

E-tourism Course Syllabus Development and Assessment: A Communications Perspective

Author:

Abstract

Based on the literature review, the lack of an extensive research on eTourism academic course evaluation process was identified. Hence a comprehensive approach to eTourism course evaluation based on Kirkpatrick's model has been tested at Università della Svizzera italiana. Thus, the main research objective is to assess the given eTourism course within the first three different evaluation areas of Kirkpatrick's model above listed: (a) *reaction* of Master Students: did they like the course? (b) *knowledge*: what have they learned? what do they remember later on? (c) *transfer*: are they able to use in their job what they have learned?

The fourth one – (d) *impact*: has the learning/training had a positive impact onto the concerned business? – has not been assessed, as dealing with just a single academic course cannot allow to assess the impact of its students on the various businesses in which they are working.

The main question that we would like to answer with this research was not primarily what the students should learn – as in previous researches have been enquiring industry and academia representatives (which knowledge/skills/competences they need) – but if the students are able to apply the knowledge that they have got at the University in their current jobs. In other words – were we able to give them needed skills and abilities or not?

The added value of this research is that we did study students/alumni for quite a long period: not just an immediate reaction to the course content has been evaluated, but we did analyze also the follow-up reaction as well as the transfer through a longitudinal study.

Based on the results of the evaluation processes – which directly cover the first three questions, and inferentially also the fourth one – some improvements will be proposed for the next editions of the course, leading to an updated syllabus.

Keywords: instructional design, tourism and hospitality curriculum, assessment

Introduction and literature review

Innovation in Tourism and Hospitality sector in the last decades is closely connected to the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the Internet, and social networks (Buhalis, 2003; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel, Fesenmaier & O’Leary, 2006; Sheldon, 1997). Moreover, among academics and tourism practitioners, there is a wide agreement on which the future of tourism will be: it will be definitely connected and aligned with ICTs development and integrations (Hofstetter, 2004; Johanson, Shea, Ghiselli, & Roberts, 2010; Lashley & Rowson, 2005; Ring, Dickinger, & Wober, 2009). As technology and tourism are two fastest growing sectors in the world economy, this trend generates an enormous demand for graduates with combined tourism, business and ICT skills, making them very desirable employees. So caring for the future of eTourism, it is the same as caring for balanced and adequate training practices for future professionals in tourism and hospitality field. In order to keep a good offer in the eTourism field we will need a continuous improvement of the curriculum.

In the last years a strong necessity of developing eTourism modules and their integration into tourism and hospitality academic programs has been extensively discussed (Cheung & Law, 2000; Dopson, 2004; Lashley & Rowson, 2005; Mills & Douglas, 2004). While a few cases of full eTourism curricula have been launched, several academic institutions around the globe have implemented single dedicated courses. As a matter of fact, most of them focus on Information Technologies and Information Systems, nevertheless according to recent research of Johanson et al. (2010), the skills most desired by tourism enterprises nowadays are communication abilities and electronic information sharing. Students are expected to be competent not just in understanding technology, they need to be able to “analyze and interpret system data to solve problems and improve business strategy and competency” (Elliot & Joppe, 2009).

Academics around the globe are still challenged to develop an eTourism syllabus that is able to strike an optimal balance among the triple requirements of (i) academic research, (ii) tourism and hospitality industry, and (iii) students expectations (Hsu, 2006; Nadkarni, 2003). While assessing which ICT skills should be gained by tourism students through their educational carrier, it's crucial to solicit efforts from principal stakeholders: future employers, educators and alumni themselves. All previous research about the ICT needs and contents that alumni should have was concentrated on the requirements of two stakeholders: industry and academia (Cheung & Law, 2000; Daniele & Mistilis, 1999; Fuchs, Hopken, Mirski, Lembacher, & Ainedter, 2007), while no one so far has studied what are the needs expressed by hospitality and tourism students themselves, be they current students or alumni.

This paper is studying a specific case of eTourism syllabus, which approaches the field of ICT integration into tourism and hospitality curriculum from the communication sciences perspective. This research offers a wide evaluation process proposal, encompassing different aspects of it, in particular following the Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model (1994): reaction, knowledge, transfer and impact. The model was designed for educators and training directors in order to increase their efforts in evaluating training programs. It encompasses the next steps:

→ **the reaction** to the course on the side of learners: are they comfortable/happy with the content? did they like the course? what were main drivers for them to start this learning experience?

→ **their actual knowledge**: how much and what did they learn within this course?

→ how much of the learned information could be **transferred** to the everyday professional life of students attending the course: are they able to apply the knowledge they have got to their working activities?

