

Engaging in hospitality and culinary research that makes a difference: The shape of things to come

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Engaging in hospitality research that matters now takes a fresh approach as to how we can contribute to shaping the future of best practices in both hospitality education and management, while engaging with problems worth investigating, and publishing the results. The domain of hospitality activities suggests the need to study both the social and the physical contexts within which particular hospitality activities take place. Current researches in the field of hospitality are relatively recent. In pre-industrial societies, hospitality occupied a much more central position in the value-system. In both contemporary and pre-industrial societies, as in earlier historical periods, hospitality included the fundamental moral imperative and duty to welcome neighbours, and begged the fundamental question “who is my neighbour”? The centrality of hospitality and culinary activities has been noted in a wide range of studies from Homeric Greece, to early Rome, to medieval Provence, the Maori, Indian tribes of USA and Canada, and finally to early modern England and Mediterranean societies. Whilst modern industrial economies no longer have the same apparently overt moral obligations to be hospitable, and much hospitality experience takes place in commercial settings in the context of world tourism, the study of the social and cultural domains provides a valuable set of insights with which to critically evaluate and inform the commercial provision of accommodation, food and beverages in a secure and safe environment.

Keywords: hospitality, sciences, profession, research, critical thinking

Introduction

This is not just an academic paper, it is a resource. Its value will be judged by the numbers of hospitality practitioners who acknowledge that research is at the heart of hospitality and culinary education and training and, having acknowledged this, will become engaged in hospitality and culinary research that makes a difference to their professional practice. Hospitality and culinary practitioners, and policymakers will need to agree that the key to improving hospitality and culinary education and practice is to ensure that highly skilled and effective hospitality and culinary teachers are placed in all classrooms, and competent practitioners placed in hotel and restaurant enterprises. Yet, there still lacks a practical set of standards and assessments that can guarantee that hospitality and culinary teachers, particularly new teachers, are well prepared and ready to teach the subject matter of this discipline.

The school of hospitality and culinary arts

The principal function of a hospitality and culinary arts school is to design, plan, prepare and deliver the programmes of learning in ways that foster and support student learning. It is also, an important point of entry for enquiry into the nature of hospitality and culinary professionalism, including public acknowledgement that what is taught and learnt is professional within a recognised “profession”.

What then are the implications for hospitality and culinary education and training, for industry, and for the community, of the development of a hospitality and culinary research base?

Gehrels (2015; see also Lashley, 2014; Hegarty, 2016) posed a number of core questions to be addressed by those engaging in hospitality research:

- What is the essence of hospitality and hospitableness?
- How can we effectively train/educate in hospitality for hospitableness?
- Where is the future of hospitality? How/where/why is hospitality developing?
- How can hospitality become sustainable?
- What is gastronomy?

This paper is for those who do not simply accept the status quo, and who seek to challenge and change it. It is for those who believe that change and progress are brought about through the commitment and effort of visionary individuals. I have likened hospitality management to a system, involving the process of transforming inputs – tangible and intangible – into outputs in line with the strategy, mission and goals of the enterprise.

If you are a hospitality (hotel or restaurant) manager who holds the view that innovation and change happen only in the “real world” and that academics in hospitality and culinary schools are living in “cloud cuckoo land”, you probably came to this paper by mistake. Likewise, if you are a hospitality and culinary educator who thinks you know it all, you should bin the paper now, because this is a paper for those engaging in research in hospitality and culinary matters; it is a paper for thinkers in the field. Also, it is a paper for hospitality and culinary managers who are interested in exploring, and thinking critically about what it is they actually do.

It is difficult to classify this paper in a clear, concise manner; of course it is aimed at both hospitality and culinary practitioners

interested in engaging with research and at culinary academics currently engaged in, or about to commence, research in hospitality, culinary arts and gastronomy. It is not intended to be a “how to” paper – there are many of such excellent papers and excellent books on research about, and I do not propose to tell you how to conduct your research or how you should foster innovation in your business. Neither do I claim to have an answer to one of the more important questions asked by industry practitioners and researchers alike, at this time, namely, how are we to engage in hospitality and culinary research that makes a difference?

Engaging with hospitality science

Is hospitality a science? The term science usually refers to a body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation, recording and verification. Like researchers in other scientific disciplines, hospitality researchers engage in organised, systematic study of social phenomena to enhance understanding. All scientists, whether studying mushrooms or murderers, attempt to collect precise information through methods of study that are as objective as possible. They rely on the careful recording of observations and accumulation and analysis of data.

Of course, there is a great difference between hospitality and physics and between psychology and astronomy. For this reason the sciences have been divided into the natural and the social sciences. Natural science is the study of the physical features and occurrences in nature and the ways in which they interact and change. Astronomy, biology, chemistry, geology and physics are all natural sciences. The social sciences study the various aspects of human society. The social sciences include anthropology, economics, history, psychology, sociology, political science, and hospitality. All these sciences contribute to understanding the principles and practices of hospitality.

These social science disciplines have a common focus on the social behaviour of people, yet each has a particular orientation. Anthropologists study human beings in their totality, ranging from human biological and social origins to present-day societies, including the origin of languages and their use today. Economists explore the ways in which people produce and exchange goods and services, along with money and other resources. Historians are concerned with the peoples and events of the past and their significance for us today. Political scientists study international relations, the workings of government, and the exercise of power and authority. Psychologists investigate personality and individual behaviour. Sociology emphasises the influences that society has on people’s attitudes and behaviours and the ways in which people shape the society they live in. Humans are social animals; therefore, sociologists scientifically examine our social relationships with others. Clearly, the host-guest relationships dominant in hospitality are worthy of considered examination in a new discipline which we may call “hospitology”.

