Transformative learning in educational tourism

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Abstract

Transformative learning is important not only for the learner, but so too the teacher-as-learner. Educational tourism - here defined as tourist experiences that explicitly aim to provide structured learning, in situ, though active and engaged intellectual praxis - provides an opportunity for university teachers to engage with lifelong learners beyond the Academy. Both the medium (educational tourism) and the participants (lifelong learners) can generate transformative experiences for the teacher which may in turn inform and improve his or her classroom teaching. This paper outlines the results of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council study into how humanities scholars use educational tourism to engage with lifelong learners. The study found that educational tourism is characterised by intentional and structured learning experiences that provide opportunities for the teacher to immerse him or herself in experiences that have the potential to challenge previously held beliefs and biases. Furthermore, the typical educational tourist is a well-educated, critical lifelong learner and as such, challenges the teacher in ways which may not occur in the classroom.

Introduction

Transformative learning is an adult education theory that emphasises the critical reflection of personal experiences that have the potential to challenge previously held norms and beliefs. Educational theorists - most notably Jack Mezirow (1990) - understand transformative learning as a three-stage process. First comes critical post facto reflection - that is, a critical examination of an experience. Second comes reflective discourse which can be self-reflective, peer-shared or Socratically driven by a teacher. Third comes action, such as a positive change in behaviour based on the first two stages. Teachers are no strangers to seeking out opportunities for critical and reflective thinking for their students and such strategies inform a lot of learner-centred, applied and action-based teaching models. However, transformative learning is of benefit not only to the student, but also to the teacher-as-learner. As part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council project, the authors of this presentation examined how educational tourism could be employed to create transformative learning opportunities. Educational tourism is here defined as tourist experiences that aim to provide structured learning, in situ, though active and engaged intellectual praxis. The project examined how educational tourism might engender transformative opportunities for the teacher-as-learner, as well as for tour participants. Whilst much research has been conducted on

travel broadly as an opportunity for experiential learning, it has tended to focus on self-directed, incidental learning as part of travel (see for example Moscardo, 1996), or on applied experiences for students undertaking tourism studies (see for example Ruhanen, 2005). By contrast, we wished to examine the notion of the teacher-as-learner engaging with tourism for professional development.

Our investigation found that Australian academic scholars currently participate in a wide range of educational experiences beyond the classroom. These include roles acting as leaders or hosts of inbound programs, as fieldwork and excavation supervisors, providing touring advice to students and colleagues, delivering public lecture series in regional areas, and facilitating student exchange. Indeed Australian universities act as service providers of tourism experiences by offering a variety of short programs, often fee-paying, with the express aim of combining learning and travel. Such travel options range from study abroad and student exchange to group study tours, field work at various Australian locations, holiday programs and customised short courses designed upon demand.

However, the focus of the project was to specifically engage with those educational tourism interactions that occur with industry bodies. This was predicated on certain theoretical assumptions, three of which delineate this presentation. First, educational tours centre on learning - that is, learning is not incidental but an intentionally sought outcome, in the same way that, for example, relaxation might be an intentionally sought outcome for a person booking a short-break at a resort. Second, educational tourism has the potential to expose the teacher to in situ experiences that cause them to reflect upon and challenge their norms and beliefs. Third, educational tourism has the potential to expose the teacher to a different sort of learner - namely a lifelong learner - who may question or challenge the teacher in different ways to his or her classroom students.

Data and method

Online survey tools

Two surveys were conducted. A Participant Survey collected data from individuals who had previous experience of educational tours as well as from others who had expressed interest in them. These individuals were approached via an email invitation to a combination of existing tour company client records and a university's community education database. The second survey, an Academic Survey, was constructed for academic scholars working in broad Arts and Humanities disciplines in Australian universities. For the Participant Survey, a total of 1091 participants were contacted and 612 participants completed the survey. For the Academic Survey, 1552 academics were invited by email to complete the survey and 228 of them completed the survey.

The surveys contained a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions. An example of a qualitative question was 'What does the term 'educational tourism' mean to you?' Respondents provided a free-text response. Free text responses were analysed for content, with a view to identifying recurring concepts, understandings and perceptions. Other questions generated quantitative responses, including demographic data. Yet others included Likert scale items relating to agreement, measuring the extent to which a person agreed or disagreed with a certain statement. All of the questions and statements explored perceptions about the nature, purpose and content of educational tourism.
In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews (29 in total) were conducted with key staff from educational tour operator organisations, and scholars; both those who had participated in educational tourism and those who had not. Personnel from five educational tourism companies were interviewed, including company directors, tour program developers, tour leaders, tour managers and trainers, operations managers, and marketing and sales staff. Scholars both with and without experience in educational tourism, from five universities, were interviewed. All worked within the broad disciplines of arts and humanities. An open-ended approach to questioning was adopted, allowing the interviewer to investigate individual issues of interest that were raised, whilst at the same time ensuring that the same foundation questions were asked of each interviewee. These questions all related to the nature and purpose of educational tourism.

