Research Paper

Educators' Perspectives of eLearning in Swiss Private Hospitality Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Hospitality institutions were recommended to be innovative when delivering competency-based educational programmes as teaching methods have progressed to employ creative approaches (Malone & Gardner, 2011). Although tourism education has evolved beyond eLearning (Sigala, 2013), many hospitality education is still employing eLearning platforms as it is a web-based system that facilitates learning and making information or knowledge available to users regardless of time and/or place (Lonn & Teasley, 2009). Along this premise, this study aims to provide a rare insight of hospitality educators' perspectives of preparing their students the required managerial competencies through eLearning platforms in private hospitality institutions located in Switzerland.

HOSPITALITY MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES

Competencies are behaviours involving skills, knowledge and qualities to successfully function in a job, role or situation (Horng, Hsu, Liu, Lin & Tsai, 2011). Developing competencies in the classroom is possible through competency-based contemporary hospitality education curriculum focusing on the necessary skills or knowledge in which students can apply to enter the workforce successfully (Millar, Mao & Moreo, 2008). Sandwith's (1993) competency domains model outlines five distinct skills and knowledge (conceptual/creative, leadership, interpersonal, administrative and technical) required to succeed as managers so as to bring competitive advantage to their organisations. However, hospitality recruiters from different geographical locations have different preferences of competencies of potential managers. In the United States of America, hotel managers desire their successors to be competent in human resource management, financial management,

information technology (IT) and marketing (Kay & Moncarz, 2004). In Europe, Spanish hotel and restaurant employers prefer their managers to possess technical and generic competencies to perform their daily tasks and to cope with their changing work environments (Agut, Grau & Peiró 2003). In Asia, Taiwanese hospitality managers are required to be proficient in generic and technical competencies (Horng et al., 2011). Therefore, the following research question was developed:

RQ1. What competencies can eLearning platforms prepare hospitality managerial students in Switzerland?

ELEARNING PLATFORMS

Hölbl and Welzer (2010) consider eLearning as the combination of exchange of materials through web-based platforms with the appropriate learning assistance and services creating an effective learning process. The eLearning concept can create campus-based and/or distance education learning experiences depending on higher education institutions' preferences. Although eLearning platforms are commonly used by educators to deliver and retrieve learning materials, educators also employ this technique to enhance interaction with students through chat and discussion, sharing of teaching contents and other course materials, to promote independent learning skills, and to post course announcements and homework assignments (Georgouli, Skalkidis & Guerreiro, 2008; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). The strengths and shortcomings of eLearning platforms are summarised in Table 1.

 "Insert Table 1 here"

eLearning education is grounded by the constructivism and collaborative learning philosophies (Martinez & Jagannathan, 2008). On one hand, constructivism education enhances learning by exposing students to new information in which it is analysed and evaluated. Then, the learner searches for a relationship between this new information and her/his existing knowledge thus creating a learning experience (Cho, Schmelzer & McMahon,

2002; Sigala, 2004). On the other hand, collaborative education occurs when new knowledge and ideas are created through a group of students and teachers. In eLearning, this is possible through chat rooms or online discussions when the student formulates her/his new knowledge into words and the reactions and responses from the rest of the group (Cho et al., 2002; Sigala, 2004).

The actual use of eLearning platforms is influenced by teachers' perceptions of technology (Mahdizadeh et al., 2008). The success of implementing eLearning in an institution of higher education is largely dependent on users' viewpoints or attitudes towards the use of technology in education (Georgouli et al., 2008). However, empirical study of hospitality educators' perceptions of eLearning platforms is scarce and outdated since the introduction and implementation of eLearning techniques in hospitality higher education a decade ago. Hence, the following research questions were posed to gain deeper understanding of contemporary hospitality educators' perceptions of eLearning in Switzerland:

RQ2. What are the factors impacting educators' usage of eLearning platforms in preparing hospitality students' managerial competencies?

RQ3. What are the benefits and challenges of employing eLearning platforms to prepare hospitality students the required competencies?

