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**Redressing the balance: inverted hierarchies in the tourism  
classroom**

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## **REDRESSING THE BALANCE: inverted hierarchies in the tourism classroom**

### **ABSTRACT**

The research evaluates a collaborative case study to co-create the curriculum for a tourism undergraduate module. In three course design team (CDT) meetings, students selected and discussed topics and learning styles. Qualitative analysis revealed that the students involved strove to be independent learners. They favoured active learning styles and ‘non-vocational’ aspects of tourism. However, university bureaucracy represents a block in the design process. The paper concludes by advocating a more equal relationship between students and tutors. This involves a shift in power relations, inverting traditional hierarchies in which teachers act as gatekeepers of knowledge and students are passive recipients.

Keywords: co-creation, student engagement, participation, module design

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Increasingly, managerial approaches dominate higher education discourses and practices, from curriculum development to everyday teaching. This phenomenon reflects greater inter-university competition and a growing focus on student recruitment, target achievement and on the development of professional skills (Ayikoru et al. 2009). In the case of tourism, it is also associated with a focus on tourism as an industry, as opposed to other conceptualisations stressing its role as a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). The increased focus on performance, efficiency and industry has led (not only in the tourism discipline) to greater control of teaching and learning practices through the enforcement of (course/module) learning outcomes, quality benchmarks and professional body accreditations. Whilst this approach may have improved consistency, critics have pointed out the loss of autonomy of both academics and students (Barnett, 2003; Tribe, 2007), and the danger of prioritizing business values over wisdom, understanding and critique (Belhassen and Caton, 2011). As a result, a growing number of university educators are calling for a shift towards more ‘democratic and emancipatory learning agendas (...) valuing multiple worlds and knowledge experiences in the classroom’ without which, arguably, students cannot develop into critical thinkers (Pritchard et al. 2011: 955).

The present research aims to evaluate how the co-creation of learning curricula contributes to strengthening student engagement and encouraging a critical and reflective approach to learning and teaching. It achieves this by analysing a case study whereby students and tutors

collaborate to devise the curriculum for a selected tourism undergraduate module/ unit. This approach involves a shift in the approach to education, suggesting a change in the student's role within the classroom from passive object to active, critical subject (Shor, 1980; 1992). This idea resonates with widely accepted pedagogic approaches such as student-centred learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In the UK, the Higher Education Academy is starting to recognise the importance of students' active engagement, as reflected in their recent publication 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education' (HEA, 2014). Students' engagement could - and should - include the students' active participation in designing key markers of their learning experience, such as curricula and assessment. However, many educators still reject a potentially threatening shift in power relations between teacher and student **and HEA guidance, though welcome, is still sufficiently vague that it does not challenge the status quo**. Common concerns include uncertainty about the appropriateness of students' subject knowledge, the need to meet professional bodies' requirements, and difficulties in developing equal student/staff partnerships (Bovill et al., 2014). **These fears are certainly not unfounded, and the practical challenges of a highly structured and monitored university curriculum will be discussed**. As a result, student engagement may happen with varying degrees of impact and student empowerment; from consultation (for example, through course committees, periodic course reviews and satisfaction surveys) to direct involvement in curriculum and module design. Consequently, the experience of curriculum co-creation may be implemented with students featuring as 'unequal partners' (Healey, 2014).

## **2. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO TOURISM EDUCATION**

This research finds its roots in three related theoretical approaches: critical theory, critical pedagogies, and the academy of hope. Critical theory has a long tradition as a research paradigm and social theory, having been first developed by the Frankfurt School of Habermas and Marcuse almost a century ago. It distinguishes itself from other scientific traditions, such as positivism and interpretivism, by its focus on values, moral issues and desirable ends (Tribe, 2007). Questioning and addressing tacit inequalities thus becomes one of its core objectives. Its origins as a pedagogical approach date back to the works of Paulo Freire (1970), Ira Shor (1980) and Henry Giroux (1983), amongst others. Critical pedagogy theorists denounce the shifted role of schools from places where civic leadership is nurtured to capital-driven institutions where technically trained professionals are created to satisfy the needs of the marketplace (Giroux, 2001). Crucially, advocates of critical pedagogy envisage a schooling system where all members participate on equal terms and where learning becomes an instrument of transformative social action.

