
Students' perception of what they learn in Teaching Hotel Château Bethlehem

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Bachelor students of Hotel Management School Maastricht, part of Zuyd University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, start their educational program with a semester of orientation on Hotel Operations in theory and practice. The teaching staff was curious about students' perception of what they learn during their duty in the Teaching Hotel Château Bethlehem. Students were interviewed about the learning environment, the coaching and their learning outcomes. The interview findings gave insight in different unexpected and subconscious learning outcomes together with the conditions under which they occur during practice-based learning. Findings were presented to the teaching staff during a work conference. The entire team emphasised the value of the research method for fine-tuning students' learning outcomes.

Introduction

The Teaching Hotel Chateau Bethlehem is situated in a castle at the campus of the Hotel Management School Maastricht (HMSM). The Teaching Hotel was founded in 2010 as an integral part of the educational program, with the ambition to provide an innovative and challenging learning environment for students. It operates as a commercial hotel and integrates the latest trends and developments in the hospitality industry. Students are set to work as employees, but the context is one with strong teaching and learning objectives. The curriculum is dynamic and attuned to each new cohort of students. Consequently the teaching staff wants to evaluate what perception students have of what they actually learn during their traineeship in the Teaching Hotel.

When looking at workplace learning within an educational context, often a distinction is made between learning inside and learning outside the school. To what degree does the Teaching Hotel offer best of both worlds: productivity and learning? During the orientation for the research project it became clear that teachers are uncertain about the learning outcomes of students doing their traineeship in the hotel. What effect does the on-campus facility have on the learning outcomes? What is the contribution of intense coaching and supervision to learning outcomes? What do students perceive as personal achievements?

The main objective of this research project is to provide evidence for the teachers that helps them make decisions for further developing the curriculum. Some of the findings can also be transferable for workplace learning in other curricula.

Theoretical framework

For many students work-based learning is one of the most significant learning experiences that has a major impact on their growth towards becoming a qualified professional. However, from a curriculum perspective it is undetermined to what extent work-based learning contributes to the further development of professional and academic competences, as Bayley, Hughes and Moore (2004) argued. In their view workplaces are perhaps appropriate to educate for lower level vocational qualifications but these do not enable the purposeful development of competences that are dominant in higher education curricula. Underpinnings for the view of Bailey, Hughes and Moore, at least for the Dutch context, can be found in, for example, studies conducted in nursing education (Reenalda, 2011) and engineering and teacher education (Lappia and Streumer, 2012). These studies point at severe difficulties in organising work-based learning because of its haphazard, incidental and informal nature (Marsick, 2006). Whether the goal is to qualify students or to offer them opportunities to develop their notions of the profession, inherent to work-based learning is the tension between working and learning. The rationality of working implies that all activities are geared to the performance of work and the deliverance of the expected products and services. This does not necessarily imply that there is no space for learning activities, but it does mean that learning 'plays the second fiddle' and that the work performance is the ultimate priority.

Attempts are made to overcome the problems attached to conventional work-based learning. High fidelity simulations (e.g. for educating pilots, doctors, nurses, navigating officers) are responses to ensure that students learn to master critical work activities that cannot be easily trained in the workplace itself. Though simulations appear to be useful, they do not offer the full range of learning experiences that authentic workplaces

do offer. Another solution focuses on avoiding the pitfalls of work-based learning by providing students additional support and guidance. Especially the opportunities to reflect on the tasks at hand and to consider the points for improving performance appear to be fruitful (see the cognitive apprenticeship model proposed by Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989), as applied in the internships of teacher education (Seezink, 2009) and medical doctors education (Stalmeijer, 2011). Guidance and reflection that mainly consist of show and tell (behaviouristic instruction) appear to be less effective compared to the ones that are rooted in cognitive or constructive learning theories. However these latter forms are less often observed in work-based learning. Characteristic for teaching firms is that learning and work performance gain equal attention. The teaching firm needs to achieve financial goals, like any other firm, but offers more opportunities to adjust the work activities to the students' learning needs and their prior knowledge. There is, as is in simulations, also a higher level of tolerance for making mistakes, compared to conventional firms but since teaching firms are authentic firms they offer a much wider range of learning opportunities than simulations usually offer. Moreover teaching firms usually offer various kinds of instruction and coaching to ensure sufficient high quality learning experiences. Teaching firms can be found in different branches (like hospitals, schools) and also as teaching hotels in the hospitality sector. So far work-based learning studies mainly focus on the possibilities or impossibilities work-based learning offers to advanced students. Far less attention has been devoted to how work-based learning contributes to first-year students' sense of belonging and their perceptions of the profession they are educated for.

This paper focuses on the first-year bachelor student's perception of what they learn in the Teaching Hotel. The following research questions were central in the study: 1) what perceptions do students have about what they learn in the Teaching Hotel? 2) what perceptions do students have about what they learn from the coaching during work-based learning? 3) what perception do students have about the influence of the particular context of the Teaching Hotel on their learning outcomes?