Findings

The nature of learning in educational tourism

Survey respondents were asked to define educational tourism in their own words. In doing so, most touched upon the nature and purpose of educational tourism. Learning was unmistakably the dominant outcome defined by the survey respondents who returned 609 responses to the question "What does the term 'educational tourism' mean to you?" More than four in five definitions included the concept of learning. By contrast, the idea of leisure, or relaxation, appeared in only two percent of the definitions. The definitions provided expressed three key ideas about the form of learning in educational tourism. First, it is intentional, for instance one respondent saw it as "taking a trip specifically to broaden my horizons or enhance my knowledge". Second, it is experiential. Definitions commonly used words or phrases such as "immersive", "hands-on", or "engaging with ideas in their original context". Third, it is structured, or as one person said "it is the combination of travel with a structured educational program."

These three elements - intent, experience and structure - were also highlighted in definitions provided in interviews. One director saw his company's focus as "[enhancing] travel experience through learning for fun." Academics defined the provision of an explicit structure to pursue learning as the significant feature of educational tourism. One academic tour leader expressed it as: "Tourism, or travel which is structured, has a theme to pursue and requires some background knowledge of the sites being visited and some attempt to analyse on the spot." Another highlighted "the desire to acquire information about that place... It's the sense of information." One experienced female academic leader offered: "education tourism is for those people who want to take it seriously, who want to learn from it, rather than those who just want to come along for a holiday."

Statements such as these emphasised the intent required by clients to learn on such tours as an important definitional feature of educational tours.

Furthermore, in general the learning described was implicitly about personal development rather than testable information. Educational tour companies regularly emphasise that no specific academic qualifications are necessary to participate in a tour - far more important is willingness, motivation and a desire to learn. Attitude rather than qualifications is thus a key requirement for clients. The degree of knowledge attainment is up to the individual; with phrases such as "broadening your knowledge" conveying a sense of learning that is measurable only at the level of
each participant. Educational tours appear to focus on contributing to a participant’s personal and intellectual lifelong learning. Because of the individual nature of the learning, and the need to avoid quantifiable knowledge outcomes that cannot be guaranteed for each participant, there is in general no attempt to provide specific learning outcomes for individual tours. In other words, the purpose, or goal, or motivation behind educational tourism is founded on humanistic, lifelong learning principles. It is a means by which individuals develop personally and socially (Strain, 1998). This framework supports not only the tour participants but also those leading the tours and directing the educational focus. Previous research suggests that events experienced whilst on a leisure trip can not only cause individuals to change their perception about the country being visited but also the way in which they view their own country (Pearce, 1982) and this is the essence of transformative learning and, we argue, affects the teacher-as-learner as much as the paying customer.

**Academic interactions with educational tourism**

Our research confirmed that educational tour companies and their clients value academics as educational tour leaders highly; particularly those with formal knowledge complemented by first-hand experience of the tour content, including local integration, language skills and personal connections. The benefit of this expertise is for some scholars reflexive. One male academic leader remarked: "I'm able to pursue what I'd say is my personal interest which is the same as my professional." Participation in educational tourism assists scholars' own understanding of their teaching strategies and research. One male academic reflected: "not all that I do personally in my research leads into my teaching... but a lot of it does". More than one academic explained their involvement in terms of advancing their own research agenda through the opportunity to explore new or unique destinations, or to revisit sites of interest. Practically speaking, involvement with a tour company enables many scholars to develop their research interests with the funds the company provides, such as the academic who had funds donated to his team's ongoing archaeological excavation by the educational tour company he worked for. One company involved in this study is a not-for-profit organisation, comprised of 25 members universities and colleges, part of whose income is allocated to support university-based research programs. Thus, there is evidence that the relationship between the academic and the tour company transcends a commercial transaction. Education travel providers are generally sympathetic to an academic's personal and professional value systems and support them in this respect.