Many criticisms voiced against the increasingly market-driven nature of university education were developed before tourism even entered the higher education curriculum. However, they are possibly even more relevant to tourism, a subject traditionally dominated by vocational training and largely sold to prospective students on the basis of future growth and jobs (Ayikoru et al. 2009). Ayikoru et al. (2009) explore the dominance of neoliberal and managerial ideologies in tourism education discourses, noting the important role played by such ideologies in framing and informing what tourism students learn. Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) reminds us that tourism – far from being merely an economic activity – has transformative capacities including positive impacts on individual wellbeing, education, cultural and environmental protection, and peace. On the other hand, the potential negative impacts of tourism are even better known (Buckley, 2012). This highlights the important role of tourism education in contributing to the pursuit of social justice and sustainability. It also confirms the risks associated with the dominance of a neoliberal approach to tourism education.

Drawing on bell hooks' visionary idea of a 'pedagogy of hope' (bell hooks, 2003), Pritchard et al. (2011) propose the concept of 'hopeful tourism' as a value-based transformative approach to tourism enquiry and practice, underpinned by principles of partnership, reciprocity and respect. Interestingly for the present research, hopeful tourism also plays a role in informing tourism pedagogy. One of the values it promotes is the transformation of the traditional hierarchies of pedagogic practice, and the advocacy of equality in the classroom. In a similar vein, the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) was developed in recent years with a mission 'to be the leading, forward-looking network that inspires, informs and supports tourism educators and students to passionately and courageously transform the world for the better.' (Dredge et al. 2014: 2).

Critics have pointed out the excessive focus on negativity in much critical pedagogy discourse. According to Van Herten (2006), critical theorists, in the attempt to raise consciousness and unmask ideology, have overlooked that 'critique alone has never led any revolution' (p. 45). Ellsworth (1989) questioned the effectiveness of critical pedagogy in addressing power relations in the classroom. She argued that some of the key concepts celebrated in critical pedagogy, such as empowerment, student voice and dialogue, are 'repressive myths' which in the daily context of a classroom actually perpetuate relations of domination. A fundamental flaw of critical pedagogy literature is, according to Ellsworth, a consistent failure to link theoretical constructs with practice.

Two key developments in critical pedagogy since then have, however, attempted to address such criticisms: 1) An increased focus on the (positive) transformative power of education rather than on the (negative) critique of existing ideology, and 2) A slow movement towards a

demolition of in-class power relations and of the deep-rooted assumptions as to ‘who produces valid knowledge’ (Ellsworth (1989: 298). Whilst the first of these key developments has been embraced by part of the tourism academy (for example, through the concept of hopeful tourism and the TEFI), the latter remains largely neglected. In the next section, we review existing evidence of teaching experiences where traditional tutor-student hierarchies were significantly transformed. Interestingly, Lambert (2009) notes that critical educational methods, which problematise traditional binary divisions and hierarchies (between student and teacher, audience and artist, appearance and reality, etc.), reflect similar trends seen in other spheres of cultural experience such as the arts (Featherstone, 1991) and, indeed, tourism (Larsen, 2008). While such practices have been documented by academics in education studies, we found no published records of similar experiences in the tourism field. The present research aims to contribute to bridging this gap, by exploring an example of teaching practice where traditional tutor-student hierarchies are abolished in a tourism higher education context.

### 3. STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

Contrary to the outdated perspective that views students as passive, empty recipients to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1990); as '*demanding (and potentially litigious) customers whose position is adversarial to that of staff, or as a burden on the time-poor, research-active academic*' (Lambert, 2009: 299), there is currently a shift in higher education towards viewing students as valuable co-creators of the learning and teaching experience. Reciprocal learning – teachers learning from students and students learning from teachers – thus plays an increasingly fundamental role in education.

Bovill et al. (2011) refer to *student voice* as the theory and set of practices that reposition students as active agents of their own learning, whose insight should be valued and acted upon. Active learning, stress Bovill et al (2011: 2), implies not only a shift from passive to active learning, but also the development of a new ‘meta-cognitive awareness about what is being done’. According to this constructivist approach to education (Davis and Sumara, 2002), students actively and collaboratively construct their learning and understanding. This process of co-creation was recognised by the HEA (2014) as a key new development in education, and one that is central to student empowerment.