Methodology

Prior to the actual research a preliminary research was done where conversations took place with 11 employees and four students to develop a better understanding of the context and to gain ideas for possible research questions. Partly based on the information gathered in this pre-phase it was decided to opt for a qualitative research study.

Based on the research project orientation phase the learning outcomes of first-semester-students have been selected as subject of investigation. Each semester almost 150 new students start with a course on Hotel Operations related to professional orientation. The first semester is divided into periods of three weeks where students have

duty at the different departments in the Teaching Hotel. Students work and study in periods of two weeks of theory and one week of operational practice in the kitchen, the restaurant, and rooms division (housekeeping and front office). On average every week about 50 new students start their duties in each department. In less than a week, the students have to be introduced, put to work, be trained and evaluated. Second year students work for one week as a supervisor with a team of first year students; a professional instructor assists the students in operational tasks and is responsible for the final assessment within the department. The second year student and the instructor are the ones who supervise and coach the first year students.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 19 first-year Dutch students during their work in the teaching hotel. Saturation was achieved as after the 15th interview no more new facts and insights were mentioned in the remaining interviews. Two external researchers with no direct involvement with the Teaching Hotel have conducted the interviews.

Interviewees were invited to respond to their transcribed interview report. The researchers that conducted the interviews have analyzed the data with the use of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). The qualitative analysis of the data mainly reflects the approach to research as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). First open coding was carried out on three interviews, resulting in a list of over a hundred codes, which were consequently reduced to a set of 12 codes. With these codes relevant text fragments of all interviews were coded. Both researchers were involved in coding the text fragments. In all cases mutual agreement between the researchers was achieved during the process of coding and clustering. As is noticeable in the frequency Table 1, most references refer to learning outcomes of being coached. "When the management sets more pressure, you act better and this is what I want." Less references report on learning outcomes in personal achievement. "In the beginning, I was shy. When you respond to the needs of the guests, you learn to communicate very well and that creates an enthusiastic attitude."

The coded dataset has underpinned a fine-grained description and critical evaluation of the learning environment, which aimed as input for a work conference with the teaching staff. For this purpose, the codes have been ordered into main groups according to the central themes for the research project: the context for learning, supervision and personal achievements.

Findings

Findings are reported at an aggregated level, mainly presented in tables. Table 1 gives an overview of the main codes and Tables 2-4 show a brief summary of the descriptions on an aggregated level.

Table 1. Frequencies of sources and references

Main Codes		
Name	Sources	References
01 Professional skills	18	125
02 Image of hotel management	18	94
03 Corporate culture	12	35
04 Coherence between theory and practice	17	56
05 Valuing supervision	19	232
06 Teamwork - communication	18	85
07 Professional efficacy	13	40
08 Being challenged	15	26
09 Taking responsibility	14	41
10 Structuring the work	12	25
11 Sense of belonging	13	29
12 Motivation for learning	9	14

Table 2. Learning outcomes related to the context for learning

Learning Outcomes	
Professional skills	Students learn within a week all operational tasks in the different departments of the hotel: kitchen, restaurant, housekeeping, and front office. Although most students have previous work experience in the hospitality industry, the Teaching Hotel still offers them enough challenges, like learning to communicate with guests, to work under pressure, to plan additional work when there are few guests, to think about the impact of design for the employees, etc. The tasks seem to be simple, but the environment is challenging and demanding.
Image of hotel management	Students often relate learning outcomes to their future position as hotel manager. They reflect on the relation between management and employees and the importance of a hands-on mentality for management. This makes even less attractive operational tasks acceptable. Their perception of management makes students reflect on their positioning within the hotel industry.
Corporate culture	Students define the attractiveness of the work environment in terms of good atmosphere, mutual respect, collaboration and personal coaching. They perceive that these conditions strengthen the quality of hospitality. The atmosphere during a workweek is diverse and strongly depends on the department, the supervisors and the guests.
Coherence between theory and practice	The value of theory for practice is predominant according to students. It is mainly expressed in terms of application and less in terms of deeper understanding. Students appreciate the combination of theory lessons and practice. Although practice often differs from theory, students see the additional value of practical experiences for knowledge tests.

Table 3. Learning outcomes related to supervision

Learning Outcomes	
Valuing the supervision	Students say they learn best from strict guidelines and accurate feedback in an environment where it is allowed to make mistakes and where there is an opportunity to correct. Nevertheless they also know that they learn most from unexpected situations where they have to make decisions instantly. Students view the positive feedback from supervisors as a catalyst for their self-efficacy and see the supervisor as a role model. Some students are disappointed that most feedback sessions at the end of a workday are related to operational skills and therefore remain superficial.
Teamwork – communication	Collaboration is not self-evident for students. Shared responsibility makes them aware of the necessity of clear communication. Supervisors emphasize the

	importance of cooperation and clear communication. A sense of interdependence and collaboration is gradually created. In difficult situations the character and skills of fellow students are revealed and students learn to manage these differences. Students continue to have difficulties in giving feedback to each other.
Professional efficacy	Students experience that the supervisors as well as the instructors give them lots of trust, which makes them feel responsible, pro-active and proud of their achievements. Students have admiration for the instructors because of their craftsmanship and the way they manage students' learning. Feedback is merely experienced as supportive instead of controlling. The feeling of professional efficacy grows through interaction with real guests.
Being surprised – challenged	The challenging context of the Teaching Hotel creates many new experiences and demands a high degree of adaptation. Difficult or less attractive tasks give new insights. Students learn to be flexible and at the same time to stay authentic in an extraordinary environment. The challenges in combination with a broad variety of tasks inspire students in innovative thinking.

