

Learning on the Road: Thoughts, Reflections and Relationships on a Tourism Field Trip

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Abstract

Tourism is an academic discipline that has seen a rapid increase in student numbers within the last forty years. Teaching tourism involves great reliance on a knowledge base that spans different disciplines. Experiencing the tourism industry and reflecting on observations is essential for learning and general understanding (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning has therefore become a key tool for educators who are trying to bridge this gap between theory and application. The objective of this project was to explore certificate-level tourism students' perspectives of a tourism field trip to Rotorua, New Zealand, during the summer of 2013. In particular, identifying specific types of experiential learning and quantifying the benefits of this learning was an essential component of the project. As well as identifying what aspects of experiential learning were effective, it was also important to identify the personal development that occurs during the field trip. Very little has been written regarding the experiential impact of field trips on certificate level tourism and travel students, which supports the findings of Weeden, Wooley & Lester (2011). Xie's (2004) conceptual framework has been adapted by the author and was instrumental in establishing the structure of this project. The findings confirm that field trips are not simply 'holidays without meaningful educational value' (Robson, 2002). Instead field trips provide an interactive learning environment where students can gain hands-on experience and achieve personal growth. The research has shown that during field trips, students develop and embrace the freedom that is attached to the adult world. Gaining the life experience that comes with the field trip can only be beneficial for the students later in their academic and indeed, professional careers.

experiential learning; field trips; tourism education

1.0 Introduction

Tourism as an academic discipline has seen a rapid increase in student numbers within the last forty years. As much as tourism research depends on theories developed in other disciplines, teaching tourism also involves great reliance on a knowledge base that spans different disciplines. Tourism teachers play an important role in assisting students to acquire both theoretical knowledge as well as the practical application of that knowledge. Although tourism education is an interdisciplinary field that requires students to reflect on their learning experiences to become active participants and to think critically, tourism classes are often conducted in a classroom setting (Gretzel, Jamal, Stronza & Nepal, 2008). In this situation the knowledge is passed from teacher to the students by using a symbolic means to achieve student understanding of general principles (Miles, 1991). The reflection element from students is missing in the teacher-centered system - the students may understand how and why something happens but are unable to apply the learning to a real life situation. Experiencing the tourism industry and reflecting on observations is essential for learning and general understanding (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning has therefore become a key tool for educators who are trying to bridge this gap between theory and application.

Xie (2004: 101) argues that despite the recent increase in research on experiential learning for the field of tourism studies, questions remain about which aspects of experiential learning best contribute to tourism courses and how students perceive the effectiveness of field trips. The objective of this paper was to explore Certificate level tourism students' perspectives on a tourism field trip to Rotorua, New Zealand during the summer of 2013. In particular, identifying specific types of experiential learning and quantifying the benefits of this learning was an essential component of the paper. As well as identifying which aspects of experiential learning were effective, it was also important to identify the personal development that occurs during a field trip. The following literature review includes a discussion on definitions used to describe experiential learning and experiential tourism, an overview of previous literature that has also looked at field trips, tourism and experiential learning. It is important to note that studies from various disciplines such as education have also been reviewed to gain the appropriate background knowledge required to inform this paper. To support the travel journal, a qualitative survey was given to students to complete following the field trip. The findings of both draw on students' opinions and impressions of the field trip in relation to experiential learning.

