

Chapter 6

Transforming Tourism Education: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Sustainable Tourism Management

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ABSTRACT

The chapter describes an interdisciplinary project that was designed and implemented within the scope of a Tourist Activities Management degree whose main topic was sustainability. Based on the use of a bilingual student blog, this project challenged students to produce multimedia content (posts, podcasts, and videos) focusing on sustainable practices and behaviors in different tourism sectors. Making use of a project-based learning approach, the strategy used is perceived as innovative having enhanced student participation and engagement. Concurrently, a preliminary analysis also suggests that there has been a positive change in the participants' awareness towards sustainability, with the different assignments and research having prompted changes in their behavior, denoting the project's pertinence, particularly in these challenging and technology-laden times.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is currently experiencing an unparalleled crisis (OECD, 2020) which defies the sectors' resilience (Biggs et al., 2012) and its capacity to overcome the effects of the COVID-19 pan-

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dem. As different researchers study the short-term social, economic and environmental effects of the pandemic, and try to foresee its long-term impacts, topics such as sustainability and sustainable development have become paramount, not only for governments and service providers as a whole, but also for tourists and the destinations themselves.

This challenge, combined with tourism's contribution for overall sustainable development – as acknowledged by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017) – and the continuous growth of the industry and its impacts, have raised questions regarding the sustainability of tourism activity (Arrobas et al., 2020) and the need to shift current managerial practices and priorities, paving the way for a new sustainable growth paradigm (Lalici & Weber-Sabil, 2020), something that was made more evident by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the uncertainty about the future, and the industry's ability to overcome this period and adopt more sustainable practices, tourism stakeholders will face “unlimited path-shaping opportunities (Niewiadomski, 2020, p. 654), with education for sustainability playing a pivotal role in this change (Arrobas et al., 2020). On the other hand, the pandemic has also urged a prompt reaction from the tourism higher education (THE) sector, having precipitated the ongoing digital transition, creating an opportunity for redesigning curricula and teaching methodologies, and ultimately providing tourism students with better tools to deal with their future working reality.

Based on these premises and focusing on students currently pursuing degree in Tourist Activities Management, in this chapter the authors describe a recently implemented Interdisciplinary Project (IP) aiming to further develop tourism students' awareness as to the importance of sustainable tourism, as well as to engage them in a public discussion regarding sustainable practices and behaviors, considering both the suppliers and the consumers' perspective. Taking into account recent findings, namely studies focusing on the profile of current hospitality and tourism professionals and the challenges they are currently facing (e.g., their limited levels of educational achievement and digital literacy and the resulting difficulties in adapting to new contexts and ways of working – Baum et al., 2020) this project, which involved Tourism Operations Management and English Applied to Tourism courses, made use of technological platforms and tools, namely a class blog and student-produced podcasts, to bridge the gap between theory and practice and encourage students' creativity and resourcefulness. Having been implemented in the summer semester of 2021 (while on partial lockdown, due to the COVID-19 pandemic) the project was also instrumental in promoting remote and hybrid teaching methodologies, making the most use of online collaborative approaches and tools.

Bearing this in mind, the authors start out by establishing the theoretical rationale behind the project. Based on a literature review, they provide an overview of the state of the art, focusing on tourism sustainability and sustainable practices and behaviors, as well as the role tourism education and interdisciplinarity can play within this scope. Next, they describe the teaching/learning strategy designed to achieve these goals, dividing it into three different stages: design and planning; implementation; and assessment. Given the nature of the topics explored, it was deemed necessary to collect students' initial perceptions regarding the concept of sustainability and the role it plays within the industry, as well as to introduce them to best practices and put them in contact with experts in the field. As a result, in addition to an introductory questionnaire, there was an opening webinar, which helped frame future work, namely the topics on which students should focus, as well as other webinars with practitioners from different tourism subsectors, so that students could come into contact with authentic contexts. At the end of the semester another questionnaire was applied as to collect data regarding the impacts of the project, particularly on students' perceptions regarding sustainability and whether they had evolved throughout the semester.

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