→ the global **impact** of the offered training onto their actual activities: has the learning/training had a positive impact onto the concerned business?

Outlining the case

At the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI – University of Lugano, Switzerland), the course New Media for Tourism Communication (42 teaching hours, 4.5 ECTS out of 120

overall Master academic credits) is offered as a mandatory first year, first term course at the Master in International Tourism run by the Faculty of Economics in collaboration with the Faculty of Communication Sciences.

The course has been taught by several instructors since 2006, and has had five editions till now. One of the authors of this paper has been involved since the very beginning, either as co-instructor or as instructor, while the other author has attended the course as a master student, and later on has become assistant of the course.

By February 2011 more than 170 students have participated in the program of Master in International Tourism, while 83 of them have successfully graduated.

Students attending the Master in International Tourism have very different backgrounds: from economics to cultural heritage interpretation, from foreign languages to management. Usually very few of them have background in communication, technologies, or online marketing. Nevertheless, almost all of them use extensively social media, mobile applications and they are very handy with portable gadgets in daily life.

Due to their coming from different backgrounds, students do not have a single area for future employment: alumni are active in the hotel industry in different functions, at national tourism boards, media agencies, travel agencies, event management organizations, cultural institutions, etc., not to mention the academic field. As a result, it is not possible to present eTourism industry practices and case studies encompassing all the sectors of their possible future employment.

Course goals, contents and instructional design

The course has been designed and refined taking in mind managerial competence scenarios. As future managers, current students of the Master in International Tourism will be required (i) to fruitfully interact with ICT experts; (ii) to design and evaluate eTourism projects; (iii) to manage available ICT assets (people, technologies, other resources) in the most effective and efficient way.

When it comes to different levels of knowledge, the abovementioned competences entail that students should (i) know current eTourism applications, technologies and successful practices; (ii) know how to plan, run and evaluate eTourism related activities, as well as how to interact fruitfully with ICT experts, especially when it comes to expressing their

own needs (user requirements); (iii) be aware of the crucial role played by ICT within the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Beside ex-cathedra lessons, course teaching strategy encompasses industry cases presentations, testimonies by experts and leaders in the field, and group projects. In particular, group projects are designed to exercise students in real (or highly realistic) projects. Learners have to sit a written exam, awarding 60% of the final mark, while the group project accounts for 30%, and a summarization exercise done in turn by a group of students to recap the previous lesson accounts for 10%.

Those more interested in the topic, are given the chance to attend a follow up lab (awarded 6 ECTS) as well as to write a Master thesis in the eTourism field under the supervision of the course instructor.

Table 1 matches those goals with a sample of actual course contents and adopted strategies.

Knowledge level	Sample of contents	Strategies
<i>Know current eTourism technologies and successful practices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Definition and map of eTourism - Website communication model (WCM) - Online content quality criteria - Search engines (SEO & SEM) - Web2.0 - Business models in online marketing - eLearning in tourism - Mobile applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ex-cathedra lessons - Summarization exercise done by students - Reference materials and course reader - Written exam
<i>Know how to plan, run and evaluate eTourism related activities, as well as how to interact fruitfully with</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diffusion of innovations - Online promotion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborative projects - Case studies

ICT experts, especially when it comes to express their own needs (user requirements)	- Usages and usability analysis - Online reputation analysis	- Presentation of Master and PhD theses done within eTourism field
<i>Be aware</i> of the crucial role played by ICT within the tourism and hospitality sectors		- Meeting testimonials / experts - Possibility to attend ENTER – eTourism Conferences being volunteers and social media reporters

Table 1 Synthesis of New Media for Tourism Communication course goals with a match of actual course contents and adopted strategies.

Methodology

In order to understand if current instructional design of this course is valuable, the first three layers of the evaluation model proposed by Kirkpatrick have been considered: (i) reaction, (ii) knowledge, and (iii) transfer.

Relevant data to answer the questions have been respectively collected from (i) the feedback provided by students to the University at the end of each course edition, as foreseen by the quality procedures in place. Besides the immediate feedback, a follow-up feedback by course alumni has been sought through a survey (see under letter iii); (ii) the results of exams; (iii) a survey, intended to check if alumni have been able to transfer what they have learned during the course to their professional places, as well as to assess students' follow-up reaction.

For the first step, results of the evaluation reports of the course New Media for Tourism Communication issued by the Quality Control Department of the Università della Svizzera italiana were analyzed, in order to understand overall perception of the course by students of Master in International Tourism and to see what was their *immediate reaction* on the course delivery. Overall 128 students out of 170 answered the questionnaire of the Quality Control Department of the Università della Svizzera italiana. This questionnaire is given centrally to all university students in an electronic format, while they are registering for the exam, before the end of the academic term.