2.0 Literature review

Before discussing experiential tourism and experiential learning, it is important to define both terms. Experiential tourism is a difficult term to define. One of the key characteristics of experiential tourism is that it shows rather than describes - this form of tourism allows the tourist to be an active participant in the experience. It involves activities that draw tourists out into the natural environment and engages them in cultural interaction (Smith, 2005). Experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". In simple terms experiential learning is 'learning by doing', but there usually needs to be background knowledge in a particular area allowing the experience to reinforce the knowledge learnt. You could therefore argue that experiential learning is a key component of experiential tourism. Research shows that experiential learning that is intentionally created, thoughtfully implemented, and consciously reflected on, can significantly enhance students' knowledge and understanding (Hanson & Moser, 2003). Experiential learning has been promoted as a potent aspect of education (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker, 2001; Itin, 1999). Kolb and Kolb (2005) identify that the experiential learning theory is built on the following key aspects: learning is continuous - it is the process rather than an outcome, all learning is relearning - individuals need to review their learning in light of new experiences, and finally learning involves constant reflection. With experiential learning there is an emphasis placed on learning by doing, in this situation students learn a particular topic and then applied it in a real world setting. This learning can be reflected on and applied to future experiences. Joplin (1981) discusses the importance of the student in the learning process and in particular, the personalised nature of learning. In this model the instructor needs to provide the environment where this learning can take place. The students' engagement in learning activities is essential to construct meanings translated into knowledge. The tourism industry is vibrant and brings together people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, however, tourism studies are often conducted in a classroom where it is difficult to simulate an environment, where students are able to actively participate and apply the theory that has been delivered. Field trips can provide students with an authentic learning experience where they can practice what they learn and also see it in operation (Wong & Wong, 2008).

Field trips have been used in the study of tourism to provide students with opportunities for experiential learning (Xie, 2004). However, if the field trip is to be a successful learning tool there needs to be associated tasks and components to clearly outline that the field trip is being conducted for educational purposes rather than a holiday for the students involved. This perception that field trips are holidays that have little educational purposes may contribute to the minimal coverage in academic literature. Field trips form an important part of the learning experience of higher education (Ritchie, 2003), as there is only so much students can learn about tourism in a classroom setting. Konstantaki (2009) identifies that these real-life experiences created from field trip observations act as a catalyst in the creation of knowledge, largely because they induce "episodic memories". Another interesting observation when reviewing the literature was the large amount of recent research on study abroad programs, and the interactions between students and the foreign environments (Robson, 2002; Arcodia, C & Dickson, C, 2009). However, little has been written on the impacts of field trips. Field trips are able to provide different insights and learning experiences from those provided by lectures and tutorials (Hirsch & Lloyd, 2005). It is important to consider that most learning is experiential. The students are given information (lecture notes, presentation slides)

and they have to interact with the information to understand the reasons behind it. The conventional style of teaching and learning does not always fully engage the students. Thus experiential learning works as mechanism for students and teachers to focus their attention on a specific task, work together to achieve the task and then reflect on it (Xie, 2004).

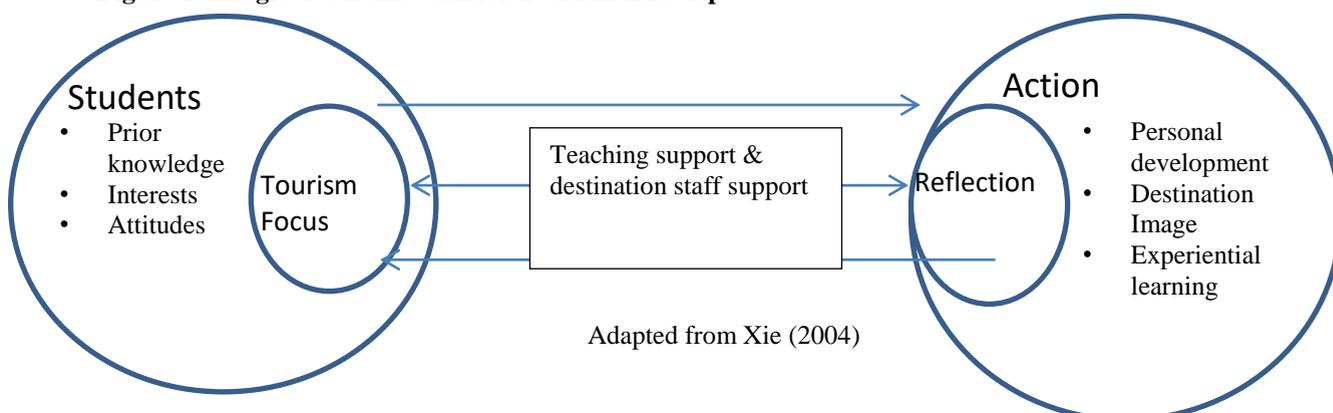
Rhee's (2003) research focused on a field trip in Costa Rica. The students examined were studying towards a tertiary qualification in natural resource management. The study assessed the success of the course in terms of how well it prepares students to deal with real-life natural resources management problems (Rhee, 2003). The evaluation was divided into two parts: prior to the field trip and on the field trip. The study found that, prior to the field trip, teaching staff need to clarify the goals of the course and how students can meet these goals. Rhee expressed the importance of class time being spent discussing the management problems that is the focus of the field trip. Teaching staff need to show students that the theoretical concepts learnt in class can be operationalised in real-life settings. During the field trip, time spent on the project should be maximized. Weeden, Woolley & Lester (2011) discussed the marketing opportunities that field trips create for educational institutions. To remain competitive, field trip development needs to be considered as an extension of the course of study. This particular issue is also faced by the Institute of Technology in question. Prospective students look at the field trip as key differentiator in their decision making.

