A Comparative Study of Scottish and Australian Student Preferred Learning Styles in Hospitality and Tourism Education: A Progressive Perspective

Sandra Watson  
Napier University

David McGuire  
Napier University

Paul Barron  
University of Queensland

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the preferred learning styles of students studying hospitality and tourism programmes. It compares the learning styles of students studying in Scotland and Australia depending on the year level of study. It highlights the learning style preferences displayed by students at different stages of their educational experience. It concludes with a discussion regarding the importance of recognising potential changes in learning style preferences as students’ progress in their studies.

Keywords: Learning, Hospitality, Education

Problem Statement

Understanding how individuals learn has been of academic interest for a number of years, however with current attention focussing on the importance of the knowledge society, the understanding of learning becomes more critical. Gold & Smith (2003:1) argue that learning is the key factor for survival, sustainability and competitive advantage at the level of the individual, the organisation and the nation. However understanding learning is not a straightforward process. Merriam (2001: 38) argues that the knowledge base of learning comprises a myriad of theories, models, sets of principles and explanations. The expansive boundless nature of learning theories has undoubtedly resulted in the development of new knowledge of how learning occurs, but has also caused some academics and practitioners to shy away from the learning concept.

Educational providers are facing a number of key changes that are focusing attention on efficiency in relation to delivery methods and greater flexibility in learning (Litteljohn and Watson, 2004). At the same time attention is being drawn to improving the quality of student experiences by quality assurance agencies, with more attention being given to student centred learning (Rogers 2004). The learning environment for hospitality and tourism students is marked by discussion regarding the balance between generic business knowledge and sector specific skills in the curriculum (Litteljohn and Watson, 2004), changes in government funding policies for educational programmes and an increasing number of students taking on part time job commitments. Thus it is contended that in light of these different influences affecting students’ educational experience, it is considered that this environment is an interesting one in which to examine student learning.
The context for the study is hospitality and tourism students studying in Australia and Scotland. Several reasons are advanced for this choice of context: Firstly hospitality and tourism programmes appear to be becoming more popular and continue to attract a large number of domestic students; secondly the student body is becoming more diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and background of students; thirdly it is a maturing field of study in both countries; and finally attention is being focused on improving efficiency and effectiveness of hospitality and tourism educational programmes.

The purpose of the paper is to examine differences in the student learning process from a cognitive perspective. It is proposed that a greater understanding of the student learning process will encourage educational providers to adapt their teaching to best suit the needs of their students. The paper is structured as follows: The literature review examines cognitive learning approaches and exploring how these affect learning styles; the methodology section considers the key research aims and describes the measures used in the study; the results examines the key findings from the study undertaken and the discussion that follows highlights the key implications for human resource development.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Learning Theories and Different Types of Learning Styles

Cognitivist theories of learning emphasise the processes involved in learning, rather than the products or outcomes of learning. Both Harrison (2000) and Von Krogh et al. (1994) argue that traditional cognitivist approaches adopt a rationalist stance, viewing cognition as the processing of information and the rule-manipulation of symbols. In agreement, Good (1990) argues that cognitivists view learning as a reorganisation of the cognitive structure in which individuals store information. As indicated above, cognitive theories of learning embrace Gestalt principles. Blanton (1998) argues that our perception is broken up into organised wholes through our ability to organise data so that it makes sense. Likewise, in order to deal with and process the large volume of information and arrive at meaningful decisions, individuals develop highly structured cognitive schemas. Daniels et al. (1995) argue that schema act as simplifications, helping managers to overcome the limitations of short-term memory.

An important development of cognitive approaches and one that assists us in understanding how cognitive approaches influence behaviour is experiential learning theory. This theory concerns itself with the cognitive processing of experience involving elements of action, reflection and transfer. Experiential approaches are based on the premise that learning can be made more meaningful if it is grounded in the experience and context of the learner and that individuals learn more easily when engaged in active problem-solving (Holman, 2000). The experiential learning cycle involves four learning stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Concrete experience involves the individual partaking in a new activity from which learning can occur. Reflective observation entails watching or observing others and/or reflecting on one’s own experiences of the activity. Abstract conceptualisation engages the individual in developing a theory to explain the observations and/or activity experienced. Finally, active experimentation involves the testing of such theories in a new situation.

