

ACTION LEARNING : AN APPROACH TO TOURISM MANAGEMENT EDUCATION¹

Rob Dodson,
BSc (Econ), P.G.C.E.,
M.T.S., M.Soc, Sc.²

"Action learning" as pioneered by Professor R.W. Revans (1982, 1983) will be well known to those with management expertise. However, there have been few documented examples of application in tourism management education. An earlier contributor to the ABAC Journal (Gallagher 1992) concludes that this developmental approach has been one of the most important (if not very often practiced) educational traditions of the present century. Some recommendations by employers in tourism and other industries to incorporate practical work in syllabi might be satisfied by making use of the action learning approach. This paper aims to describe some examples of action learning for tourism students and to evaluate the learning in relation to these activities. A simple learning cycle represented in the diagram illustrates the perceived stages in the learning cycle, which includes theoretical aspects as well as the practical ones.

Problem

In this context, the problem should be one which confront employees in the industry. As employees rarely work in isolation some element of teamwork should be incorporated in the design. Adequate time needs to be allowed for the students to solve the problem satisfactorily and wherever possible employ-

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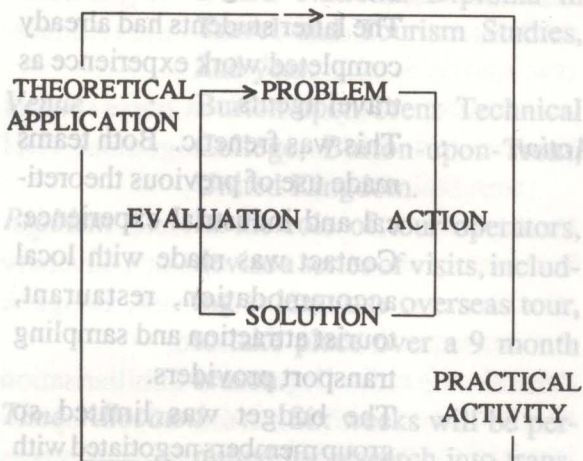
²Co-ordinator, Travel and Tourism Studies Unit, Department of Management, Computing and Business, Burton-upon Trent Technical College, Burton-upon Trent, U.K.
Visiting Professor Universities of Kurukshetra and Srinagar Garhwal, India; Dhaka University, Bangladesh and Assumption University, Thailand.

ers should advise, assess and evaluate the exercise.

Action

Once the problem is presented, the student activity begins. Staff participation should be confined to a consultancy role and opportunities for observation and assessment may be taken.

ACTION LEARNING -- A LEARNING CYCLE



Solution

The outcome of the problem solving and action taken by the students may itself take the form of action. Tourism is an activity which involves interpersonal relationships at all levels and solutions will involve such activities.

Evaluation

A form of debriefing is valuable for both lecturers and students. Questions like 'What have you learned from this exercise?', will assist in evaluating the learning process. 'How can the exercise be improved?', should assist in future problem design. (Students

frequently suggest more time but this consideration has to be balanced against the merit of working under some pressure and also the constraints they will face in the industry !)

Example No. 1

Students : Masters in Tourism Administration (MTA) 1st Semester and Post Graduate Diploma in Destination Management (PGDDM) 1st Semester

Venue : Department of Tourism, HNB Garhwal University, Srigagar (Garhwal), U.P. (India).

Problem : Organise a National Seminar on Tourism Development Plan for Garhwal Himalayas.

Time Allocated : 6 months.

Action : Students actively participated in to Organising Committee. They became hosts to the seminar and prepared and delivered papers (Bagri, 1991). They also planned the sightseeing tour and organised press coverage of the event.

Solution : The seminar was held on 13-15 December, 1991 in the town of Pauri in the presence of U.P. Tourism Minister Mr. Harak Singh Rawat. The team performed all conferencing tasks from registration and welcome to final closing session.

Evaluation : The students shared their ideas and framed the draft report which will eventually go to the Uttar Pradesh (A province of the Indian Republic) government. Further evaluation will take place as the report is produced.

Example No.2

Students : MTA 1st Semester

Venue : Department of Tourism,
Kurukshetra University,
Kurukshetra, Haryana (India)

Problem : Organise a half day sightseeing
tour on foot

Time Allocated : 2 days

Action : The student group discussed
and planned the tour. Each
student adopted the role of
guide for part of the tour and
prepared speaking notes. The
format included a brief personal
introduction, description of the
allocated part of the tour and a
conclusion with question.

Solution : Tour activity involved team-
work, speaking and presenta-
tion skills in English, research
and confidence building.