As a result of a comprehensive review of research on student-teacher partnerships, the HEA identified four main areas where partnership may occur: 1) learning, teaching and assessment; 2) subject-based research and inquiry; 3) scholarship of teaching and learning; and, 4) curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (HEA, 2014). This classification encapsulates the main forms that student-teacher partnerships may take: for instance, engaging students in teaching or assessment design (*co-creation of learning, teaching and*

*assessment*); students involved in conducting fieldwork and research (*co-creation of subject-based research and inquiry*); student-led pedagogic research (*co-creation of scholarship of teaching and learning*); and students actively contributing to course or unit design (*co-creation of curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy*).

While there is now a substantial and growing body of literature on students as co-creators of curricula and other aspects of the university process, there is a paucity of detail on how this is achieved. Exceptions to this rule include Wegener and Leimeister's (2012) action research and the development of co-created web training materials. Wegener and Leimeister followed this with an online questionnaire to evaluate students' experiences of the co-creation process, which showed significant improvements in students' levels of satisfaction with the course. This was a project undertaken with students participating on a university course. Many other examples which are described as 'co-creation' do not take the same view of student participation and either choose a sample of students, taken from a larger class, to participate or call on a team of 'experts' who, though undoubtedly valued contributors, are not necessarily students or student representatives (Tribe, 2003).

Bovill et al. (2011) describe three co-creation projects with three distinctive means of including students in the creative process of curriculum development. In one project, student consultants were used as mediators or go-betweens, working with staff and students (see also Cook-Sather, 2012, and Healey, 2014). In this case, the undergraduate student mediator was not studying on the course being developed, nor would they in future. They were, however, members of the same women-only small liberal arts college in the USA, and would therefore not be classmates but would be familiar with the students who were their 'clients' while they acted as consultants.

A similar form of student consultancy was tested in Lincoln in the UK, with the emphasis being on gathering impartial feedback (Healey, 2014). This was made possible by employing student consultants who did not study on the courses being developed and were therefore seen to have no stake in planned changes. While this is an interesting way of involving students actively in curriculum development, it does not fit with the aims of the research presented in this paper, and can effectively create another layer in the existing hierarchy of power relations by empowering one consultant rather than the student body as a whole. The paid groups of students, employed to create learning materials for their courses, are also perhaps in a similar position to the consultants and to Wegener and Leimeister's (2012) student co-creators. The 'course design teams' (CDTs) outlined by Bovill et al. (2011, p 5) and by Mihans et al. (2008) influenced our work to a far greater degree. In this case, students worked in small teams with an academic member of staff in order to make improvements to a course or module they had previously taken.

#### 4. BENEFITS OF, AND BARRIERS TO, CO-CREATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Research has demonstrated the benefits to students and teachers of empowering students to co-create learning and teaching. Cook-Sather (2011), for example, shows how students who were working in partnership with faculty staff as consultants developed greater confidence, capacity and agency. According to Cook-Sather (2010), greater responsibility and accountability, by asking more of students, fosters a more transformative notion of education. In addition, benefits for teachers are also noted. For instance, Mihans et al. recall that, as teachers involved in a curriculum co-creation project, they felt 'reenergized and excited about the possibilities for this course' and 'never felt more connected to our students' (2008: 7). Cook-Sather (2011: 42) notes that, in addition to the insights gained by listening to students consultants, teacher-student partnerships provided 'a unique forum within which to access and revise my assumptions, engage in reflective discourse, and take action in my work.'

In many of the cases noted above, authors concede that, although participation was enhanced it remained 'imperfect'. Typically, drawbacks noted the difficulty in engaging with students and encouraging them to participate fully. While we can postulate here why this might be, it is an issue that requires further thought. Healey (2014), amongst others, points out that students remain unequal in the co-creation process, although their levels of power and influence are higher than would normally be the case in a conventional educational setting. Staff members retain the role of facilitator or chairperson in many cases, thereby retaining a level of control. To illustrate this complex dynamic, Bovill and Bulley (2011) developed a 'ladder of student participation in curriculum design'. Their ladder shows how curriculum development may happen with varying degrees of empowerment, from 'dictated curriculum' and 'participation claimed, teachers in control' (lower empowerment) to 'negotiated curriculum' and 'students in control' (higher empowerment).

