



## **Learn while cruising: experiential learning opportunities for tourism and hospitality higher education**

### **Author**

Lohmann, G

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## RESEARCH NOTE

### LEARN WHILE CRUISING: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING CRUISE TOURISM COURSES

GUI LOHMANN

Griffith Aviation & Griffith Institute for Tourism (GIFT), Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

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This article follows up on the seminal experience written by Weeden, Woolley, and Lester in 2011 where a cruise field trip was undertaken with a group of undergraduate students in the UK. It presents the reflections of students who undertook a cruise field trip carried out in Australia with 24 undergraduate students. While some of the experiential learning findings obtained in this research ( $n = 22$ ) support what was presented from the smaller sample of the above-mentioned article ( $n = 8$ )—facilitation of group cohesion and first-hand understanding of managerial and operational aspects of the cruise sector—new pedagogical opportunities were also identified.

Key words: Cruise field trip; Experiential learning; Intense teaching; Tourism and hospitality education

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#### Introduction

Albeit the importance of the cruise business to the tourism industry and the recent growth of tourism in Australia and worldwide, the literature is scarce on reporting the benefits of cruise ship field trips, either to teach tourism-related (Papathanassis, Matuszewski, & Havekost, 2013; Weeden, Woolley, & Lester, 2011) or nonrelated (McClellan & Hyle, 2012) content. Some of the broader advantages of learning while cruising include the opportunities for engaged learning, where students can blend vocational and liberal aspects that characterize tourism, hospitality, and events management degrees

(Dredge et al., 2012). The aim of this note is to reflect and share the experience of this unique learning opportunity, while at the same time offer some discussions on the pedagogical opportunities of cruise ship field trips.

#### The Course

In 2012, “The Cruise Business” course was offered for the first time over Summer School (October 2012–January 2013) through a regional public university in Australia. The syllabus consisted of nine topics focusing on managerial and operational aspects of cruise tourism, including three cruise topics where

students reflected on their experiences, which are used in this article to analyze their experiences while cruising. They are “the demand for cruise,” “cruise itineraries and their impacts,” and “working onboard.”

### *The Field Trip*

The field trip related to this course comprised a 7-day cruise out of Brisbane, Australia, visiting three ports of call in Queensland (Airlie Beach, Cairns, and Port Douglas) in November 2012. The cruise line chosen was a major provider for mass market contemporary cruise, which offered the most affordable option to suit the budget of undergraduate students self-funding this trip. The field trip was offered as an optional component. A total of 24 students took part out of the 40 students enrolled in this course. Six students attending the field trip were male and 20 students were under the age of 25. Students had 20 hours of teaching onboard the cruise ship. In addition, two behind-the-scene tours were organized. Three staff from the cruise line provided guest lectures, including one human resources (HR) consultant, the director for administration and revenue management, and the cruise line executive head chef for the whole country that happened to be onboard. Two free days were organized, providing opportunities to disembark and explore the destinations. The free days were another way for the students to engage with different parts of the cruise experience, particularly in regard to shore excursions, providing additional material to be linked with the experiential workbook.

### Data Collection

A multimethod approach was used to collect data for this research. Firstly, a contextual analysis was carried out in terms of what students had written in their experiential workbook. A total of 22 experiential workbooks were used for this purpose. Secondly, a survey was also developed in order to capture the students' evaluations about the field trip experience. This instrument allowed for a more direct and informative evaluation of their learning and personal experience. Thirteen out of 24 students responded to the survey, which was made available online for about 1 month after the return from the field trip.

Thirdly, a focus group reunion meeting was also carried out with a group of four students, which took place about 15 weeks after the field trip. As usual, bringing large numbers of students onboard is challenging from a pedagogical and logistics point of view, in comparison to other similar experiences. This research reports on a larger sample of students ( $n = 24$ ) in comparison to the work of McClellan and Hyle (2012) and Weeden et al. (2011), which had, respectively, samples of 16 and 8 respondents. Papathanassis et al. (2013) are one exception as their research analyzed 34 internship reports.

### Students' Reflection

Part of the framework used in this article reflects the same as that employed by Weeden et al. (2011), particularly in terms of the reflection on the experiential learning opportunity while cruising and the development of a “field trip-based learning community,” a term coined by Skop (2009). Another topic also analyzed in this article is the HR aspect of a career onboard a cruise ship. This reflects the curiosity students have shown in regard to the cruise ship as a workplace and the work conditions onboard. It taps into the discussion presented by Ross (2003) regarding new approaches to learning and the implications for tourism industry employment. In many aspects, managerial and operational aspects of the cruise industry are unknown even to tourism and hospitality students, as access to crew-only areas is usually restricted. Among the three topics comprising the experiential workbook, “working onboard” generated the greatest interest in terms of questions posed to two officers during one of the guest lectures. All names used in the quotes that refer to crew and officers of the cruise line are pseudonyms.