Evaluation : Venue arranged by students
over tea for group and staff
evaluation. How could this be
improved ? --Strengths and
weaknesses. A personal writ-
ten evaluation by the tutor dur-
ing the activity was issued to
the students at the end of the
activity. Outcomes--Students
commented that it had im-
proved their confidence and
strengthened their teamwork
skills. It had provided some
welcome personal evaluation
and a foundation for future
action learning.

Example No. 3

Students : MTA 3rd Semester

Venue : Department of Tourism,
Kurukshetra University, Hary-

ana (India)

Problem : A familiarisation visit for one
day with the students in two
teams : (1) Delhi Travel Agents
(2) Local Tour operators.

Time Allocated : Two days preparation
in respective roles to research
for the event. The tour opera-
tors to prepare for the visit and
the travel agents to prepare a
press release and to consider
their role as agents from Delhi.
The latter students had already
completed work experience as
travel agents.

Action : This was frenetic. Both teams
made use of previous theoret-
ical and industrial experience.
Contact was made with local
accommodation, restaurant,
tourist attraction and sampling
transport providers.
The budget was limited so
group members negotiated with
their suppliers and selected ap-
propriate refreshment to reflect
the theme.

Solution : A draft press release was pro-
duced before the event and
amended slightly afterwards
when it was accompanied by a
photograph. The visit took
place with the party shown local
tourist attractions and tourist
provisions.

Evaluation : Venue arranged by students.
Group discussion was supple-
mented by comments from the
principal of Exotic and Adven-
turous, a Delhi travel agent/
tour operator, who gave views
on what representing the in-
dustry would look for Individ-

ual assessment by tutor.

Learning Objectives :

- Teamwork

- Contact with the industry

- Organisational and Management skills

These were aspects of the exercise were highlighted by the students.

Example No. 4

Students : BTEC National Diploma in Travel and Tourism Studies, 2nd year.

Venue : Burton-upon-Trent Technical College, Burton-upon-Trent, United Kingdom.

Problem : In the role of tour operators, devise a series of visits, including at least one overseas tour, to take place over a 9 month season.

Time Allocated : Six weeks will be permitted for research into transport, destinations, costings and assembly of literature. At the end of this period a draft brochure should be submitted for printing. The team will be expected to hold regular meetings and take record of their deliberations for assessment.

Activity : The team chose a business model of a functional organisation selecting chair, vice-chair, secretary, financial director etc. They delegated individual tours to subgroups of two and three. Weekly meetings were held to review progress and present reports. After five weeks the

draft brochure research was completed. They had contacted suppliers and received at least three quotations. The team reviewed the whole programme and constructed their brochure from what they had agreed.

Solution : The brochure was printed and launched at a 'German Breakfast' to focus on their 8-day overseas visit to Germany. The solution of this problem prepared the students for the next problem that of selling the products in their brochure.

Evaluation : Continuous assessment took place during the team meetings and staff contact time. Evaluation of individual performance can include teamwork, individual effort and quantity of staff consulting time demanded. Peer group assessment was also used to assist in the evaluation.

Learning Outcomes : Numerous -- the running of the business demonstrated useful business skills and in the case of one tour-failure. The team began to accept that not every bright idea works and a day long boat tour had to be withdrawn.

Example No. 5

Students : BTEC National Diploma in Travel and Tourism Studies, 1st and 2nd Year.

Venue : Burton-upon-Trent Technical College, DE14 3RL, Burton-upon-Trent, United Kingdom
The college is situated in the

centre of a town in the Midlands of England. An office is equipped for the use of tourism students at the library entrance to the main building. Potential customers are therefore plentiful.

Action : The second year students who have already had four weeks work experience in travel agencies or tourist information offices, adopt the role of duty managers on a rota system. The first year students join the rota as their assistants. Enquiries come in by telephone, in writing or personal visit. The team have information on all countries of the world and request further information as required. They also act as agents for the tour operating company mentioned in the previous problem. They adopt functional roles which include marketing, public relations and personnel as well as their actual office management duties. The organisation holds a weekly meeting for half an hour to one hour to monitor the running of the service.

Solution : The service has now run for seven months a year over a five year period. All teams of the students have solved the problem of running an office over a lengthy period of time. The management functions they choose assist in the service they provide. The team themselves make the selection and some-

times 'retire' to experience a different function. Occasionally a 'dictatorial' chairman will be replaced by the team.

Evaluation : This is a continuous process by the teacher, offering advice when appropriate. A proportion of the assessment is by the students themselves and this contributes to the final grade.

Example No. 6

Students : Bachelor of Business Administration (B.B.A.)