University structures also restrict participation and so does the relative inequality in knowledge of the educational theory and practice that is being co-created. Mihans et al. (2008), for example, note the difficulty in including student ideas and improvements when course documentation is already written, agreed and signed off by university quality controls. Ensuring university courses meet required standards is of course important but the need to pre-agree these standards makes student co-creation problematic, as the course is relatively inflexible. Staff are at an advantage also because they have teaching experience and a greater understanding of how courses are structured and taught in the conventional settings alluded to above. For example, Lambert (2009) recalls that teachers, when empowering students to collaboratively develop the content of a module/unit, worried that as novices to the subject they may not have the expertise required to identify the 'appropriate big ideas for the course'. Another problem may arise when students have different views from teachers on the type of knowledge they should be developing; for example in Lambert's experience, students



focused on practical aspects of the subject while teachers focused more on theory. We can attempt to overcome some of these drawbacks by reflecting on our own practice as staff and facilitators of the co-creation process.

Shor (1992) points out that students used to teachers dominating the classroom may feel threatened by an inversion of traditional hierarchies. However, it should be noted that students today are products of their time and are therefore perhaps more used to giving their opinions and expressing their wishes than previous generations of students would have been. Fisher and Smith (2011) note that consumers of products (and university education is increasingly seen as a product which is bought and consumed) are involved in the co-creation of added value. For example, the personalisation of technology and other consumer goods is now commonplace and social media encourages individualism and the presentation of a personal image to a wide audience, which goes beyond friends and acquaintances. This not only means that students are more comfortable presenting themselves and their views in public but that they also seek this, often, as a way of finding community and a sense of belonging (Fisher and Smith, 2011).

With all of these issues in mind, we approached our choice of methods for co-creation carefully and tried to choose an approach which would be open to as many students who wished to participate, would allow us as teachers to learn from those who had previously taken the course and would also allow the ambitions and interests of those planning to take the course to be included. To this end, we created CDT style working groups of student participants made up of those who had taken the course in the previous year and those signed up to take the course in the next year.

## **5. METHOD**

Action research is an increasingly common practice (or practices) for those working in pedagogical research, and it entails the researchers actively participating in the process of change. Indeed, the barriers between researchers and participants are at least partly broken down during the process. The value of an action research approach in this project was its acknowledgement that knowledge generation in this context cannot be objective and value-free (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Instead, we aimed to work collaboratively on the project, and were prepared for changes in ourselves as researchers as well as seeking change in teaching practice, content and student engagement.

To achieve this, three one-hour CDT meetings took place over a period of one month and concluded six weeks before module delivery. The opportunity to participate was initially advertised in class and further reminders were sent by email and posted on intranet notice

boards in an effort to reach as many of the undergraduate tourism students as possible. The module, 'Contemporary Issues in Tourism', runs in the second semester of study, meaning even students in their first year had some university experience already - in this case, approximately 8 weeks of regular, timetabled classes.

The meetings involved two lecturers in all cases and two, four and three students respectively. These formed the basis of curriculum design, and meetings covered both topics students would like to include in the new module and the ways in which they would like to study. They also form the basis of the explorative primary research for this paper. Meetings were recorded and professionally transcribed for further analysis. All students who were due to take the module in the second semester of their first year of undergraduate study were invited to participate. So too were those undergraduates in their third year of study who had previously taken this module. While the students who were about to take the module were those who appeared to have most to gain from participation – they were able to influence their own studies – uptake was not strong. Approximately 25% of the class group took up the opportunity to participate. Student participants suggested that the relative lack of interest in the CDT meetings was down to a combination of time pressures and lethargy or passivity - a tendency not to actively engage with their studies. This is in contrast with the experience of Mihans et al. (2008), who found '...the student response was overwhelming. Applications came pouring in. Student applications provided us with compelling reasons for moving forward with this effort. Students wrote that this experience would be 'unique' and a 'once in a lifetime opportunity.' In our experience, it can also be difficult to contact or communicate with students, who can be overwhelmed by the number of emails and electronic communications generated by the university and somewhat unreceptive to suggestions advertised in class. We were therefore grateful to have the participation of a few students. Experienced students in their later years of study brought the benefits of their greater understanding of their course and studies at the university, and a clearer view on what might be missing from their course.

Admittedly, this was a small, explorative study, and its limitations should be acknowledged. Although participants came from a variety of national backgrounds (including Italy, India, UK and Austria), the small number of students who took part in the CDTs meant that interesting themes such as inclusion of minority groups could not be explored. The small sample size, however, mirrored the small size of the module, which had about 20 students overall.

