristic shifts in students learning styles demand curricular innovations ([Shi, Zhang, & Cai, 2020](#)).

3. Case study - Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)

Over the past several decades, multiple forms of active learning have been proposed in order to increase student engagement and deepen their understanding ([Robertson, 2018](#)). [Ryan \(2020; 5\)](#) states that LIT is working strategically towards the development of a coherent Continuous Professional Development (CPD) pathway in teaching, learning and assessment. The provision of accredited and non-accredited CPD programmes at LIT has a strong focus on competency in Active Learning, Assessment, Student Engagement and Digital Capacity. This form of CPD suits many academic staff as they can obtain Special Purpose Awards (SPA) Level 9 (10 Credit) modules while working full time and delivering their modules 100% online which is evident through the roll out of the various LIT Level 9, 10 Credit Certificate SPA's over the last few months namely *Research Methods, Active Learning: Pedagogies for Student Engagement and Designing and Adapting Coursework for Blended and Online Learning*. Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (amalgamation of Limerick Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology in September 2021).

In the Irish context, [Ryan \(2020\)](#) has named Active Learning as its 'Signature Pedagogy'. In its current Teaching and Learning Strategy (2018–2023), LIT positions active learning as a means of achieving "Academic Excellence" and has also embedded active learning as a core element of LIT's Strategic Plan (2018–2022; 10–11 - Priority 2 - Provide High Quality Teaching and Active Learning that reflects the needs of industry). LIT will continue to embed active learning in programme design, delivery and assessment processes

as a means of continuously striving for innovation and excellence in teaching and learning which is ongoing within the author's own teaching style within the travel and tourism programme. Ryan (2021; 9) states that a positive undergraduate experience and taking ownership for one's own learning is vital to the development of a positive attitude towards life-long learning which LIT's academic staff are trying to incorporate through their own teaching styles. A concerning issue in the virtual environment is student engagement which is a current buzzword in the Irish higher education system becoming increasingly researched, theorised and debated with growing evidence of its critical role in student achievement and learning.

Within LIT's Compendium of Active Learning Strategies for Student Engagement Ryan (2021) states that active learning can range from traditional instructional models to more constructivist and co-constructivist approaches (inclusive of face to face, blended and online learning). With active learning, lecturers have the opportunity to become: activators of meaningful learning, not just facilitators, being creative in choosing from a wide palette of strategies to be mixed and adjusted to context and learner (Caena & Redecke, 2019) which is common practice within LIT as the lecturing staff grapple with the impact of COVID 19 and the enforced online and/or remote delivery since September 2020. This is supported by Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, and Henderson (2018) when they wrote that a shift to online study requires adjustments to the teaching and learning practices traditionally associated with university learning environments. Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Diaz, Garrison, Richardson and Swan (2008) argue that the social presence (the degree to which students feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment), the cognitive presence (the extent to which students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse) and the teaching presence (describes the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes) are crucial in defining and implementing an interactive learning environment (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2008). Enamul-Hoque (2016; 46) state that the cognitive domain includes learning processes including a hierarchy of skills involving processing information, constructing understanding, applying knowledge, solving problems, and conducting research.

Winn et al. (2019) ascertain that cognitive learning strategies are strategies that improve a learner's ability to process information more deeply, transfer and apply information to new situations, and result in enhanced and better-retained learning. The author have chosen the cognitive learning strategy as its main aim is to compare and contrast documented research and literature. Holmes (2017; 23) ascertain that student engagement is currently an important topic in travel and tourism higher education, with learning, marketing, retention rates and economics all influenced by the level of student engagement at an institution (Trowler, 2010). LIT's Active Learning Principles for Student Engagement (Ryan, 2021) illustrates the importance of the diversity of student engagement as students are actively engaged through relevant learning hooks, students make their own meaning by linking new concepts to prior knowledge and embedding their learning into long-term memory due to a deep learning process offer on the travel and tourism programme.