For the second step, the marks received by examined students were analyzed.

For the third step an online survey was utilized for the purpose of this study. A questionnaire has been mailed and then promoted on main social networks to Master in International Tourism graduates with an invitation to participate in the study. The questionnaire included four following areas. The first part was designed in order to assess the *follow-up reaction* of alumni on the course content. The second part included questions in order to evaluate the *knowledge* they have got during the course, and then the third part contained questions about the *transfer* – how they have used/are using the competences acquired during the course within their current work. The last section contained *demographic questions* as well as request of data on alumni's current working activities. Comments provided in a free format were analyzed as well. The data was collected in February 2011, addressed to current students who already attended the course (enrolled both in the first and in the second Master year) and to all Master alumni.

Overall 71 student out of 170 answered the survey, yielding a 42% response rate. 33 of them had already finished the Master (out of 83: 40% response rate; the co-author of this paper who attended the course has not responded to the questionnaire, to avoid any possible biases).

Alumni are working in the following tourism sectors: Consultancy (7), DMO (4), TO/TA (3), Hospitality (3), Event Management Organization (2), Cultural institution (1), other tourism / hospitality companies (2); 8 of them are in the academic field, either as PhD candidates/assistants or as trainers, and 3 are working outside the tourism field (bank, web marketing agency, and television).

Based on the above assessment and evaluation strategies, some improvements will be proposed for the next editions of the course, yielding to an updated and refined syllabus.

Research results

Reaction

In order to follow the first step and to answer the question – what is the *immediate reaction* of students on the course New Media for Tourism Communication? – the results of the evaluation reports issued by the Quality Control Department of the university were taken into consideration. Overall 128 students out of 170 answered the questionnaire of the Quality Control Department of the Università della Svizzera italiana, with a high level

of satisfaction: on average students marked their overall course experience as 7.9 out of 10.

While assessing the *follow-up reaction*, the course overall immediate reaction mark was compared vs. the mark given by the students who have already finished the Master: 7.8 out of 10, while the overall mark of the students that are still studying is a bit higher: 8.2 out of 10. The question that was asked both in the questionnaire submitted by the Quality Control Department as well as in our survey is the next one: *If you had to give to that course a mark from 0 to 10, which mark would you choose?*

Results show a quite consistent and stable reaction by students: also after years their appreciation of the course remains almost the same.

In the immediate evaluation survey, 9 students out of 128 indicated that their level of overall satisfaction was not sufficient: lower than 6, in the follow-up reaction survey 6 students out of 71 were not satisfied with the course (4 of them among alumni, and 2 of them still enrolled in the Master). The fact that the percentage of unsatisfied students is slightly higher in the group responding to the survey than in the full students' universe (8.5% vs. 7.0%) suggests that the first group was not positively biased, hence falsifying a possible concern that only satisfied students would contribute to the research.

Knowledge

While evaluating the *knowledge*, two directions were undertaken.

The first one consisted in checking the marks that the students have got during course's exam within the last 5 years. The marks that students get at the exam of the course New Media for Tourism Communication are generally quite high: average is 7.8 out of 10. There were very few cases when students failed the exam and had to re-pass it.

Through several questions in the questionnaire, students were also asked how they perceive/evaluate received knowledge in the course as well as how much and what from the course content they remember. We have compared the results between students that are still studying with the answers of alumni.

For the question *Do you remember the content of the course New Media for Tourism Communication?* students that are still doing the Master tend to remember more from the

course content. The answers were distributed in the next range: *something*: 35.1%, *a lot*: 37.8%, *almost everything*: 27%; while students that already finished the Master evaluate remaining knowledge as follows: *something*: 53.1%, *a lot*: 40.6%, *almost everything*: 6.3%. It is important to note that none of the students has indicated that has no remained knowledge, moreover, while the number of people answering *almost everything* decreases dramatically, alumni do remember *a lot* more than current Master students, and anyway do remember *something* also after years.

For the question: *Which contents do you remember in particular?* the next answers were given in ranked order:

a) Students that are still studying: Web 2.0 and Social Media, Search Engines, Back-linking and online promotional activities, Website Communication Model (WCM) and Usability.

b) Alumni: WCM, Search Engines, Web 2.0 and Social Media, Back linking and Usability.

The importance of WCM: Website Communication Model (Cantoni & Tardini, 2007; more recently called OCM: Online Communication Model, Cantoni & Tardini, 2009) for alumni (shared by 11 among 33 respondents) may be explained due to its providing an overall framework of understanding to cluster all activities related to online communication, hence offering a simple and comprehensive map of eTourism.