The notion of personal development and the sense of belonging and community were also identified during the literature review (Wong & Wong, 2009; Conceico & Skibba, 2007). Wong & Wong (2009) identified that the relationships that students form with their peers during the field trip can sometimes be the most important factor in determining the satisfaction of a field trip. The relationships that students form during the field trip will assist them in all aspects of their education. Many courses of study now have a relatively large portion of group work. The relationships created will assist students in forming a more cohesive group. It is also important to point out that the relationships between staff and students can also benefit from the field trip. Students are able to talk with their teachers in a less formal environment without the boundaries of the classroom.

3.0 Integrative framework

Xie's (2004) conceptual framework for tourism field trips has been adapted to inform this paper both in the structuring and guiding of the research, but also as an analytical means to analyse and organise the primary data. As discussed in the literature review, Xie's (2004) integrative framework for tourism field trips has been adapted to incorporate specific characteristics of the Rotorua field trip. This adapted framework is depicted below as Figure 1.

Figure 1: Integrative framework for Tourism field trips



This framework provides a summary of key ideas and concepts identified in the literature review. An integrative framework emphasises a collaboration of key ideas and concepts to combine what is known about a particular

phenomenon (Pearce, 2012). Frameworks need to be simple and easy to explain as they are essential in organising and communicating the research being done. This framework suggests that the field trip can be viewed as a system involving students' participation (pre-trip, during the trip and post-trip) and teaching staff support. The study aimed to establish the importance of teaching staff support and identify how this support impacted on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the field trip. This relates to Rhee's (2003) study. Prior to the field trip, students received information about the destination from the teacher and they also had to conduct their own research. Their travel expectations become apparent and they showed their interest and excitement about the intended travel. The concept of prior knowledge was added to the framework. This concept was added mainly because the author wanted to establish whether prior knowledge of the destination would impact on the students' perception of the effectiveness of the field trip.

During the trip students participated in tours and guest lectures, and experienced activities and attractions. The learning was created when students noticed inconsistencies or relationships between what they learnt in class and what actually happens in the industry. A key emphasis of the evaluation process with experiential learning is the personal development of the students.

Xie (2004) identifies the reflection stage as the most important component for students during the field trip. This is because when students begin to reflect on observations and experiences that have actually happened, more connections can be made and remembered. Through their travel experiences and reflection journals, students are able to explain the tourist destination, rather than simply regurgitating information learnt in a text book (Xie, 2004).

4.0 Tourism field trip

Table 1 outlines the structure of the tourism field trip.

Table 1: Field Trip Itinerary

Itinerary - Rotorua	Planned Learning Resources
Day 1: Tongariro River Rafting – activity Extreme Back packers- accommodation	Library search Required readings Presentation Discussion
Day 2: Whakarewarewa Maori Village – attraction Paradise Valley – attraction Polynesian Pools - activity YHA Hostel - accommodation	Field trip requirements Travel journal Post trip evaluation
Day 3: Luge - activity Agrodome - attraction Rotorua museum – attraction	Student Learning Outcomes Assignment Poster Presentation
Day 4: Rapid Jets – activity	

Before travelling, the students conducted individual and group research into the development of Rotorua as a tourist destination. Students were also asked to research the different attractions, activities and accommodation facilities that they would be visiting during the field trip. This contributed to setting an educational context for the field trip.