The model also acknowledges the important role played by different types of learning styles. Sadler-Smith et al. (2000) notes that Honey and Mumford’s (1986) learning styles questionnaire arose directly from Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. The four learning styles identified are: Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist. Activists like to involve themselves in new practices and enjoy tackling problems by brainstorming. They appear to be
easily bored and prefer to move from one task to the next as the excitement fades. Reflectors are more cautious and thoughtful and prefer to consider all possible avenues of action before making any decisions. Reflectors students prefer to learn through observation and benefit from the opportunity to think before acting. They appreciate the opportunity to undertake research before an activity and think about what they have learned. Reflectors find it more difficult to learn from activities where they are forced into the limelight, for example through peer presentations or role-playing. Similarly, methods of learning such as case studies may prove problematic for these students as they are not keen on undertaking a task without prior notice or sufficient information (Honey and Mumford, 2000). Theorists like to integrate their observations into logical models based on analysis and objectivity. They appear to enjoy the structure associated with sound theoretical frameworks. Pragmatists are practical, hands on people who like to apply new ideas immediately. They often get impatient with an over emphasis on reflection. It is argued that a wholly effective learner is proficient in all four styles.

Several criticisms have been levelled at experiential learning theory. Reynolds (1998) argues that it promotes an individualized perspective, neglecting the sometimes collectivist nature of learning. Wilson and Beard (2002) argue that by locating itself within the cognitive psychology tradition, experiential learning overlooks or mechanically explains and thus divorces people from the social, historical and cultural aspects of self, thinking and action. A third criticism by Thagard (1996) maintains that cognitive and experiential approaches neglect the role of emotion, reducing learning to a calculating, functional process.

It has been noted that there are at least 32 commercially published instruments being used by researchers and educators to assess the different dimensions of learning styles (Campbell 1991). When determining the appropriateness of choosing the Learning Styles Questionnaire over another tool that measures learning style preferences, it is useful to reflect upon Curry’s (1987) onion simile. On analysis of all the available learning style questionnaires, she placed each in one layer of a three-layer system. She suggests that the three layers are like an onion. The first layer (or core) presents learning behaviour as controlled at a fundamental level by the central personality dimension. The middle layer centres on a theme of information processing dimensions. The outermost layer, influenced by the interaction of the environment, is based on the theme of instructional preferences. This model is built on further by the work of Sadler-Smith (1996) who argues for a holistic approach to learning styles, which encompasses learning preferences and cognitive styles. Learning preferences (autonomous, dependent and collaborative) are similar to the outer layer in the onion, while cognitive style relates to the core of the onion.

The Learning Style Questionnaire fits neatly into the middle layer of Curry’s (1987) onion model. Marshall (1987) agrees with Curry’s (1987) analogy and places the Kolb (1985) Learning Styles Inventory and the Honey and Mumford (1986) Learning Styles Questionnaire firmly in the information processing preference layer of the model. While there has been some criticism regarding the use of the Learning Styles Questionnaire for managers (Duff, 2000), it has been found that this tool is most appropriate to determine the learning style preferences of students, particularly those of diverse backgrounds (Anderson, 1995).