METHODOLOGY

The design of this exploratory qualitative study is underpinned by the interpretivism and axiology research philosophies (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Axiology was needed to uphold ethical practice in all stages of the research process; while interpretivism attempted to collect, appraise and construe educators' opinions and experiences of eLearning platforms in preparing students' managerial competencies in higher education institutions in Switzerland (Saunders et al., 2009). As such, purposive sampling was employed due to the lack of a sampling frame to identify a list of potential hospitality educators working in higher

education institutions in Switzerland. The 12 educators were selected based on the fact that they have employed eLearning platforms in their teaching assignments in private hospitality institutions of higher education in Switzerland; their medium of teaching must be in English to ensure their abilities to converse effectively and efficiently in English during the interviews.

A set of semi-structured interview questions, with the inclusion of probing and prompting queries, were developed based on thorough literature review and arranged in thematic order. All the participants were individually interviewed using the same set of questions in the precise order for reliability purposes (McNeill & Chapman, 2005). The semi-structured interview questions permitted the interviewees to answer with more flexibility thereby increasing the validity of the data collected (McNeill & Chapman, 2005). In order to enhance clarity, the developed interview questions were first pre-tested by research specialists and then pilot tested by three pilot sample sharing similar characteristics as the actual interviewees (McBurney & White, 2007). Further, prior to asking the questions, the five competency domains were explained to the interviewees to ensure their comprehension. Positive research ethics were observed by obtaining informed consent from the interviewees, in advance, for the taping of the interview conversations (Saunders et al., 2009); while fictional names were used in the analysis to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. The tape-recordings were first transcribed verbatim and cross-checked to eliminate error, then coded, categorised, interpreted and analysed using template analysis (King, 1998). Template analysis, a qualitative data deconstruction analytical method, was preferred because it shared similar strengths with content analysis and grounded theory but it required few predetermined codes and allowed a flexible approach to interpretation of the primary data (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). The coding template was constructed in two stages, first, an initial template using codes and themes identified from the literature, then, a final

template (see Table 2) incorporating additional data that emerged from the interviews. More codes could be added whenever necessary during the analysis process; while unitising of data was performed by "cutting" up or dividing the information in the text into units and then grouping these units into categories that expanded the template horizontally. This process facilitates relationships for connecting the categories to answer the research questions.

"Insert Table 2 here"

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interviewees' Profiles

Twelve hospitality educators, all Europeans, working in two private hospitality higher education institutions, who employed eLearning in their teachings, participated in this study (see Table 3). Although the interviewees' gender mix was imbalanced, both female and male hospitality educators were provided the opportunity to share their perceptions of eLearning. Most of them (n=9) were frequent users of eLearning platforms in their teachings. The frequent users' age ranged from 32 to 60 years old, taught various hospitality related subjects, which implied that eLearning platforms are suitable for both young and mature educators to employ. All, except one, interviewees had at least four years of teaching experience in higher education institutions. This finding strengthens the trustworthiness of the educators' views of eLearning platforms.

"Insert Table 3 here"

Hospitality Managerial Competencies via eLearning platforms

With respect to the Competency domain model, managers should possess administrative, technical, conceptual/creative, interpersonal and leadership skills in order to be successful (Sandwith, 1993). Hence, this section attempts to answer the research question of "What hospitality managerial competencies can eLearning platforms prepare students in Switzerland?"

Nine educators (Amy, Christine, Linda, Mary, Anthony, Eric, Philippe, Robert & Steven) agreed that eLearning could assist hospitality students in acquiring human resource management and financial skills within the administrative domain. In terms of managing manpower, Linda, Robert and Anthony specifically mentioned that eLearning platforms prepared students' organisation and time management skills. Linda said "when my students employ the scheduling function in eLearning platforms, they can reflect and learn how to manage their time to organise their jobs"; while Robert mentioned that "eLearning encourages my students to organise their own time based on the workload I have set for them.....the workload is there and they know where to find it [pause] they can organise themselves on how much time they need to complete the tasks within a certain period". In addition, Amy and Mary recognised that eLearning platforms could aid and enhance students learning skills and widened their learning perspectives, which could directly benefit both manpower and financial management skills. This finding concurred with Mahdizadeh et al. (2008) that eLearning platform makes it possible for teachers to offer students different representations of knowledge. Further, Eric admitted using simulation activities via eLearning platforms in preparing his students' financial management skills. On the contrary, Manja, Renato and Lars did not consider their students could acquire hospitality administrative managerial competencies via eLearning. Renato reasoned that eLearning platforms functioned as "a back-up for classroom lessons". Their (Manja, Renato & Lars) negative perceptions might be due to their poor understanding of the functions of eLearning platforms.