The aim of the meetings was to identify what students wanted to get from the module. This was interpreted as not only their interests in subjects of study and knowledge acquisition, but also their needs to increase or improve their skills or future employability. Furthermore, we discussed which methods of teaching and learning were effective and enjoyable, and explored

preferred learning styles. This information would then be used to inform the delivery of the module and the content of the curriculum of study.

The three CDT meetings comprised four stages:

- 1) The aims of the project were explained to students in detail and students were asked to sign an informed consent form stating their willingness to participate and be recorded.
- 2) Brainstorming exercise – current and past students talked about what was contemporary and critical in the tourism field (including industry and research) and what they would like to achieve from this module.
- 3) Students viewed module content from the past two years and gave feedback. Students also viewed suggested textbooks and gave feedback. They were also asked to comment on module delivery and structure (e.g. type of seminar activity, teaching style, etc.).
- 4) Final impressions of the meeting – what they got out of it, why they chose to participate, potential impact on their student experience.

The CDT meetings were recorded electronically and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data was analysed by the two researchers (who were also the lecturers on this module and organised and moderated the meetings) using an established qualitative analysis technique (adapted from Yin, 2003). The same data were analysed separately by the two researchers and the themes identified were then compared and discussed. A final list of themes and sub-themes (summarised in **Table 1**) was agreed. This form of ‘Investigator triangulation’ contributed to ensuring credibility of interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al. 1991) and enhancing descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992). The results are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

MACRO-THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Red tape/ teacher’s role as moderator	Non-negotiable aspects (e.g. Learning Objectives, assessments) vs. Flexible aspects  Placing barriers / red tape  Excitement about students’ ideas  Moderators interpreting what the students say or explaining meanings of terms and topics
Students’ desires to be independent learners and to take responsibility	Desire to achieve independence in thinking about big issues

<p>for their own studies</p>	<p>Attendance</p> <p>Responsibility, trying to engage, being mature</p> <p>How to encourage students to participate (e.g. mark attendance, one-to-one dialogue)</p> <p>Usefulness of this focus group/activity</p> <p>Doing own research in order to understand topics independently</p> <p>Managing work and study</p>
<p>Reflections and comments on learning practice and style preferences</p>	<p>Reflecting on their past experience: what works</p> <p>Qualities of a good textbook</p> <p>Qualities of a good lecture</p> <p>Passive vs. active lectures</p> <p>Feeling helpless ('this is just the way it is')</p> <p>Debates and discussions, competitions</p> <p>Group work</p> <p>Use of videos, case studies, site visits, guest speakers</p> <p>Preferred text-books</p> <p>Reflection on what they need to learn</p>
<p>Reflections and comments on topics/content</p>	<p>Module title</p> <p>Topics suggested:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sustainability/environmental aspects</li> <li>● Mass vs. alternative tourism</li> <li>● Sociological/psychological aspects of tourism</li> <li>● Film/literary tourism</li> <li>● New destinations</li> <li>● Pink tourism</li> <li>● Dark tourism</li> <li>● Food tourism</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Impacts of war and terrorism on tourism</li> <li>● Impact of news and media on tourism</li> <li>● Backpacking tourism, student travel</li> <li>● Voluntourism and slum tourism</li> <li>● Sport tourism</li> <li>● Airline regulation</li> <li>● Health tourism</li> <li>● E-tourism</li> <li>● Wine and food tourism</li> </ul>
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**Table 1** – Macro-themes and sub-themes identified through qualitative analysis

## 6. RESULTS

The qualitative data revealed some very interesting findings. As moderators of the workshops being analysed, we found ourselves in the position of being researchers and also research subjects. In fact, the transcripts of the three workshops revealed that a larger proportion of the conversation was conducted by the tutors than by the students. This included the expected practical running of the workshop: explaining the activity objectives, illustrating the learning outcomes of the module, asking questions according to the topic guide, and answering students' questions about the module. As moderators, we set the boundaries and this would of course skew the power balance away from the student participants.