Transfer

A significant part of the questionnaire, was devoted to the *transfer part* of the evaluation process.

For the question *How much do your working activities involve the use of Information and Communication Technologies and the Internet?* On a Likert scale ranging from 1: not at all up to 5: always, just 5 out of 33 respondents selected values 1 and 2, while 20 selected values 4 and 5, and the remaining 8 selected the intermediate value. In addition, ICT do play a major role when it comes to upgrading their knowledge/skills in the field of eTourism: they do so through one or more of the following strategies: following specialized websites/blogs/mailling lists (17), reading books/magazines (15), attending seminars/conferences (11), following professional groups on LinkedIn (8), getting

recommendations of friends/colleagues (3), following Twitter (3), attending a further Master/Postgraduate Course/MBA (2), and networking (2).

While answering the question: *Please, indicate which technologies you use the most in your current working activities?* the most common answers were Internet, Search Engines, Google Services (Analytics, AdWords), eMail, Mobile Applications, and Social Media.

Figure 1. represents the distribution of the answers to the question *Do you think the course New Media for Tourism Communication has been important considering your current activities?* Values from 1: not at all to 5: a lot; respondents 32 out of 33.

Figure 1 Distribution of responses to the question: Do you think the course New Media for Tourism Communication has been important considering your current activities? (Five-point Likert-scale: 1=not at all; 2; 3; 4; 5=a lot.)

The vast majority of respondents (57%) acknowledge that they were able to transfer what they have learned during the course to their current jobs, thus providing an important positive feedback to the course, at the same time confirming scientific research on the value and the role of new technologies in current tourism working world.

For the question *Which topics – if any – of the course have been more relevant for your current activities?* the most popular answers were: Search Engines (Search Engine Optimization, Search Engine Marketing), Web 2.0 (social media, blogging), Online Promotion and Back linking, Google Analytics.

Former students have suggested to include the next topics within the course: Mobile Applications and practical hints on how to use Google tools in order to improve business (Analytics, AdWords, etc.). As for the proposal on indicating content of the course that might be eliminated from the program, very few answers were received, suggesting to cancel technical details.

Coming to the teaching strategy, the last question in the transfer block was devoted to the group work: *Do you think that the group work (practical activities) has been useful considering your current activities?* The answers received are quite positive: 11 answered 4 or 5 on a five values Likert scale, 11 respondents selected the medium value, and just 6 selected 1 or 2 (while 5 did not answer this question).

Conclusions and limitations

This study has shown that current and past students of the course New Media for Tourism Communication are quite satisfied with the course (rating it above 7.5 out of 10), and that their level of satisfaction remains pretty stable also once they have graduated. 7% of all students, and 12% among alumni respondents do not rate the course as sufficient. They perform quite well when sitting the course exam, and the acquired knowledge is remembered also years after: 53.1% of alumni declare to remember *something* of what they have learned during the course, while the remaining 46.9% declare to remember *a lot* or even *almost everything*. The topics that are remembered the most by alumni are: Website Communication Model, Search Engines, Web 2.0 and Social Media, Back linking and Usability. Based on their experience, they suggest to add or stress more Mobile Applications and practical hints on how to use Google tools in order to improve business, and to avoid technical details.

The vast majority of alumni declares that the course has been important considering their current activities, among the most important topics, they list: Search Engines, Web 2.0, Online Promotion, Google Analytics. Also the group work is considered important by them, even if with a smaller consensus.

Thanks to collected feedback, especially by alumni, who were able to test the transferability of what they have learned during the course to their current activities, above listed topics will be given more attention, while technicalities will be further reduced. The group work will be maintained, maybe reducing its weight onto the overall course mark. The findings of this research are useful to hospitality educators in making sure that the ICT skills needed by students/alumni are duly covered by the overall curriculum and course(s) syllabus. In addition, this research has proved the usefulness of covering the first three layers of Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model in order to run a comprehensive course evaluation, and to provide important feedbacks for syllabus refinement.

Among the limitations of this study we need to mention the fact that it is based on a single case, hence it cannot be generalized without extreme caution (its methodology, on the contrary, can be fully – and, as we hope, fruitfully – replicated in all similar cases). A further limitation is due to the fact that both authors have been and are still involved in designing and running this course: while every effort has been done in order to avoid biases, especially the risk of being “apologetic” and/or ignoring negative evaluations by

students, this remains a limit the readers need to be aware of. Further research activities are required in order to provide comparable data about other eTourism courses, as well as to assess future editions of this course, once it has been re-designed and refined according to received inputs.

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