Several studies have been undertaken that attempt to identify the learning preferences of hospitality, tourism and travel Management students in the UK, Asia and Australia. In his study in the UK, Lashley (1999) found that the vast majority of students who were attracted onto hospitality management display preferred learning styles that indicate that they enjoy practical activity, but who are less comfortable with theorising and reflection. As such, these students display preferences for activist learning styles (Lashley, 1999). Indeed, it would have appeared that these students thrived on the challenges associated with new experiences and they were described as tending to “act first and consider the consequences later”
Not surprisingly, students with activist learning style preferences learn most easily from activities involving group work that is exciting, challenging and quick to change. On the other hand, activists find it more difficult to learn when they have to take a passive role, not become involved or undertake solitary work. They are not keen on practising and do not enjoy the constraints of having to follow precise instructions (Honey and Mumford, 2000). Indeed, such was the propensity for these students to adopt activist learning styles that strategies had to be designed and implemented in order to develop students studying hospitality and tourism programs in the host universities into more reflective practitioners. In contrast, it would appear that domestic students studying hospitality management, hotel and catering management, tourism management and travel and tourism studies at Higher Diploma level and above in various colleges and universities in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan display preferences for Reflector learning styles (Wong, Pine and Tsang, 2000). It is contended that a reason that could influence the learning style is the differing cultural approaches to education. Chan (1999) supports this finding and contends that Chinese history and Confucius philosophy has a major impact on learning styles of Chinese students.

This review of the literature leads us to formulate the two key research propositions that will be tested by means of a cross-cultural sample of Australian and Scottish tourism and hospitality students. In recognition of the research highlighting cultural differences in learning styles (Chan 1999; Wong, Pine and Tsang, 2000), our first research proposition is to examine whether differences exist in the learning style preferences of hospitality and/or tourism management students in Scotland and Australia. In essence, we are seeking to establish whether cross-cultural learning style differences will exist amongst two Anglo-Saxon countries, as most of the research to date has been confined to Confucian differences. Our second research proposition is derived from Lashley (1999) study, where he argues that hospitality and tourism students prefer an activist learning style. We are interested in investigating whether learning styles are consistent within a distinct disciplinary field across year cohorts. Consequently, our second research proposition is to examine whether differences in learning preferences exist on the basis of year level of study.

**Methodology**

A variation of the Learning Styles Questionnaire designed by Honey and Mumford (2000) was used in this study to investigate the learning styles of domestic and international students studying hospitality and tourism management at a variety of tertiary education institutions in Australia and Scotland. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first section asked respondents to answer questions concerning age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and number of dependents. This section also asked questions that attempted to determine motivations for current area of study and reasons for choosing the particular university. The second section consisted of 80 questions relating to the four different types of learning styles as identified by Honey and Mumford (1986), namely activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists. Respondents were asked to express the strength of feeling for each statement on a six-point likert scale. This means of response differs from the original Honey and Mumford (2000) method of responding which involved respondents merely placing a tick to indicate if they agreed with a statement, or a cross to indicate that they disagreed with a statement. The employment of a scale adds to the sophistication of the responses as it allows respondents to present a more accurate measure of their feelings concerning each question (Lashley and Shaw, 2002). The imposition of an ordinal Likert scale on the previous Honey and Mumford yes/no type measurement will enhance the reliability of the data collected. By employing
equal interval measurement, Goodwin (1995) argues that Likert scales allow respondents to express varying degrees of favourability towards a particular item, thus providing enhancing the accuracy of the overall measurement.

In order to achieve an optimum response, and to answer questions students may have had during the completion of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was administered in the controlled environment of formal class time and under the supervision of a tutor. Ticehurst and Veal (1999:138) describe this approach to a questionnaire survey as a 'captive group survey' and suggest that this method of questionnaire administration is expeditious and less problematic than in less controlled situations.

The data collected from the second part of the questionnaire, which contained 80 questions on learning styles, were analysed, using SPSS, by the score mean of each type of learning style. This allowed the researchers to develop frequency tables and undertake cross tabulations. Due to the use of the Likert scale, an indication of likes and dislikes relating to learning styles was determined for each group of students.

Analysis of Results

In total, some 514 students from nine Australian institutions took part in the study. Seven higher education institutions in Scotland that offer hospitality and/or tourism management at bachelor level or above were invited to take part in the Scottish element of the study and all but one agreed. In total, some 391 students from six Scottish institutions took part in the study. The composition of the respondents was broadly similar in that female respondents outnumbered their male counterparts by at least two to one. In addition, there was an even mix of the number of respondents in each year level. The average age of both the Australian and Scottish sample was just over 22 years.