The module, 'Contemporary Issues in Tourism', was designed to allow the flexibility of updating its content each year, to reflect the most recent trends and what was most 'contemporary' in tourism practice and research. Its learning outcomes<sup>1</sup> are carefully worded to allow such flexibility. The module therefore lent itself particularly well to this activity. Despite the module flexibility, from the very beginning of the workshop tutors seemed to

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<sup>1</sup> According to the approved module documents, on successful completion of the module students will be able to:

1. Show an understanding of a wide range of current tourism issues and topics.
2. Identify the underlying theories for current trends and connect these with appropriate literature and concepts.
3. Demonstrate the changing nature of tourism itself, and of a range of external factors that impact on it.
4. Evaluate new developments in tourism as a result of contemporary issues such as globalisation, information technology, consumer trends, terrorism and their implications for the tourism industry.

experience a struggle between a will to stress that the students should feel free to suggest anything they wished, and the need to signpost what could (or could not) be realistically changed. The main constraints in relation to what could or could not be changed were the bureaucracy and time necessary to make changes to key aspects of the module such as the learning outcomes, assessment and module title:

*'Yeah. Certain things are fixed. So, the assessment, the learning outcome and, oddly, the name are all fixed. But the rest is quite flexible'*

Quality assurance practices based on the concept of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) - such as curriculum design based on learning outcomes and subject quality benchmarks - whilst facilitating consistency, also contribute to placing barriers to educators' and students' autonomy. This emerged as an important theme, which we discuss in the next section, under the heading 'red tape'.

## **5.1 Red Tape**

This was a persistent theme. For example, at the beginning of the workshop, when presenting the learning outcomes, the tutor would note *'the learning objectives (...) are, I'm afraid, set in stone. That's the framework that we have to work within for the modules'*. Often, the two workshop moderators would try to find a balance between the existing framework, and the desire to stress the module's flexibility:

*'So, by the end of the module, you will need to have addressed all of these learning outcomes. Within that framework, we have quite a lot of flexibility (...) you shouldn't feel restricted'*

A higher level authority, which cannot be circumvented, was often cited by the tutors to justify potential resistance to implementing change. Words such as 'official approval', 'framework', 'regulations' and 'the university' (as in: authority) were used to describe such resistance. This confirms Healey's view that students often remain unequal in the co-creation process (2014) and that in most cases staff members retain control of at least some key areas (for example, assessment and learning outcomes). As a consequence, often curriculum co-creation experiences sit somewhere in the middle of Bovill and Bulley's 'ladder of student participation in curriculum design' (2011): in our case, students were in 'control of some areas of choice', rather than fully in control of all aspects of the curriculum.

Even an apparently simple request by a student to modify the module title, because the term 'issue' (meaning matter or topic) may be interpreted as 'problem', was met by the tutors with slight apprehension:

*‘Change the content – we can do it. Change the name – we need to do it officially. It has to be done by the university. So, it might be possible maybe next year. I’m not sure if it will be possible for this year. It’s a bit late’.*

In common with learning outcomes, assessment and marking were perceived (by tutors) and presented to students as non-negotiable. When students suggested the idea of marking attendance, one of the tutors was quick in stressing the need to comply with university regulations:

*‘I think here there could be issues, because this is the kind of thing that either you can do as part of the regulations or you cannot do. I’m not sure there’s a way [to do it]’*

Besides pointing out the university’s red tape, the two moderators occasionally also highlighted other types of barrier. For example the need to avoid duplication of content:

*‘So, we are sort of limited, well, we are not allowed to repeat what’s being done in other classes already’*

However, their role was not only confined to limiting student freedom. On the contrary, **the tutors acted as facilitators, encouraging students to express their views freely**. In most cases students’ ideas were encouraged, with tutors showing genuine excitement, for example:

*‘Excellent. I like the literary tourism actually. That’s not a topic that I researched before. I’m confident that there is a theme in there’*

Whilst the tutors’ attitudes towards participants’ ideas were intended to be positive and encouraging, the possibility of them leading participants’ ideas must be acknowledged. For example, often tutors felt the need to repeat and re-word what a student said, to clarify their idea to the rest of the group. What is probably a teaching habit should be limited during this type of workshop, where it is particularly important to leave students completely free to express their views, without leads or hints.

## **5.2 Striving for greater independence**

Students who took part in the CDT meetings were keen to express their desire to work independently and to have more responsibility for content delivery. Frequent comments such as those quoted below expressed a willingness to be active, not passive, learners and to find things out for themselves rather than be told by the lecturer.