The majority of the interviewees (n=9) agreed that eLearning platforms could, one way or another, assist students to acquire technical skills to support a broad spectrum of hospitality managerial jobs. Renato elaborated those hospitality managers frequently required to perform business calculations and/or financial management in their jobs and that eLearning

platforms were able to aid hospitality graduates acquiring those knowledge "via transmitting formulae, related information and other useful (software/computer) applications". Amy added that contemporary hospitality managers required IT skills to get their daily work done and students' exposures to eLearning technology could enhance their IT skills. This finding concurred with Lominé (2002) that students could develop their IT skills through the usage of eLearning platforms. In contrast, Steven, Mary and Manja argued that eLearning was not useful in preparing students to gain practical skills (like food and beverage service). However, Linda suggested educators to upload videos to eLearning platforms to demonstrate food and beverage service skills.

The interviewees had mixed views concerning the employment of eLearning platforms to prepare hospitality students' leadership skills. On one hand, Renato, Anthony, Philippe and Lars argued that eLearning was useless in assisting students to acquiring leadership competencies because it is a platform to deliver teaching materials and the technology itself could not develop leadership competencies; educators must work alongside and coach their students in building leadership skills through the use of examples and experiences. On the other hand, Christine, Mary, Linda, Robert, Eric and Steven perceived that eLearning could assist students to develop a leadership profile. Mary and Eric explained that eLearning technique encouraged students to be responsible and proactive in self-development through independent learning. Robert commented "the students could feel the responsibility of getting their work done on time [pause] this way they cultivated self-motivation". Further, Christine said "eLearning empowered students to be in charge of their own education…..if they could manage themselves then they would be able to manage other people". These findings corresponded with Bromham and Oprandi (2006) that eLearning allowed students to be independent and manage their learning progression.

With reference to the conceptual and creative competencies, the majority of the interviewees (n=9) superficially perceived eLearning as a tool to deliver and share information and knowledge with students. They overlooked the analytical and discussion components of cognitive skills. For instance, Christine confessed that she employed eLearning platforms to post her lecture notes and she did not explore further. However, Eric, Philippe and Amy acknowledged the collaborative element of eLearning could enhance learners' creativity when students were provided the opportunities to share and exchange their ideas in forums, chatting and discussions of eLearning platforms (cf. Sigala, 2004).

Eight educators (Linda, Eric, Amy, Robert, Mary, Steven, Christine & Lars) agreed that eLearning platforms could assist students in acquiring interpersonal competencies. Linda said "eLearning gave the shyer students a way to interact without raising their hands in class"; while Amy reckoned that students were more likely to chat in forums than in class. Steven saw students and teachers had more opportunities to interact via eLearning platforms. However, Eric, Mary and Robert suspected that eLearning is limited in developing students' interpersonal skills as the amount of class interactions had reduced. Robert elaborated that face-to-face interaction is important because "both the teachers received great satisfaction interacting their students and vice versa". This finding concurred with Lominé's (2002) finding that human factor is a key component of hospitality education. On the contrary, Renato and Anthony determined that eLearning was useless in preparing students' written communication when students were reluctant to write on official forums. This finding contradicted to Hölbl and Welzer (2010) finding that eLearning could enhance communication skills.

Factors Impacting Educators' Usage of eLearning in Preparing Students' Managerial Competencies

Insufficient time and lack of training was mentioned by the interviewees as the key factors impacting their usage of eLearning in preparing their hospitality students' managerial competencies. Eight participants (Steven, Manja, Christine, Anthony, Eric, Robert, Mary & Renato) confessed that time constraints limited their usage of eLearning platforms in their teachings. Firstly, Steven revealed that he needed time not only to setup eLearning platform but also to update and maintain it, which becomes a long and time consuming process (cf. Zhang et al., 2004). Renato considered the updating and maintenance of eLearning platforms extra work and "a bit of a hassle". Then, Manja, Christine and Anthony protested that there were too many functions in eLearning platforms and that they needed a lot of time to navigate, discover and select the right functions. Next, Eric specified that "time must be dedicated for training and also the trainees needed time to be trained properly on how to use the platform". Further, Mary stated that both educators and students required time to use eLearning platforms. In particular, students might have insufficient time to balance eLearning and other school activities.