During the field trip, students were required to write their experiences in a travel journal that they would later simplify into an A3 poster and present to the class. The field trip lasted for four days and attendance was mandatory for students. There are two assignments that relate to the field trip. If students were unable to attend the field trip they were offered an alternative assignment if they provided a satisfactory reason for missing the field trip

5.0 Methodology

A mainly qualitative methodology was used for this research. The data for the analysis came from two main sources. Firstly, during the field trip students were required to create a journal documenting their travel experiences. There were no formal requirements for the journal, but the students were asked to focus on the following key points:

- Their experiences of the accommodation, activities and attractions.
- Rotorua as a tourism destination.
- Benefits and/or negatives of learning outside of the classroom.
- And, finally the relationships and friendships created during the field trip.

During the first class back from the field trip, students were asked to simplify their journal into an A3 size poster summary and present their poster to the class. Students were given 10 minutes to present their findings to the class. They were advised to prioritise their data, so their key points were expressed in the timeframe given. Information from the posters was firstly categorised into the following three categories: **Destination Image, Personal development and Experiential Learning**. These categories were used as an initial data analysing method. The categories give structure to the data collection and analyses, but there is some crossover between categories as some of the responses could fit into more than one category. Because of this, at times during this paper the categories will be discussed together. It is important to note that these categories relate back to the integrative framework created by Xie (2004) and adapted for this study. This framework created structure and guidance when analysing this primary data. As this study was focusing on the students' perception of the field trip, it was important to get all students who participated to complete this task.

The data was then open-coded and analysed in conjunction with the research design. Initially the students' reflections were categorised into: Destination Image, Personal Development and Experiential Learning. This original categorisation meant that all related answers were grouped together. During this phase it was important to search for reoccurring words, themes and similar concepts. The posters were seen as more appropriate to transcribe when compared to the reflection journals – because of the time constraints of this research. Some of the reflections did not fit into any of the categories and may be used in later research.

The second data source came from a survey administered to students after they returned from the field trip. It was important during the research design stage to carefully construct each question in the survey to ensure, as much as possible, that the information obtained was relevant and reliable. Open-ended questions were useful because they allowed a free response from students. The questions had to relate to the purpose of the research and Xie's (2004) adapted integrative framework assisted in the design of all the questions used. The questionnaire was administered in class and took twenty minutes to complete. The entire group that participated in the field trip completed the survey and in total there were 25 responses. All questions were completed in every questionnaire. The students were advised by the researcher that the information was important and could impact on future field trips. They were encouraged to complete the entire questionnaire with as much detail as possible.

The same categories were used for both primary data sources, however, the main difference with the questionnaire was the category 'Prior knowledge of the destination before the field trip'. The research wanted to establish if prior visitation or prior knowledge of the destination had any impact on the perception of the field trip. As with the reflection poster, the questionnaire was initially separated into the separate questions and each question was categorised into one of the above categories. The quantitative data was then collated and graphs were created. During this phase the qualitative data (majority of the data) was open-coded, as it was important to search for reoccurring words, themes and similar concepts.

6.0 Findings and discussion

The results for both primary research methods reveal that the students consider the field trip to be an essential part of their learning. This paper will firstly discuss the results from the reflection posters and then concentrate on the qualitative survey results.

Reflection poster

Table 2 identifies the reoccurring words, themes and similar concepts that were identified from the students' posters. They were grouped and placed within one of the following categories.