It was clear from the data analysis that many academics consider in situ experiences as opening up learning opportunities for themselves that cannot occur in the classroom. Being "on-site" is seen by many to provide distinct pedagogical insights. As one academic interviewed remarked: "there is a different dynamic and you can draw on that shared experience without having to spell it out". Another observed that it was unlike classroom lectures because of the immediacy of the content. As he said: "[the participants] may be more focused perhaps on what they've just seen. For instance ... you know what XYZ looked like, you've just been down it, therefore you can visualise it. So there's a difference." A number of academics highlighted overlap between their work in the institution and beyond. One academic observed that "A lot of what I do is taken straight out of what I do in lectures [within the institution]. And then a lot goes back in to the lectures afterwards." The variety of the teaching environments on a tour is a feature that attracts some leaders, as one academic explained: "[it's] always intriguing, trying to teach in different places, in different contexts, in different ways. I think teaching in universities is... well, it's the same, rather repetitive."
The influence that being in place has on the production of new knowledge cannot be underestimated, according to tour leaders. As one academic observed: "the impact of it - there in person - stays in your memory very much better. You can see it in context, explain better how something got there, which really can't happen on a page in a book." Another explained: "doing it in situ, absolutely there are things that you can teach only when you are there. It's partly indescribable, just the sense of place... that you can't convey in the classroom. There's also an intensity to the teaching". Academics were able to advance their own learning and research through tour locations: the company "can gain access - because of their contacts and reputation - to sites that you wouldn't be able to see yourself." Another academic reflected that "they've given me access to opportunities I never would have had".

The outcomes of these experiences are for many scholars decidedly personally transformative. One scholar, working in the area of art history, saw educational tourism as a vehicle for promoting cultural diversity. He reflected on people's sense of security in a post-911 global environment and felt, personally, that "cultural respect has a huge amount to do with establishing cultural security... For me, it's [about] providing people with the opportunity to experience something in a way that unfolds and they learn about and sort of builds up as something that they can really participate into a high level."

Another scholar observed that:

Any trip is rich with bringing in new ideas connected to new experiences, such as listening to Iranians in Paris opposed to the corrupt mullahs and objecting to French trade with Iran. Any trip whatsoever exposes me to new issues and debates and different ways of living. It also turns lots of theory on its head, because I get new evidence on the ground.

As previously remarked, transformative reflection can be an individual exercise. However our research suggests that educational tourism has the potential to situate the teacher-as-learner within a special learning community that brings with it certain advantages. In addition to the distinct delivery techniques and content required to lecture in situ, academics interviewed and surveyed as part of this project emphasised how the quality of the educational tours encouraged them to think anew about their teaching and research. Most participants on educational tours are tertiary educated. Almost two-thirds of respondents (65%) to the client survey held a university degree. Almost one-in-four (24%) had completed postgraduate coursework studies and a further 13 percent held a higher degree by research (i.e. Masters or PhD). Moreover, participants on educational tours become involved in the first place because they are keen to have a learning experience; they are often thirsty for new knowledge. One male scholar, experienced in tour leading, reflected on distinctions between the insights gained on tours with mature learners and his undergraduate classroom teaching experiences. He valued the opportunity to teach on tour since "the more people you talk to about this - you get lots of different perspectives from them and you learn." His experience was definitely that the quality and quantity of feedback he received was greater from lifelong learners on these trips, compared to first or second-year students. Another observed that "On cultural tours you can tap into an unusually wide range of experience: art historians, lawyers, engineers..., and most of all people who have seen, done and thought a lot."
A learning community can be defined as a group of people who share some values and beliefs, and are actively engaged in learning together and from each other. Learning communities include concepts of membership ("belonging"), shared experiences and emotional connections. Much of the existing scholarship on learning communities has focussed on alternative teaching strategies for students or professionals (Carpenter, Dublin & Harper, 2005; Hayes, 2007; Egan & Jaye, 2009). Three assumptions underlie the support for learning communities: that they will a) create a group that will work together b) increase intellectual interaction and c) enhance learning (Huerta, 2004). Whilst research has also been conducted on learning communities using tourism to further their goals (Guevara, 1996), educational tourism itself as a learning community appears to have been somewhat overlooked. In survey responses for this project, leaders and clients both identified the group experience as a valuable learning resource and rated group learning/travel experiences higher than individual experiences. A tour leader for one educational tour company described the advantages of the group-learning environment: "that person is sharing all their excitement and enthusiasm and knowledge for what they’re looking at. They’re also sharing that experience with like-minded enquirers". One male academic who ran tours for independent groups of travellers, friends and companies explained his motivation: "I enjoy the interaction with other people and it’s really good when you have a group of people who share the same interests."

In such contexts, the leader acts as a facilitator of client learning, using the relationships built over the length of the tour. Academics, as well as clients, have found the sense of learning together an enriching feature of their work in this domain. One female academic leader explained:

I enjoy meeting the people and I certainly enjoy imparting the knowledge that I have to those people. And some of them are extremely interested, they will come up with questions, no doubt about it, so I enjoy that aspect of it... on the whole I enjoy it, I thoroughly enjoy it, I enjoy meeting them, being with them.