Major Elective Course - Travel Industry Management (BH 4400)

Venue : Department of Hotel Management, Assumption University (ABAC), Huamark, Bangkok 10240, Thailand.

Problem : 1. Organise a familiarisation tour in the role of tour operators for prospective customers (travel agents, travel writers) to Pattaya, the premier seaside resort in Thailand.

2. Utilise the material gathered on this tour to mount an exhibition "Conservation and Development in the Thai Tourism Industry".

Time Allocated : one month.

Action : **Problem 1** was given to a group of eleven in the class of 49 students. This group subdivided to work on different tasks : sponsorship, itinerary and route planning, communication with class, financial aspects, passenger lists and reservation systems. They

acted as hosts on the tour and produced a final report which included an Income and Expenditure account.

Problem 2 demanded the resources of the entire class in groups of 5/6. A steering group adopted the role of exhibition organisers and drafted a work plan for the other groups, which was task based; Photography, Video, Text, Finance and Marketing, Layout, Public Relations. Each group was invited to report progress on their teamwork (which included an allocation of class time).

The activities became more concentrated under pressure of time and groups began to make use of external expertise. A substantial budget was obtained together with sponsorship in cash and kind (two professional designers and a sum of money financial from The Mall, a local shopping centre). A New Zealander, Managing Director of Mission Health Foods, a local business was invited to be guest speaker at the opening ceremony and a local bookstore agreed to exhibit. Close liaison was also achieved with the National Tourist Organisation, Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Group and individual participation seemed to mirror motivation in the project. This fluctuated over the allocated time period, but the entire class were clear in their objectives

when the day came to mount the exhibition.

Solution : The exhibition hall was booked for three days. During the first day the class assembled their materials, and other resources based on drawings from the 'layout' group. The professional designers were employed to produce coloured polystyrene signs for external and internal use. The text group had prepared written display material and the photographic and video material were assembled. Individuals self selected their work to maximum advantage within their teams. Final preparations were completed for the opening ceremony on the second day. This included selection of the student host to make announcements. Ceremonials in Thailand are elaborate occasions and preparations included providing orchid collages for special guests, a gift for the speaker and ribbon for the formal opening.

During the two day duration of the exhibition a student rota was maintained to provide information for visitors and a programme of videos was screened. At the end the class then efficiently dismantled their displays and left the hall clear for the next use.

Evaluation : Observed : Whilst the students were largely unfamiliar with action learning over the period

of the exercise most individuals and teams began to become fully aware of their roles. The teaching role became more and more, one of 'consultancy' and less and less instructive.

Written : At the end of the course, students were invited to participate in written, and if they wished anonymous evaluation. Comments varied but the majority welcomed the familiarisation tour. Many students requested more time for exhibition preparation, however they also suggested more lecture time which would have reduced their class teamwork time. (The balance between didactic and other methods is a difficult one to strike and probably depends on the preferences of staff and students but the author recommends that adequate class time is allowed for teamwork and its assessment.)

Assessment : This was continuous for the work whilst in progress and then class based on the final product - the exhibition itself.

Conclusion

In all the examples given student activity is central to the learning process. When students understand the merits of the action learning approach, they become very enthusiastic and expend much energy in solving the problems individually and together. The service nature of the travel and tourism industries means that the approach can be easily

applied to a variety of situations and problems.

Action learning as an educational approach demands more time and experience from lecturing staff than conventional methods. It may be used to supplement management education and reinforce student reading. Above all it alters the role of the lecturer to that of consultant to the project/problem. As much of student learning comes from each other and from the teamwork process as it evolves, the lecturer must not be seen as the "fountain of all wisdom" or the world's best problem solver. Those who use this approach may be tempted to be prescriptive when consulted. Conventional roles in the education process condition both student and teacher to accept a knowledge hierarchy in which the latter is superior. In the context of action learning which is problem based successful outcomes are only achieved if the students "own" the problem. One way of ensuring that this happens is to throw the question back to the student(s) after the manner of psychologist Carl Rogers.

Student : "How do you think we should do this?"

Teacher : "What alternatives do you have? Which do you think is the best?"

Student : "X is the one we think is the best."

Lecturer (to reassure) : Good. Then you have solved that problem.

In the examples I have given and many others I have been involved (Dodson, 1991) I have been specially impressed with the learning process. Students draw on so many learning experiences and impart valuable interper-

sonal skills which prepare them for their working future.

Employers stress the value of practical experience (Dwivedi, 1991) (ESCAP 1990) and often educational establishments are content to leave this to work experience placements. However, the more sheltered teaching environment can often be a good place for fostering student confidence and experience. Action learning can make a unique contribution to this process.

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