Table 2: Recurring themes identified from transcribing posters

Destination Image	Personal Development	Experiential Learning
Most well-known destination in New Zealand – iconic	Talking with classmates and teaching staff – creating friendships	Class work now makes sense
Maori culture	Anything is possible	Relaxed learning environment
Something for everyone	Challenge myself	Fun learning
Uninterested tour guide	Being treated like adults	Working together – team work
Range of activities -cultural, and adventure	Making my own choices	Importance of good customer service
	Learnt more about classmates	

Destination Image and Experiential Learning: 23 of the 25 posters transcribed discussed Rotorua as a well-known destination. Some of the posters illustrated this in the text and while others used photographs that were taken during the field trip. Another common theme was Rotorua's connection to Maori culture. All 25 posters identified the strong presence of the Maori culture in Rotorua. Most of the posters discussed the Maori villages and Maori influence within Rotorua. They were able to create a link between the theory learnt in class and the reality of the industry. For example, some posters discussed the Chinese outbound market and their motivation to see and learn about the Maori culture. They commented on the large number of Chinese visitors at Te Whakarewarewa and their astonished reactions to the kapa haka performance. Before visiting Rotorua, the class had recently completed the unit titled 'Developing a Visitor Attraction,' and the timing could not have been better as they visited a number of attractions and activities in Rotorua. All of the posters mentioned the attractions and activities, but unfortunately not in the detail anticipated. It was apparent from the descriptions that the students did not learn as much about attraction development as was expected although the reason may have been that the teaching staff did not specifically mention this topic.

Fifteen of the posters mentioned the term 'something for everyone' or a similar meaning statement. One of the students commented:

"I was surprised to see all the attractions in real life. Seeing the pictures on the websites isn't the same as being there in person. I saw backpackers racing on the luge, Chinese tourists enjoying the Maori show at Whkarewarewa and couples enjoying the Polynesian Pools. I heard foreign accents while walking around the shops in my free time. This was an experience".

This quote identifies the importance of experiencing the product first-hand and the relationship between experiencing and learning.

Personal Development: This was an area in which the results show most change from students as the trip engaged students in a way that the classroom could not. Relationship building was a common concept identified in the posters. Many posters commented on the van rides to the destination and how they made friends with fellow classmates. One of the posters stated:

“The van ride was a highlight. We were all mixed up, so I was with people I didn’t know. It was good getting to know them, listen to their music, sing together and hear their stories. This made the long van ride to Rotorua fun”.

Hattie (2007) identifies the importance of learning from peers. Students learn more from their peers than they do from their teachers. Team work and getting outside of comfort zones were common themes mentioned in almost all of the posters transcribed. As well as classmate friendships, many of the posters identified relationships between students and teachers. One student commented:

“Wow I didn’t realise that my teacher was like that. They were funny, while at the same time serious and informative. I found out that they have children my age. It was easy to ask questions about Rotorua – they were relaxed”.

The teaching staff were able to build a stronger working relationship with the students during the field trip. Students and teachers were able to talk more in a less formal environment. This will assist teachers for the remainder of the trimester. Students may now feel more comfortable to approach teachers with questions or issues that they may have.

Questionnaire:

A key theme that emerged from the questionnaire was the positive learning experience students had in Rotorua. The following graphs depict their highlights and least favorite aspects of the field trip.

Figure 2: What did you enjoy most about the educational field trip to Rotorua?