*‘I like it that you’re not treated like a child, just handed everything...’*

*'...not just studying what someone else said, but actually being active, being understanding and seeing where trends are, issues are...'*

Bovill (2014) noted similar student responses in her co-creation work, and that this changed the role of the staff from teachers to facilitators of learning. This was a considerable step for staff members to take, since habits developed over years of working in the academic world would be hard to break. The aims of research, however, were met: the curriculum for the next year's module was modified, informed by student input. The topics selected by the students (for instance, impact of terrorism on the tourism industry, literary tourism, youth tourism) were included in the curriculum for the first time. The two textbooks identified by the students as most interesting and clear were adopted as key texts for the module. The students' greater engagement with topics they had selected became apparent when the module was eventually delivered in the second semester. For example students were very enthusiastic during in-class debates, and in the final examination, when students were required to select 3 topics and for each write a brief essay-style paper, the most popular topics were those selected in the CDTs.

It is interesting to note that the topics chosen, and not just the process, fit well within the framework of hopeful tourism. Pritchard et al. (2011) note, in their agenda for hopeful tourism, that attention should shift towards 'under-served life worlds' such as children and young people, or the LGBT community and 'under-served system worlds' such as international systems and less economically developed countries. The CDT results demonstrated students were interested in discovering more about these areas and that their interest was drawn towards topics without prior knowledge of the academy of hope or hopeful tourism.

For us as teachers, the outcome of the exercise was greater than simply helping us to select topics for the module. Certainly the CDTs represented an opportunity for reflection on our teaching practice and reciprocal learning, what Boyer (1990) refers to as 'scholarship of teaching'. For example we discovered that we are less flexible than we thought; and we are probably too used to dominating the session and leading, as demonstrated by the fact that we (and not the students) were talking most of the time. On the other hand we also realised how excited we can be of student ideas, and how rewarding it can be to implement change.

The process also made us realise the importance of engaging students at a deeper level, thus embracing an approach to education which celebrates the individual through confidence building and increased responsibility. It also made it obvious how difficult it can be to gather students' opinions. Although some students are prepared to engage in this type of activities, there is a silent majority who do not want to participate (as a consequence our curriculum



development project was mostly informed by a small group of keen students). During the early stages of this project we (the researchers) discussed whether participation in the CDTs should be voluntary or enforced to guarantee greater inclusion. Eventually we agreed that this should be a voluntary, free-choice process. The students who chose to participate in the CDT meetings reflected on their experience in the session and on why they were keen to get involved. When asked why other students did not show any interest in participating in the CDT meetings, one said:

*'They don't realise that this is actually a chance that we're given. We can have a voice, get a vote.'*

Student participants also stressed the role of maturity in their relationship with active engagement; perceiving a distance between teacher and student as a sign of a lack of maturity:

*'I feel like... for some of the younger ones it's like, they are obviously still like school. 'Oh, they're the lecturers, I'm the student.'*

While their participation already reflected a degree of independence and maturity, which they sought to increase, it also raised similar points to those noted by Mihans, et al. (2008) who worked with students who were ambitious and keen to demonstrate their abilities. The quote below comes from a student in one of our CDT meetings:

*'You made a choice to live this kind of life. I mean, if you do something, you need to do it properly. And this kind of meeting, or conference, I think you need to participate. Otherwise, what are we doing here?'*

There were some thoughtful comments by the students during the CDTs, showing potential for such activities to foster a more critical approach to learning. However the exercise was too short to really understand the impact; a longitudinal study involving a series of workshops and follow-up interviews would be necessary for a thorough impact assessment in future, similar projects.

### **5.3 Learning Practice and Learning Styles**

During the workshop, student participants were asked to discuss the teaching styles they enjoyed, and to provide suggestions for module delivery and teaching/learning methods. In accordance with findings from previous studies, students described conventional (passive) didactic styles as being less effective than more student-centred approaches (Cotterill, 2015). Whereas in teacher centred learning, teachers are considered as hubs of knowledge, in student

centred learning the power is shifted towards the student (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Whilst it has been argued that many educators claim to implement student-centred learning but in reality they do not (Lea et al., 2003), as lecturers on this tourism course we were confident that active engagement was a prominent feature of our classes. Instead, during one of the three workshops the student participants lamented the passive style of most lectures, which often involved a unidirectional flow of information from the teacher towards the students:

*'Yeah, like I miss interactions. Yeah, I miss interactions. (...) Like it's we all sit there, that's all we do. Like 90 per cent of the lectures. So I miss the interactions actually'*

Interestingly, the students felt powerless and unable to change this pattern:

*'I just, you can't do anything about it. It's just the way they teach. You can't complain about this. It's the way they teach'*