Chart 1: Australian student’s preferred learning styles depending on year level

Analysis of the data comparing the preferred learning styles on the basis of year of study reveals some interesting differences between the two countries. In relation to the Australian sample it can be seen that there is a strong reflector style learning preference through the four years of undergraduate programmes and also postgraduate studies. The preference for activist style learning would appear to decrease as students move through the levels of programme of study. These results may not be surprising as students are likely to be exposed to more opportunities to reflect in their studies, through differing assessment instruments, greater use of case studies and opportunities to relate theory to practice. In addition exposure to industry practice through work placements could also further develop reflection opportunities. With a
decreasing emphasis on practical skills and more theoretical input into problem-solving situations, there is likely to be fewer opportunities for students to use and develop their activist learning abilities.

The chart below also indicates that theorising as a preferred learning style increases from first to second year, remaining virtually the same level in third year, but increasing dramatically in year four students. Although it is only possible to speculate reasons for the increase in theorising, possible influences include teaching methods and content that includes greater exposure to, and use of theory. A similar pattern of increased preference for pragmatic learning style, as one moves through the four years of study can also be seen below in the Australian cohort. This increase in the preference for pragmatic learning makes for an interesting balance in relation to the reported preference for reflective learning. This could be related to teaching schedules, or assessment expectations, or it could be reflective of the students attracted to hospitality and tourism programmes.

In relation to post-graduate students studying in Australia, the reflector learning style was seen to be the most preferred, followed by theorist, and pragmatist. By far the lowest preferred learning style is activist. Interestingly, the reported extent of theorists and pragmatists is much lower at post-graduate level than year four students. This could be influenced by age, profile of the student body and or content and delivery of programme. Without further analysis of the sample, it is difficult to put forward substantial reasons for this pattern.

A different configuration emerges from the Scottish results. Although reflector learning is the most often reported preferred learning style within each level of study, the increase is between years one to three, with a decline to the similar level as year one in year four. At postgraduate level, it has the highest mean level (M=74) and is greater than the Australian sample (M=71). These results can be seen to be contrast to Lashley’s (1999) work, which found that hospitality management students had a preference for activist learning, but were less comfortable with theorising and reflection.

The mean scores for theorising in the Scottish sample fluctuates between 55-57 across the four years, with the lowest reported level in year four. Although there is a slight increase in the preference for theorist learning moving from year one to year three, there is a subsequent decline in year four. The year four results could indicate an area of concern for Scottish institutions in relation to a perceived lack of preference for a theorising style of learning. It appears that current students either do not like, or are not given the opportunity,
or are not able to demonstrate theorising learning skills. It might be expected that a theorising preference would be evidenced as students progress through a degree level programme, however this does not appear to be the case for the Scottish based students. These results could support the views expressed by Linstead et al (2004) concerning a focus on practical techniques, although the result merely highlights a lack of preference for learning through theorising, rather than a lack of theory underpinning their learning. The preference for pragmatic learning also increases between years one to three, but declines to its lowest level in year four. At postgraduate level, the Scottish results indicate that the preference for pragmatic learning is greater than theorising. This is in contrast to the Australian sample.

The preference for activist learning style is reported to be relatively popular across year one, two, and with post-graduate students. It is particularly high with year three students, but declines for year four students. It is unclear why the degree of preference for activist style learning is so high in year three, of the Scottish based students but this could be related to work placement activities (which are often scheduled within year three of programmes of study), teaching and assessment methods that encourage activist learning, like group work, presentations or problem solving. In Scotland there are also many students articulating into year three from either Further Education colleges or overseas institutions. It is likely that these students have been exposed to different learning cultures and approaches that have influenced their learning style.