The importance of the teaching, learning and assessment strategy as an integrated component of curriculum design is increasingly emphasised in LIT travel and tourism programme development and programmatic review processes as there has been a significant shift in assessment strategies within LIT so as to integrate more continuous assessment within such programmes (Ryan, 2020). Student assessment is a key way in which active learning can be reinforced. The formal lecture does have its place and that for active learning to be effective it needs to be based on clearly defined aims and objectives. Within LIT's travel and tourism modules, a varied approach to assessments is also encouraged such as written reports, multiple choice examinations, presentations, peer assessment, and written examinations. The author has experienced a Constructive Alignment with the online delivery of her modules as she is trying to ensure that a virtual active learning environment is in place for all of the students which has been challenging (especially with for first-year students). This is crucial that a clear pathway between each module's assessment, teaching strategies and learning outcomes is evident. This is supported by active learning which engages students in the process of learning through activities and/or discussion in class, as opposed to passively listening to an expert and it emphasises higher-order thinking and often involves group work.

4. The nature of travel and tourism education

Active learning insinuates that students learn by doing something and it can help students become lifelong students; however, it is not easy to implement (Wolfe, 2006). Jieyu Shi, Zhang and Cai (2020; 14) argue that theoretically, the research responds to the need for adopting active learning to travel and tourism education and enriches the literature with empirical evidence (Kim & Jeong, 2018). Research informs not only teaching but also the industry; teaching cannot ignore research in preparing students for practice (O'Connor & Baum, 2008.). Travel and tourism is an applied subject field and the travel and tourism-related studies should combine knowledge with practical exercises. Practical learning bridges the gap between academics and industry within which students learn how to act proficiently. A variety of teaching and learning methods are employed by academic staff in order to facilitate the process of active learning in a classroom environment including written projects, case study analysis, multimedia aids, student presentations, group work and student led seminars/events. This is very applicable in the Irish context as higher education institutions can demonstrate research activity by researching up-to-date and useful topics emanating from discussion between industry and academia.

During a recent review, LIT noted that employer organisations have strong demands for a discipline-specific, practical approach to education which will provide a career path and progression for the varying industries as a means of attracting and retaining high-calibre staff particular in the travel and tourism industry. It is envisaged that, employers continue to recognise that well-qualified staff, through their increased knowledge, skills, and competencies, add value to their organisations, which will be reflected in higher levels of remuneration. Students appreciate that employers require practical, skills-based programmes, while an active approach to learning is a pre-requisite for personal and professional success. Consequently, it was recognised that the importance and impact of applying a variety of active learning approaches. It is imperative to provide learning opportunities that are as clear as possible so that students can make sense of what is being presented. Learner feedback stresses the need for learning approaches that

promote understanding whereby our travel and tourism students are able to retain, recall, and apply material in other circumstances. Failure to understand often leads students to incorrectly interpret material or, in frustration, to ignore what has been said. There is a consensus that students learn things in different ways which is reinforced by Pawgi (2017) who suggests that travel and tourism is an applied subject field and the tourism-related studies should combine knowledge with practical exercises. Practical learning bridges the gap between academia and industry within which students learn how to act proficiently and it is very important for higher education institutions to provide their students with comprehensive travel and tourism training. Moreover, travel and tourism is a service sector which suggests that the practical skills are far more important than that of the academic knowledge, consequentially, it is very important for the students to get the practical skills before working into the industry (Pawgi, 2017).

5. Conclusions

Shi, Zhang and Liping (2020; 15) maintain that looking into the future, travel and tourism education needs to put more weight on students abilities and skills to acquire, process, and assess information from diverse channels (Sigala & Baum, 2003). Academic staff within LIT continually endeavour to apply creative and varied active learning techniques to maximise learning opportunities such as guest lectures and field trips (both at home and abroad) which play an integral part of the module delivery for the travel and tourism programme in order for the students to experience at first-hand the visitor experience within travel and tourism businesses. Several modules offered on this programme incorporate elements that are active by their nature and involve student-led activities, such as role-plays, food and beverage service, experiential activities, multimedia assessments, indoor and outdoor activities, industry guest speakers, and participation at site visits. One example of this is the *Travel Operations and Geography* module, trip related activities include pre-planning, designing an itinerary, deciding the sites to visit, arranging same, the visit itself, and post-visit analysis as it is very important for the students to get the practical skills before getting into the industry (Pawgi, 2017). If there's one industry that's been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, it's the travel, tourism and hospitality industries. According to some predictions, the road to recovery could last until 2024. However, some industry experts are more positive. Rather, they see the crisis as a rare opportunity to make improvements and transform the industry (ESEI, 2021), maybe this is our time to shine!

Author statement

Dr Noëlle O'Connor: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original draft preparation. Visualization, Investigation, Project Administration, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

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