In contrast to the prevalent approach, students expressed a fondness for 'learning by doing' and a more active style of classroom. Case-study based learning, where the theory is understood inductively from the analysis or discussion of a particular real-life case study, was also flagged as effective. Site-visits and fieldwork were described as particularly effective in this sense:

*'In order to understand [a] destination or anything, either natural or heritage or something modern, you have to go there and actually feel it'*

The examples of good teaching practice mentioned by student participants all involved student-centred pedagogical approaches. For example, they mentioned finding small-group presentations and debates stressful or pressured at the time, but also highly beneficial and memorable later. They also want to take the lead by speaking in front of their peers, presenting the results of their research and demonstrating their knowledge in front of the class:

*[presentations] It's what you remember and learn from, because you're stepping out of your comfort zone. It's hard getting up and presenting, but that's what you're gonna have to do.*

Several also mentioned being proud of their achievements and wanting to be challenged, in spite of any difficulties this may present.

Student participants were also asked what they would like to study, and which topics were of interest to them. This is in line with the curriculum co-creation undertaken by Mihans, et al. (2008) and Bovill (2014) amongst others. The suggestions students made were unexpected

and were overwhelmingly non-vocational in theme. As tutors and moderators, we were surprised to find students did not often mention tourism as a business, nor did they focus on skills development or on anything that directly related to the improvement of their CV and employability. Instead, they seemed interested in tourism from a traditionally academic perspective, suggesting topics that took a sociological or psychological approach. Many also were keen to develop a deeper understanding of various ‘types of tourism’ as can be seen listed in table 1.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The importance of students’ active engagement in shaping their own learning experience has been widely discussed in pedagogic research and a small but growing number of universities in the UK and elsewhere have attempted to engage students in deciding key aspects of their learning experience (HEA, 2014). Common approaches have been implementing active learning methods; encouraging subject-based research; and pedagogic consultancy (HEA, 2014). However, only very few of such projects have embraced a real inversion of the traditional higher education hierarchies by empowering students to co-create curricula, and none (to our knowledge) have involved tourism students. The present project – although admittedly a small-scale and mostly explorative study - contributes to bridging this gap by providing an account of curriculum co-creation. It also aims to start a conversation within the tourism academy about breaking away from the traditional student-teacher dichotomy, which views the teachers as gatekeepers of knowledge and students as passive recipients.

Findings from this exploratory study highlight that a small number of particularly engaged students were keen to work independently and to take on more responsibility in terms of research and content delivery. They favoured active learning styles and learning methods that challenged them intellectually. They were happy to be involved with curriculum design and felt privileged to be ‘allowed’ to do so – because they often felt powerless, perceiving the learning environment as fixed, *‘you can’t do anything about it. It’s just the way they teach’*. Barriers to implementing this co-creation model however exist. The deep-rooted assumptions as to ‘who produces valid knowledge’ (Ellsworth, 1989: 298) are difficult to overcome while Pritchard et al. (2011) acknowledge that co-creation is a substantial change and ‘a philosophical and political act, which offers the possibility of co-transformation’ (pg. 954). These transformations are intended to have an influence on thinking beyond the bounds of the university seminar room; change, however, requires change in structures as well. Professional body accreditations and quality assurance procedures make many aspects of the curriculum non-negotiable, or at least in the short-term. To overcome these barriers, we suggest incorporating student/teacher co-creation in the university’s quality control processes.

Whilst maintaining academic and industry standards is important, quality control processes should allow for more flexibility and short-notice changes.

In approaching this experience, we have taken a critical approach, since this project involved a shift in power relations questioning the normalised ways in which power and control are exercised in higher education (Tribe, 2007). Following Giroux (1997: 120), we view universities as 'sites of possibility, that is, as places where students can be educated to take their places in society from a position of empowerment rather than from a position of ideological and economic subordination'. Co-creation of learning curricula allows students to build up on their previous or implicit knowledge and to tailor the module to suit their specific learning needs and background knowledge. Redressing the balance as to 'who or what really counts' (Mitchell et al., 1997) in the classroom by engaging students in curriculum development therefore can – if implemented on a larger scale – contribute to fostering social inclusion by allowing all students to voice their needs and ambitions. **It also reflects the hopeful tourism agenda in which 'under-served worlds' and neglected forms of knowledge are accepted and included in healthy academic debate (Pritchard et al. 2011).** We hope the enhanced emancipation and engagement that may result from this and future similar experiences will help students to become more reflective and conscious actors.

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