In comparing the results of the Scottish and Australian samples, some interesting observations can be discussed. At an undergraduate level, the Scottish results indicate a lower preference for reflection, theorising and pragmatism than their Australian counterparts, but there is a greater preference for activist learning. This is in contrast to the initial analysis of the two groups taken as a whole entity, which reported a higher preference for reflection, by the Scottish students. These results contradict Lashley’s (1999) findings and could be as a consequence of programme design issues, student profiles, learning environment and content issues discussed earlier.

In relation to theorising and pragmatic learning styles, again the Scottish cohort reports less emphasis on these as preferred learning styles than the Australian results. At postgraduate level the preference for theorising as a learning style increases to a mean of 59. When compared with the Australian cohort this is a lower reported preference across all years. At postgraduate level it appears that there is a stronger preference for activist and reflective learning styles reported by the Scottish than the Australian cohort, with a preference for learning through theorising being more prevalent in the Australian students than the Scottish. The reported preference for pragmatic learning is similar between the two samples.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has demonstrated that while there are some general similarities between students studying hospitality and tourism in Scotland and Australia, the composition of both cohorts presents a more complex picture. Through analysing the data based on gender and year of study, an understanding of the complex nature of student preferred learning styles emerge. In addition, this work highlights how an understanding of preferred learning styles might be taken into consideration when developing new subjects and programs, considering and implementing new teaching methods and, planning assessment strategies. For example, if educators are seeking to produce graduates who are measured in their decision making process and who take the opportunity to reflect on a range of options, then effort should be
concentrated in developing a more reflective approach among Australian male students and year four Scottish student groups.

The consequences of diversity amongst students’ preferred learning styles presents lecturing staff with a number of challenges, particularly in Scotland with the reported dislike of learning through theorising. First amongst these is the ability to cope with such a variety of styles during the delivery and assessment of subjects. It might be suggested that the different learning style preferences as demonstrated within the two groups of students is an advantage and should be celebrated. The preference for reflector learning style by both the Scottish and Australian two cohorts, contrasts Lashley’s (1999) work in this area. This result would indicate that students would be receptive to learning and assessment strategies that encourage a more reflective approach to their studies. With the Australian results indicating that students also enjoy theorising, this would support the introduction of a more critical focus for their studies. This might be more difficult to introduce in the Scottish institutions.

Viewed positively, hospitality and tourism educators might use these identified differences to the advantage of all students. This might be achieved by using alternative means of programme delivery that encourage students to theorise, including encouraging students to present summaries of theories, highlighting inconsistencies, greater use of case studies to develop critical and analytical abilities. Revising assessment strategies in order to develop a more reflective approach in students who display activist preferences or presenting more rigorously structured subjects to students who have reflector preferences. In addition, educators may find that where learning style preferences are concerned, students learn from each other and that simply encouraging diversity in, for example, group exercises will result in the development of more rounded approaches to learning.

Implications for Human Resource Development

The results of the study have important implications for future theory and practice in the field of human resource development. Firstly, it can be argued that this research provides empirical data on preferred learning in an international context that enables comparative analysis to be practised. It also places this research in an under researched (from an HRD perspective) field of hospitality and tourism. To date, much human resource development research has been collected in the manufacturing sector, with little attention paid to the hospitality and tourism sector.

The study presents important findings in relation to differences in learning styles according to educational cohort or year of study. Students from a distinct disciplinary field (such as hospitality and tourism) will not automatically adopt similar preferred learning styles. The finding suggests that educators cannot assume the same mix of learning styles within each group, but need to adjust their teaching techniques to suit the individual group.

The cross-cultural aspect the study highlighted significant differences in the learning styles of Australian and Scottish students. In an age of e-learning and global travel, educators must themselves adapt cross-culturally when delivering teaching and training in a different cultural environment. Educators should not simply assume that as students come from an Anglo-Saxon country that they would have an identical learning style preference. Particular attention should also be paid to implications for e-learning. As more and more third-level institutions are delivering courses to overseas students through an e-learning environment, there is a distinct need to establish the preferred learning styles of these students so that learning materials can be modified in order to cater for such students.
References

Addesso, P.J. (1996) Management would be Easy- If it weren’t for the People, New York: AMACOM