Training is imperative to create strong learning and teaching benefits (Georgouli et al., 2008; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). The participants in this present study acknowledged that their knowledge of eLearning was limited. Hence, they felt that they lacked the training needed to realise the full potential of eLearning functions. Linda stated: "if I had more training, I could probably do more with it (eLearning)". Steven concurred with Linda by expressing "it would be useful to have an extended training to use eLearning properly because I was using less than 10% of the available functions". Manja protested that she did not receive the required training to use many of the functions on eLearning platforms. Eric confirmed that continuous training is a factor that would help him to develop eLearning further. These findings might be the causes of the limited usage of eLearning platforms in preparing hospitality students' managerial competencies.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges of eLearning Employment

All the interviewees found benefits in using eLearning. Linda, Manja, Anthony, Robert, Eric and Lars concurred with Singh et al. (2005) that eLearning provided convenience and accessibility to students to retrieve materials anywhere at any time. Two of the educators (Christine & Mary) claimed that eLearning was beneficial towards the students' personal growth and maturity as it allowed students to be in charge of their education, making them more responsible and independent (cf. Bromham & Oprandi, 2006; Mahdizadeh et al., 2008). Mary elaborated that since students had to access eLearning for information, they had the opportunities to "investigate a little bit beyond just the minimum requirement…..what is very often not encouraged by textbook reading", thus increasing their knowledge and positive experience through constructivism learning (Cho et al., 2002). Renato concurred with Bromham and Oprandi (2006) that the flexibility of eLearning aided students with different speed of learning as they could "catch up on what they didn't have time to understand." Amy praised eLearning platforms for helping students' future careers because it could widen their horizons and prepare them for hospitality job. In terms of teaching, Christine, Amy, Lars, Eric and Philippe found eLearning to be user-friendly for educators (cf. Georgouli et al., 2008) in structuring their courses as they could upload and store documents electronically, and create meaningful discussions with students.

Simultaneously, the interviewees had mentioned some challenges when using eLearning. Four participants (Linda, Steven, Manja & Eric) claimed that the set-up at the beginning was time-consuming due to the complexity of technology (cf. Zhang et al., 2004). In particular, Renato and Anthony complained the uploading of interactive media files were challenging. Then, Anthony mentioned the emergence of newer versions of eLearning platforms created upgrading and transfer issues. Another major challenge faced by educators was their students' lack of motivation to access eLearning platforms. Manja, Robert, Amy

and Mary admitted that students were not keen on using eLearning platform and its functions. Amy said "I tried to get my students to engage in forums, but that was just one bridge too far". This finding concurred with Hölbl and Welzer (2010) that students were not eager to use the available tools on eLearning platforms.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusions

The importance of preparing hospitality students the required managerial competencies is undisputable. However, hospitality managerial competencies requirements are inconsistent due to geographical disparity. Hence, hospitality educators prepare their students five domains of generic managerial competencies namely administrative, conceptual/creative, technical, leadership and interpersonal through competency-based education. Competency-based education is delivered through classroom teaching traditionally. As teaching methods and technology advances to cater to digital natives, eLearning education has been adopted by higher education institutions located in different continents.

In conclusion, this study determined that experienced educators of private hospitality higher education institutions in Switzerland are using eLearning technology and education to prepare their students administrative, conceptual/creative, technical, leadership and interpersonal skills and knowledge due to more acclaims than criticisms of eLearning. However, the rate, breadth and depth of eLearning usage and application vary amongst the educators. These educators, mostly frequent users, employ primarily the basic functions of eLearning like uploading documents, assignments and teaching slides; while few explore advance eLearning applications like forums, blogs and group discussion to stimulate critical thinking and analysis. This study also concludes that both constructivism and collaborative philosophies are employed in eLearning. However, their employment of eLearning is impacted by time constraints and lack of training. Hence, the educators have mixed

perceptions of eLearning. Hospitality eLearning platforms are user-friendly and it is conveniently accessible to the students to self-pace their rate of learning. In addition, hospitality eLearning education enhances students' positive learning experience and promotes their growth and development through knowledge increase, discussion and independent learning. Further hospitality eLearning broadens students' horizons and these can aid their future hospitality career. The challenges faced by educators when using eLearning platforms can be concluded as technological complexities, time constraints, eLearning functions, motivation of students and learning newer versions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