Table 4. Learning outcomes related to personal achievements

	Learning Outcomes
Responsibility	The safe environment, the financial responsibility, the constant support from supervisors, and the possibility to make mistakes stimulate students take responsibility. They feel responsible for the guests and the product, for the hotel and the team and for their personal development. During events, or when a student is appointed as shift leader, they experience an extra stimulus for their feeling of responsibility.
Structuring the work	Students learn how important it is to work in a structured way. If they are not well prepared, or when the situation is stressful, students experience that they get out of control. Especially in difficult situations students experience that information is not processed properly. Furthermore they see the importance of clear communication, staying calm and handling situations step by step in order to gain control.
Sense of belonging	The fact that starting students collaborate with older students and with supervisors gives them pride and solidarity. Many of the guests are curious how things are handled and tell students how impressed they are. When talking with guests about the benefits of working in the hotel, students mention the feeling they have of being part of the school community.
Motivation for learning	Half of the interviewed students report that practice in the Teaching Hotel has had a positive effect on their motivation for learning. They talk about curiosity, motivation and a broad image of the profession. These students show enthusiasm while at the same time they are little explicit in what learning questions the experience has given them. The questions they mention are all related to finances.

Reporting the results

The coded dataset has underpinned a rich description and critical evaluation of the learning environment, which has served as input for a work conference with the staff. For this purpose three main themes have been suggested: learning outcomes related to the context of learning, to supervision and to personal achievements. In Tables 2-4 a brief summary of the descriptions is presented.

After coding and description of the outcomes, the learning outcomes have been presented in a work conference to the committee for practice-based learning. The participants of the work conference had already

taken some decisions for fine-tuning the curriculum, which they could underpin with the results of the research. In the work conference they discussed about the need to create more coherence between theory and practice, to provide more theoretical challenge in different areas and to deepen the learning experience during the semester. There was a dialogue about the professional development of both teachers and instructors, in order to get more commitment with the work and teaching activities of each other, and to involve both parties in educational design activities. At the end of the work conference the dean has invited the committee

to define the points of interest and elaborate proposals based on the research findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study was conducted to gain insight into how first-year bachelor students perceive what they learn from working in the teaching hotel. The general objective of this first period in the Teaching Hotel is to support students in orienting on what it means to be a professional in hospitality, by offering them hands-on experiences with various tasks that are part of the core of the hospitality profession.

The semi-structured interviews with 19 students resulted into a substantial set of learning outcomes, which could be reduced to a set of 12 themes. The Teaching Hotel experience appeared to contribute to mastering operational tasks (professional skills), increase their understanding of the profession, and supports students in discovering links between practice and theoretical knowledge. In addition, interviewees pointed at the significant role of the supervisors in their learning in the Teaching Hotel. Trust, being challenged and receiving responsibility were some of the key words that interviewees mentioned while describing their supervisors contribution to their learning outcomes. The Teaching Hotel experience was far less conducive in generating personal learning outcomes. For example, only a minority of the interviewees mentioned considerable effects of the Teaching Hotel experience on their motivation for learning.

Students report the operational tasks as learning outcomes, and also explicit what they have learned from these tasks. For example they talk about stress handling and the necessity of collaboration and a student whose parents own a hotel tells that he has hardly learned anything, but that he is very curious about the financial value of sponsorships for the Teaching Hotel.

For an orientation on what it means to be a professional in hospitality it is perhaps better to strive for a broad range of learning experiences than to focus on deepening students' learning experiences. The discussion of the research findings with the teaching staff showed once more that the optimum has not yet been found and requires the attention of the curriculum designers.

This study has provided new insights not yet defined by the teaching staff. The outcomes of the yearly quality assurance surveys for students demonstrate much more criticism on the education program, while in this research students were mainly positive. Apparently the way in which the leading interview questions were phrased, with the emphasis on what students actually learn, has contributed to revealing students' own perceptions of their learning outcomes. The positive inquiry brings more commitment and ambition than a more critical or assessing research approach. At the start of their education students reflect on their personal commitment rather than on critical notes. When they do not appreciate the education, they often relate this to their own person. A possible limitation of the study is that students tend to

mention their learning experiences and are less skilled in precisely defining their own learning outcomes. We recommend to be aware of this pitfall when setting up studies that focus on learning outcomes.

The interview findings indicate that an on-campus facility for practice-based learning offers students a much broader range of learning experiences compared to conventional firms in the hospitality sector. Students receive much more responsibilities and are being truly challenged compared to the learning possibilities offered by conventional firms. This study underpins the potential benefits of the Teaching Hotel and offers insight for further developments.

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