Moreover, because teaching on tour is less linear than classroom teaching, new ways of delivering ideas are required. The relative flexibility in designing a syllabus free from university course structures and assessment requirements enable some scholars to explore new materials and experiment with more interdisciplinary programs than they could in classroom units. As one female academic leader explained:

The joy of cultural tourism is the absence of a curriculum or examinations which leaves the lecturer free to be creative, to think about their subject in new ways, and explore possibilities generated by the landscape they are themselves engaging with alongside their group.

Academics considered that teaching on tour required an ability to synthesise large amounts of information, across varied disciplines, in ways that were not comparable to delivery of unit content in the tertiary classroom:

The other huge advantage of cultural tourism for a scholar is the way in which it demands recognition of the 'big picture' as well as detailed and insightful commentary of a more specialised nature.
Equally, clients valued tour leaders who were able to "synthesize a great deal of learning and communicate it in a way, which conveys a great deal of insight into the subject matter, while remaining clearly understandable." Several academics stressed the ways in which educational tourism had enhanced their ability to create narrative, or to "tell a story". By delivering on tours, academics considered that tour leaders were able to develop more discursive learning styles.

As well as participating as tour leaders, the project research has highlighted a range of other opportunities for academic input. Many do not require scholars to travel on, or lead, tours. Organising travel itineraries; identifying seminal historical moments, architectural features, geographic regions; writing travel literature; speaking at information sessions are also all educational tourism opportunities for engagement of the expertise of the academy. As one said:

> It also gave me the opportunity to develop my philosophy of learning in place by getting to know a specific itinerary well, and discussing it continually with my tour guide and tour leader colleagues.

**Challenges for using educational tourism for transformative learning**

Transformative learning occurs when the teacher-as-learner transforms his or her frame of reference i.e. habits of mind, mindsets, assumptions and expectations. Frames of reference are the structures of culture and language through which we construe meaning. The more inclusive and reflective a person’s frame of reference, the more likely it will be to guide justified behaviour or opinion (Mezirow, 2006). Thus, transformation theory’s focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others. One way in which this can occur is through exposure to cultures, opinions and experiences that is, for the teacher-as-learner, atypical.

An examination of the demographics of the persons engaging in this type of tourism reveals specific challenges for scholars considering educational tourism as a means of transformative learning. As previously noted, almost two-thirds (65%) of clients surveyed had a university qualification, including many with postdoctoral and doctoral degrees. Educational tourism clientele was therefore, on the whole, well educated. Ninety percent of these respondents indicated that they were employed in professional, white-collar positions, most of them well-paying, including as lawyers, dentists, doctors, psychologists and accountants. This correlated with comments from the interviewees, who generally remarked that people paying for educational tours were, in the words of one historian ‘a much more socially homogenous clientele. They tend to be middle class, well-educated [and] affluent.’ Thus, tour participants represent, essentially, the elite: people from lower socio-economic groups rarely participate in this type of tourism. Furthermore, as products of universities, in the sense that the vast majority have tertiary qualifications, they may well possess frames of reference closely matching the scholar concerned. As further evidence, survey responses reveal that, for many travellers, educational tourism is at least partly about reinforcing values, rather than challenging them. Overall, the most preferred travelling companions for educational tourists were other family members, closely followed by friends. Travelling with unknown people was considered of only average interest. In their free-ranging discussions about educational tourism, a significant number of respondents made specific reference to a desire to travel with ‘like-minded’ people.
The implication for transformative learning is that if the teacher-as-learner directs their gaze inward, so to speak, through discussions with other tour participants, then there is a possibility that their frame of references will become even more tightly defined. Conversely an outward gaze, taking into consideration the experiences, thoughts and perspectives of individuals from the communities through which he/she is travelling, might prove to be far more transforming for the teacher-as-learner.

Conclusion

Academics from Australian universities participate in a wide range of educational tourism and travel experiences but until recently, the potential for teaching development through such programs has been under-explored. Evidence from educational tourism providers indicates that, academic teaching involvement is highly valued and can occur in a variety of ways, not just leading tours. Clients expect sophisticated and flexible delivery modes from academic practitioners in this domain and value highly high-quality educational materials pre and during their tour. Academic scholars emphasise that participation in educational tourism changes the way they think about their work, by enhancing their communication and teaching skills in and beyond the classroom, and also enhances their research both directly and indirectly through securing funds, accessing unique or important sites, and engaging with this learning community. Overall, there is great potential for educational tourism to create transformative learning experiences for academics leading tours and using them as a classroom like no other.

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References


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