In terms of theoretical implications, competency-based education is the key to preparing hospitality students for managerial jobs and the five competency domains (conceptual/creative, leadership, interpersonal, technical and administrative) in Sandwith's model (1993) are still relevantly applicable in contemporary hospitality management. Hence, it is imperative to include a competency model in hospitality education curricula design and development. This study has revealed that the usage of eLearning platforms is increasing in contemporary (hospitality) higher education institutions due to its many benefits. However, both the constructivism and collaborative learning philosophies must be present in eLearning platform to maximise its potential for all users. The findings of this present study has complemented and supplemented previous empirical studies of hospitality managerial competencies, the preparedness of hospitality students' managerial competencies, hospitality education, and eLearning education. In addition, the perspectives of the 12 European educators have provided readers valuable and rare insights of the usage of eLearning platforms in private hospitality higher education institutions in Switzerland. In addition, this study expanded the benefits of eLearning to aid students' future career. Further, the employment of a qualitative research design in this present study has added diversity to those

hospitality managerial competencies investigations predominantly employing quantitative research methods.

With respect to practical implications, this paper focuses on top management and owners of private hospitality education institutions, and educators who are current and potential users of eLearning platforms. Firstly, top management and owners of private hospitality education institutions should have clear vision and strategies before making commitments to embark on eLearning. After making positive decisions, they must support the investment, development, implementation and maintenance of eLearning platforms and technology as this is the advancement of education and learning. The return of investing in eLearning platforms may not be immediate and quantifiable. However, the benefits generated by eLearning are long term and they can add value to users' behaviour and experience, and the institutions' competitive advantage. Secondly, top management must offer sufficient time to educators to plan and setup eLearning curricula, and be trained and upgraded on eLearning technology and teaching techniques.

Hospitality educators who are existing users of eLearning platforms should evaluate their attitude towards eLearning technology and teaching methods. Although eLearning should not fully substitute classroom teaching and contact hours (in particular food and beverage service skills), current users of eLearning should perceive such technology positively in the context of blended learning; then, they can explore and unleash the full potential of eLearning teaching. Hospitality educators must understand the goal of employing eLearning is not to fully utilise all functions exist in eLearning technology but to customise the usage of appropriate eLearning functions to benefit and complement their teaching materials and interaction with students. As recommended by Brandl (2005), educators are encouraged to start with the basic eLearning tools (uploading documents, assignments and teaching slides) then progress further with advance tools (forums, blogs, multimedia,

simulations). Using eLearning functions inappropriately can impact negatively the users' (educators and learners) experience. Hospitality educators should continue to employ eLearning education to prepare hospitality students with leadership, administrative, interpersonal, technical and conceptual/creative managerial competencies. However, they should focus on critical thinking, analysis, and discussion. Further, hospitality educators should find ways to motivate their students in eLearning usage.

As for hospitality educators who are potential users of eLearning platforms, this present study recommends them to explore eLearning technology as a new approach to teaching by critically analysing the strengths and weaknesses. Potential users are suggested not to hastily rush into using eLearning without prior proper training. On the contrary, they should attend and complete training in different modules allowing sufficient time for them to learn and progress.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this present study has provided insights of hospitality educators' perceptions of eLearning platforms, there are some limitations worth noting. Firstly, the small number of participants and the employment of purposive sampling have compromised the external validity of the findings. Future research should attempt to employ a probability sampling technique to select a bigger number of respondents. Although this study has justified the use of individual interviewing technique to gain qualitative data, such method limits the richness and depths of group discussion amongst interviewees. Hence, future researchers are recommended to replicate this study using focus groups interviewing. Alternatively, future researchers should contemplate to collect participants' experiences, stories and examples through narratives then analyse the findings using narrative analysis or other non-data-fragmenting methods. Next, this present study focused solely on the accounts of existing hospitality educators who have used eLearning in their teachings. Their perceptions might be

limited in breadth and depth. Hence, future research should include perspectives of students and potential hospitality educators who have not used eLearning but are planning to embark on such method. Finally, this study primarily employed the competency domain model (Sandwith, 1993) in determining those generic competencies and skills required by hospitality managers, future researchers should consider employing other frameworks, for example, the Taiwanese hotel management competency framework (Horng et al., 2011) to underpin their studies.

<div align="center">REFERENCES</div>

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