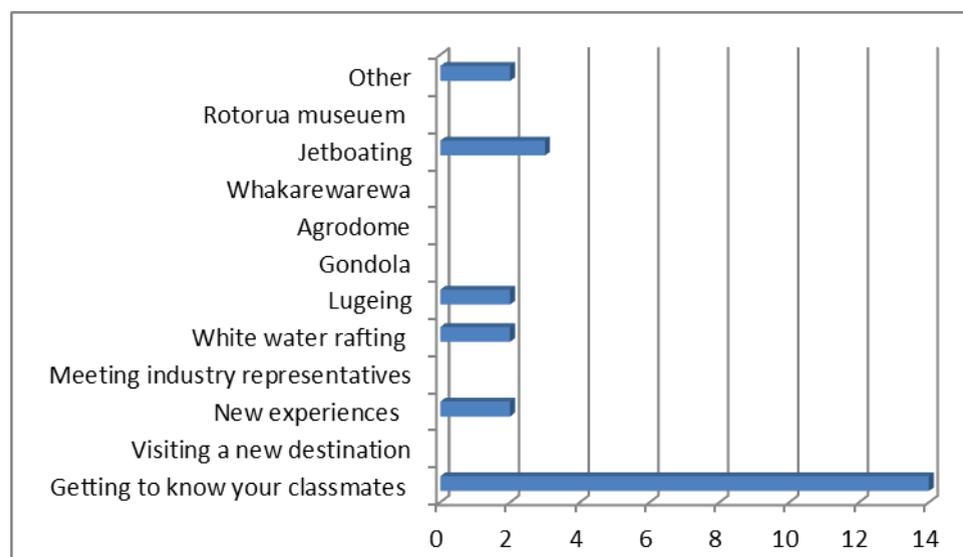
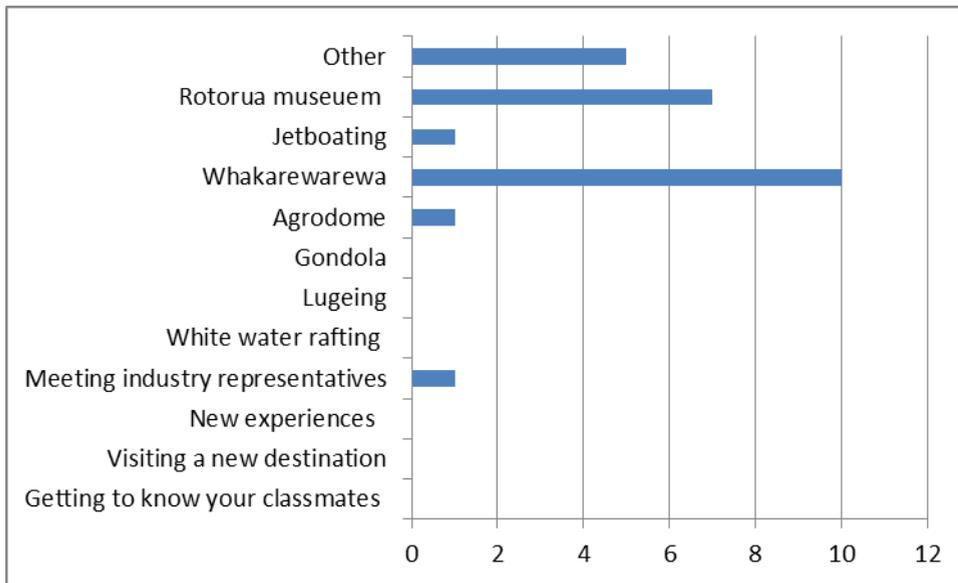


Figure 3: What did you enjoy least about the educational field trip to Rotorua?



The results above identify the importance of relationships and their impact on learning. Figure 2 illustrates that students value getting to know their classmates better over the destination and what it has to offer in terms of activities. In figure 3, the attractions of Whakarewarewa and the Rotorua museum have been rated poorly due to a negative experience with a tour guide. This point was reflected in the following reflection by a student participating in the field trip:

“The guide appeared unenthusiastic and uninterested in creating a learning experience. I couldn’t connect to the tour guide and it tainted the whole experience. It was hard to learn when the tour guide didn’t offer the chance to ask questions. Most of the group was too scared to ask a question. This went against what I learnt in my customer service class”.

It becomes apparent through the results of the survey that students enjoy experiential learning and that it has a positive impact on their ability to acquire and retain new information. Table 3 identifies some key statistics in relation to experiential learning identified in the questionnaire.

Table 3: Key statistics in relation to experiential learning during the field trip

During the field trip:

- **80 %** of students experienced a higher level of understanding of subjects taught in the classroom.
- **80%** of students learnt something outside of what they studied in class as part of the Certificate in Tourism.
- **92 %** of students gained a new insight into the tourism industry.
- **80 %** of students preferred hands-on learning over classroom theory.
- **100 % of** students formed new friendships or gained a better understanding of their peers and tutors.
- **80 %** of students learnt something new about themselves.