### *Learning While Cruising*

Learning while cruising could be perceived by some as a distraction or even a holiday opportunity (McClellan & Hyle, 2012), but the testimonies of some students were quite different. One female student stated that

personally I didn't think that it would be easy [to concentrate on the studies] as we would have . . . so many distractions but once in class . . . we got all our study done in the class times.

The same student carried on saying that

part of the experience was learning from the crew and officers that we got to meet and socialize with.

A number of students mentioned in their experiential workbooks how much they had learned from cruise employees about their background and lifestyles during informal activities, particularly over meals at the main restaurant where they tended to have the same waiter for the duration of the trip.

The main restaurant also provided a perfect environment to engage with other passengers and to learn more about cruise passengers. This was most common over breakfast in the main restaurant, where the *maître d'* or the waiters would direct guests to sit together on the same table. Students were able to reflect on the demographics of passengers and learn first hand from engaging with passengers about their motivations to cruise, including two women who were celebrating their divorces. These opportunities gave students the chance to understand an authentic experience of the industry they were learning about, particularly in regard to travel behavior and motivations.

A small group of students had a unique experience to learn more about cruise passengers. As a couple of students had previously cruised with the cruise line, these two students and their fellow cabin passengers were invited to the Captain's cocktail party. The purpose of this party was to get together the repeat cruise customers and also to congratulate those guests that had cruised more than 10 times with the same cruise corporation with a bottle of wine. One of the students invited to this party stated:

one family was congratulated on cruising 25 times. My involvement in this party opened my eyes to how strong the demand for cruising really is.

Participating in this particular event provided a sense of experience hardly similar to just reading or learning in class about trends and patterns related to cruise demand. This reinforces the claim made by Ruhanen (2005) that anecdotal evidence and experiences help to bridge the divide between theory and practice for tourism and hospitality management education.

While it is possible to argue that any cruise passenger could learn as much as any of the students just by undertaking a cruise, the opportunity to have classes onboard, as well as the guest lectures, did help the learning experience. Students were able to reflect on what they were learning while engaged with a real-world experience. They were critical about the messages they received from the guest lecturers, with one student commenting:

Although Elizabeth was trying to make working on a cruise ship sound fun, I read between the lines. There were some questions she couldn't answer . . . it is hard to control and implement the new laws relating to work conditions. Some staff expressed to me that they work more hours than required to lift the likelihood of earning more money (tips). . . . Some staff also revealed that although the law states you must have 10 hours rest between each shift, this is not monitored on the ship.

The interaction with real issues and what was being presented to students from both crew and senior officers gave students the ability to critically evaluate what they were learning. As previously stated, HR issues were the major foci of their questions during guest lectures with two cruise line officers. As further explored later in this article, this topic provided many opportunities to analyze what had been said by representatives of the cruise line in comparison to what they heard while also engaging with the crew. Outside HR management, students also identified the value in this experience in terms of better understanding the complex operation of a cruise ship:

I felt that the field trip was an invaluable insight into the operation of the cruise ship. The magnitude of the operation cannot be fully appreciated from reading a textbook. I gained critical understanding of the logistical requirements needed to process several thousand passengers through all stages of their journey.

In many aspects the findings from this learning opportunity are similar to those identified by Lee (2008) in his research on industry-based experiential learning to complement the classroom environment of hospitality management students. They include a better understanding of how organizations function (as per the above quote), increased

ability to view career expectations realistically, and an enlarged network of professional contacts, as indicated in the following section.

### *Evaluating the Work Place and Conditions Onboard*

Among the three topics covered in the experiential workbook, no other seemed to be more appealing to students than HR. This probably happened due to the potential interest in working for a cruise line, as well as the opportunities offered during the field trip to engage with senior staff over guest lectures. There was also a sense of curiosity in learning more about the hidden life of crewmembers “under the waterline” (Bruns, 2008).

Gender was a topic that caused surprise among some students, particularly when realizing the increasing participation of female employees among senior officers. One male student wrote:

during this guest lecture I came to learn that within the cruise ship industry . . . there are many strong independent women that work within managerial positions. This is an achievement, as for women to work onboard a cruise ship it may impact their personal life more so than it would on a male’s personal life.

