TITLE: EDUCATING TOURISM STUDENTS TO HAVE A SUSTAINABLE MINDSET: A STUDY INTO HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN DEVELOP STUDENTS’ CAPABILITIES TO HAVE MORE COMPLEX UNDERSTANDINGS OF SUSTAINABILITY

ABSTRACT

In preparing future sustainable tourism workers, universities need to design curriculum that develop students’ skills in critical thinking and foreseeing the implications of their actions with a sense of ethics and empathy. Research evidence indicates, however, that students often graduate without these skills. A possible reason for this may be the design of tourism curriculum based on weak conceptualisations of sustainability as opposed to strong sustainability. Another possible reason could be that educators are not successfully cultivating students’ capabilities to think in more complex ways about sustainability nor do they adequately acknowledge the ways in which the students make sense of the concept. This paper highlights the need to examine the conceptualisations of sustainability currently being integrated into university undergraduate tourism courses. Further discussion proposes that an alternative curriculum approach, referred to as a learning study underpinned by variation theory, might improve students’ understanding of sustainability.

Keywords: education for sustainability; sustainable tourism; teaching and learning; learning study; variation theory; tourism curriculum;

INTRODUCTION

After a decade of support for sustainability education (UNESCO, 2005), although there is strong evidence that universities have taken sustainability issues on board (e.g. campus greening), there is still limited evidence as to the extent to which sustainability has been embedded into tourism curriculum and teaching and learning activities (Boyle, 2012). It seems that it is no longer enough to simply increase awareness of the myriad of environmental, economic and social problems but rather what is required is cultivating students with a sustainable mindset whereby they are capable of thinking in complex, critical, systematic, holistic and interdisciplinary ways (Gretzel, Davis, Bowser, Jiang & Brown, 2014). More research is needed into the conceptualisations of sustainability currently underpinning course design, as well as alternative teaching and learning approaches in order to foster more complex conceptualisations of strong sustainability.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EDUCATION

Some of the key components of education for sustainability (EfS) include critical thinking with key sustainability capabilities including systems, critical, holistic and interdisciplinary thinking (Thomas & Day, 2014). Despite this, a recent study uncovered a lack of critical thinking skills amongst tourism students that are essential for them to become managers who will implement “systemic change and action” (Wilson & Von der Heidt, 2013, p. 133).

Universities need to focus more on developing students’ ability to see the complex interconnections of sustainability (Sterling, 2010) particularly amongst tourism students (Connell, Remington & Armstrong, 2012). Furthermore, according to Tribe (2001) many tourism curricula tend to use a positivist approach to curriculum design by objectifying the social world. Therefore, there is a need to
seek understanding and meaning from all stakeholders, including students, in the process of designing the curriculum through an interpretive approach (Tribe, 2001).

The limited capability amongst tourism undergraduates to think critically about sustainability is an ongoing concern and leads one to question whether this may stem from weak conceptualisations underpinning course design. Part of this challenge lies in current conceptualisations of sustainability held not only by the educators, but also the understandings that students start with.

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Research suggests that students seem to have a narrow view of sustainability with many still graduating with weak sustainability ideals (Reid, Petocz & Taylor, 2009). In some cases students are developing an unbalanced view of sustainability through focusing on one aspect such as the environment for example (Zeegers & Clark, 2014). The three realms of sustainability: environmental, social and economic are often referred to as the triple bottom line (Hall, 2008). The triple bottom line model of sustainability, however, can be interpreted as a weak form of sustainability due to the anthropocentric focus on profit/economics (Springett, 2003).

Strong forms of sustainability, in contrast, place emphasis on social and environmental justice (Springett, 2003), or activity that is very eco-centric in nature. According to Dovers (2005) categorizations of strong forms of sustainability tend to be ecological in nature, whereas government and business sectors tend to display predominantly weak forms of sustainability. By making clear the conceptualisations of sustainability underpinning course design, universities can then look at approaches to teaching and learning that encourage students to think in more complex ways about the strongest conceptualisations of sustainability.

TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES TO SUSTAINABILITY

According to UNESCO (2005) a variety of pedagogical techniques are needed in EfS that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills. Traditional forms of learning such as behaviourist theories of learning need to be complemented with alternative learning theories due to the risky and often complex phenomena of sustainability (Wals & Dillon, 2013). Alternative teaching and learning approaches in EfS include transformative learning, transdisciplinary learning, anticipatory learning, collaborative learning and social learning (Wals, 2011).

One approach to teaching and learning that has not yet been explored within a university sustainable tourism course is the learning study. The core idea behind the learning study is the use of variation theory to underpin a collaborative process of designing and teaching curriculum (Marton & Tsui, 2004). In contrast to other approaches, the learning study assumes that people learn by discerning the variations and critical dimensions of sustainability within a destination as an integrated system whilst simultaneously being aware of two or more variations of the way in which sustainability can be experienced (Pang & Ling, 2012). Learning Studies have demonstrated the power of variation theory showing significant improvements in student understandings and professional development that result from groups of teachers sharing ideas for better learning (Marton & Tsui, 2004). They may also be well suited to teaching and learning about complex phenomena such as sustainability; as well as the capability to think about the phenomena in more complex ways.

CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS
It is apparent that there are a number of challenges surrounding the complex nature of the phenomenon of sustainability itself, the way in which it can be defined based on context and prior knowledge, and subsequently the way in which the phenomena is built into curriculum, taught and learnt. Ongoing research is needed into the best approaches to teaching and learning about strong conceptualisations of sustainability within the tourism degrees in order to foster graduates who will become responsible leaders.

In order to strengthen conceptualisations of strong sustainability amongst university students, current conceptualisations used in university tourism curriculum needs to be identified. Sustainable tourism education may also benefit from a learning study as a viable strategy to promote stronger and more complex understandings of sustainable tourism as there is still no research into its’ usefulness within a university tourism curriculum focusing on tourism sustainability as the object of learning.

REFERENCES