The qualitative responses to the open-ended questions provide a deeper insight into the thoughts and beliefs of how the students' learning benefited from the field trip.

A key theme that came across in most of the students' evaluations was the impact of experiencing the tourism products in a real world setting and the effect it had on their own personal development. As exemplified by one student who stated:

“The trip made me realise that I am capable of securing a job in the tourism industry and I can challenge myself to do something that may not be in my comfort zone”.

On the other hand, a student who had a negative experience during the Jet Boat activity came to the realisation that adventure tourism was no longer a career option that she wanted to pursue:

“Learning by doing definitely has a lasting effect. For me it made me realise what I didn't like in the tourism industry – adventure tourism is too extreme for me!”

It was also interesting to note that the development of relationships was valued by all of the students and contributed significantly to the success of the field trip. The inclusion of group-based activities enabled the students to build relationships with their peers and their tutors. These enriching interpersonal experiences had a positive effect on their learning and enhanced student participation during the field trip. This was captured in the below student evaluations:

“It was exciting to share these experiences with my classmates and made the educational experience fun. The activities enabled us to get to know each other better and gain more of an understanding of who we are - our values and goals. Everyone was exposed to each other's strengths and we were able to find new things that we had in common.”

“White water rafting brought everyone together and it was a great bonding experience. We have become a closer unit through the experiences of the field trip – from the road trip to the more team-based activities such as lugeing. Having fun outside the classroom was different and enjoyable.”

The data from this questionnaire outweighs the notion that field trips are simply 'holidays without meaningful educational value' (Robson, 2002). Instead field trips provide an interactive learning environment where students can gain hands-on experience and achieve personal growth. Experiential learning is a powerful learning tool that helps students understand abstract concepts better, as demonstrated in the following student evaluation:

“Classroom learning is from another person's perspective but on field trips it is interactive and meaningful. During the field trip I was able to experience the theory and put it to the test, then compare my experiences to what I learnt in class”.

In response to the questionnaire question about what style of learning did they prefer, one student emphasises that experiential learning compliments classroom theory:

“I like both styles of learning, learning in the classroom and then applying it in the real world. A mix of both is more effective and offers a change of scenery”.

7.0 Implications and conclusions

Tourism students need to have the ability to relate the subject matter of the material that is learned to the real world around them (Goh, 2011). It is clear from the findings that students consider the field trip to be a key experiential learning tool. Twenty two of the twenty five students identified that they preferred experiential learning over classroom based learning. To some extent this is not really surprising when you consider the travel itinerary, but the qualitative reasons to why they preferred this type of learning were interesting. A reoccurring theme was the idea of being able to interact with the destination. The students were able connect the in-class learning with the real-time

industry. The importance of relationship building with students and staff was another key finding. Relationship building was a crucial part and highlight of the field trip for students. Staff play an important part in facilitating these relationships and keeping students focused on the task.

This study has identified that regardless of what learning framework is being used, field trips should demonstrate experiential learning outcomes through preparation, participation and reflection (Do, 2006 as cited in Goh, 2011). It would have been interesting to conduct the survey at the end of the trimester, once all learning had been completed. This would give students a greater chance to reflect on the material learnt in class and compare that to the field trip. Personal development was an important issue identified in the research. Many students had never been away on a field trip before. Another reoccurring theme that emerged from the qualitative data was 'being treated like an adult' and 'being treated with respect'- this leads to maturity that should be reflected in the classroom.

Although this research was successful in answering the research question, there are limitations that need to be discussed. Firstly, there were twenty five participants in this research, but although the sample size was small it was a fair reflection of the target sample. The research was based on only one field trip and this is a limitation because different classes may have different perceptions of the field trip as an experiential learning tool. It will be important to conduct the survey again with the next class to look at the similarities and differences. This is an opportunity that can be developed. Another limitation identified is that most of the literature stems from other disciplines other than tourism. This study has demonstrated the importance of the field trip as a learning tool for students of different academic ability. Empowering students to engage with learning in a real world setting is essential for development and ultimately future success.

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