A large number of students stated in their experiential workbook how impressed and satisfied they were in regard to the work ethic and performance presented by the vast majority of the cruise staff and crewmembers they encountered:

for example, my cabin steward worked very long hours . . . [but] . . . went to every effort he could to keep his guests happy, serviced the cabins on average of three times per day, remembered everyone’s names (even before boarding) and kept a smile and friendly attitude while doing so. This example astounded me, and I later found out that the people in these lower positions don’t get a great pay (compared to what an Australian is used to). . . . I gained a lot of respect for the staff on a cruise ship during the week.

To some students, this seemed a contrast to what they were able to learn (and previously identified in a few of the above quotes) about the difficulties in dealing with the employees’ absence from family. In spite of the perception of an existing “happy,”

“warm,” and “helpful” workforce, which Weaver (2005) labels as “performative metaphors,” students could also pick up the disparities that exist between the crewmembers’ and officers’ lifestyle onboard. For them, it became clear that emotional labor impacted the crew and officers in different ways, as the latter had access to a number of privileges unimaginable to the crew. One student explained it in this way:

Conversation with our recurring waiter within the [main] restaurant explained that . . . the staff pool . . . never had water in. When questioned further he explained that only officers are granted use of it . . . While it is understandable that some ranks receive different benefits, the waiter went on to explain that several new crew to the ship were under the impression that all staff got to use this facility.

### Discussion and Conclusions

From the pedagogical and institutional point of view, a number of goals were achieved with this field trip, including:

- **Immersing students in an authentic tourism and hospitality experience:** Students attested to the opportunity to learn by observing and interacting with a tourism and hospitality sector. This is crucial to give students insights, as future professionals, as to how they perceive the services that they were receiving.
- **Interacting with professionals:** The structured and unstructured opportunities offered during the field trip gave students the ability to learn from other professionals, rather than exclusively from the instructor.
- **Blended learning experience:** The blended learning methodology integrates online, mobile, and classroom learning opportunities. Considering “The Cruise Business” course was offered during Summer School, when the university offers exclusively distance education classes, the field trip provided the opportunity to offer compressed face-to-face classes, enhancing the overall opportunities for students to learn in different ways.
- **Marketing opportunities:** The field trip generated a great deal of interest within and outside the university: interviews to local TV, radio, and newspaper on that matter. In addition to promoting the innovation of this teaching initiative, students will certainly carry with them a fond memory of this

learning opportunity. When a student states that “I had the most amazing time and I would gladly say that was the best week of my life!!!!” there is an expectation that a positive word-of-mouth experience will be spread in regard to the degree and the higher education experience.

- **Sense of community and building relationships:** Providing opportunities for students from different campuses, including those undertaking the degree by distance education, to meet and learn together and socialize. The compressed/intensive learning opportunity in a week (instead of the usual several weeks of a usual academic session) has also been perceived as valuable (Inglis, Broadbent, & Dall’alba, 1993). One external student reflected during the survey that:

this was my first experience of attending lectures and I loved it, getting to meet other students and to find some of our issues and problems aren’t all too different was interesting and the friendships I have now made are invaluable and will definitely come in handy for my future studies.

Regarding future career benefits, the field trip exposed students to opportunities they had not previously considered. While a number of students stated that they do not see themselves working onboard a cruise ship, due to the difficulties of coping with seasickness and spending a lot of time away from family and the lifestyle opportunity while living onshore, most said the field trip opened up their minds about the possibility of working for cruise line headquarters. A few students seemed to be keen on considering a job on a cruise ship in the future. In addition, several other aspects seemed to have made an impact, including the opportunities of developing friendships that can last beyond their academic time and be relevant in their careers. This last part was actually reinforced during the focus group that took place a few months after the field trip. All four students attending the focus group attested that their level of friendship has increased since the field trip, creating a bond that has been enduring and helpful both in terms of academic and social activities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one aspect of the cruise that certainly had an impact on the students was the crew’s level of professionalism, dedication, and knowledge of the passengers and their needs. The space confinement of a cruise ship

and the intense use of the cabins and public areas require a high degree of quality service not experienced in most other tourism and hospitality products (Wolber, 2012). Students were impressed by the fact that most Filipino cabin stewards knew the names of the guests as soon as they met them. One female student who had previously cruised, stated that:

as a returning guest . . . I was pleased with . . . [the] . . . professional and personalized service from all crew. I was impressed with the room steward who knew the names of the passengers in the cabins under his jurisdiction and the efforts he went to in making his passengers happy.

The high level of personalized service was in fact also emphasized by one of the students sampled in the study presented by Weeden et al. (2011, p. 358). These opportunities to experience high-end quality service can have lasting impacts on students’ future careers and expectations they may face as future professionals.

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