The science domain of hospitality activities suggests the need to study both the social and the physical contexts within which particular hospitality activities take place. Current researches in the field of hospitality are of relatively recent development (Molz & Gibson, 2007; Lashley, Morrison & Lynch, 2007; Lashley & Morrison, 2000). In pre-industrial societies, hospitality occupied a much more central position in the value-system

(O’Gorman, 2007). In both contemporary and pre-industrial societies, as in earlier historical periods, hospitality included the fundamental moral imperative and duty to welcome neighbours (Melwani, 2009; Meehan, 2009; Cole, 2007), and begged the fundamental question “who is my neighbour?”

Frequently, the responsibility to provide hospitality, to act with generosity as a host, and to protect visitors has long been more than a matter left merely to the preferences of individuals engaged in the activities of capitalism. Beliefs about hospitality, and obligations to others, are located in world view about the nature of human society, and the natural order of things from which the individual derives her roles and his identity. In other words, people’s emotions and self-interpretation like their actions are predefined for them by society, and so is their cognitive approach to the universe which surrounds them. This socially determined world-view is, at least in part, already given in the language used by society. Of course our language is not usually chosen by ourselves, but imposed upon us by the particular social group in charge of our initial socialisation. Society predefines for us the fundamental symbolic apparatus with which we grasp the world, order our experience and interpret our own existence. Thus, any failure to act appropriately is treated with social condemnation. The centrality of hospitality and culinary activities has been noted in a wide range of studies of Homeric Greece, early Rome, medieval Provence, the Maori, the Indian tribes of the USA and Canada, early modern England, and Mediterranean societies (Heal, 1990). Whilst modern industrial economies no longer have the same apparently overt moral obligations to be hospitable, and much hospitality experience takes place in commercial settings in the context of world tourism, the study of the social and cultural domains provides a valuable set of insights with which to critically evaluate and inform commercial provision of accommodation, food and beverages in a secure and safe environment.

Thus hospitality, both as an experience (i.e. eros-informed institution) and an industry (logos-informed institution), is a microcosm of the differentiation between these two that takes place in a wider societal context. Of course, viewed from the solely “industry” perspective, both hospitality and tourism, as a Fordist pattern, may be criticised as problematic. This is understandable. However, at a deeper level, the factors underlying the fact that the massification of tourism and hospitality frequently give rise to negative consequences is not the pattern itself (i.e., Fordism), but the realisation that hospitality and tourism production is informed more by instrumentalism and short-termism, which disregard the interests and long-term well-being of the host community, the local culture, the stranger/visitor and the environment. Therefore, in order to minimise these effects, hospitality and tourism development should entail not merely a change of pattern, but more importantly a change of philosophy, i.e., a shift from short-termism to long-termism, from instrumentalism to humanism, and from one-sided to all-encompassing policies (Wang, 2000). Furthermore, policy makers and planners should begin to display a humanistic concern not only for tourists, but also for hosts, and such concern should gain ascendancy over the “instrumental” purposes of hospitality and tourism, i.e., the profits earned by business organisations. According to Hall (1994), hospitality and tourism should be integrated within the host community, a situation in which both parties are winners.

This change of philosophy appears to have occurred in some academic circles. However, it should also be reflected in public policy-making and planning with respect to hospitality and tourism. In other words, “sustainability” should become the focus of the new direction for hospitality and tourism development.

Mastering the discipline of hospitality and culinary research is an iterative process: you get good at it by doing it, and get better at it by doing more of it. The key skill is to think critically, that is, firstly, not taking anything at face value, but probing into the exact meaning and determining the perspective (bias) of the writer. Thus, it can be seen that science is more than a body of knowledge as referred to earlier; it is, according to Carl Sagan (1996), “a way of thinking”. The scientific way of thinking is at once imaginative and disciplined. This is central to its success. The science of hospitality invites us to let the facts in, even when they do not conform to our preconceptions. It counsels us to carry alternative hypotheses in our heads, and see which fit the facts. It urges on us a delicate balance between no-holds-barred openness to new ideas, however heretical, and the most rigorous sceptical scrutiny of everything – new ideas and established wisdom. This kind of thinking is also an essential tool for a democracy in an age of change. One of the reasons for its success is that science has built-in error-correcting machinery at its very heart. Some may consider this an over-broad characterisation, but to me every time we exercise self-criticism, every time we test our ideas against the outside world, we are doing science. When we are self-indulgent, self-promoting and uncritical, when we confuse hopes and facts, we slide into pseudoscience and superstition (see Goldacre, 2009).

Every time a scientific paper presents a bit of data, it is accompanied by an error bar – a quiet but insistent reminder that no knowledge is complete or perfect. It is a calibration of how much we trust what we think we know. We humans may seek to have absolute certainty; we may aspire to it; we may pretend to have attained it. But the history of science teaches that the most we can hope for is continuous improvement in our understanding, learning from our mistakes, with the caveat that absolute certainty will always elude us. We will always be mired in error. The most each generation can hope for is to reduce the errors a little, and to add to the body of data to which errors apply.

One of the great commandments of science is, “Mistrust arguments from authority”. Too many such arguments have been proved wrong. “Authorities” must prove their contentions like everybody else. The apparent independence of science, its unwillingness to accept conventional wisdom, makes it dangerous to doctrines less self-critical or with pretensions to certitude.

Because research carries us toward an understanding of how the world is, rather than how we would wish it to be, its findings may not in all cases be immediately comprehensible or satisfying. It may take a little work to restructure our mindsets. Some science is very simple. When it gets complicated, that is usually because the world is complicated – or because we are complicated. When we shy away from it because it appears too difficult, we surrender the ability to take charge of our future. We become disenfranchised. Our self-confidence erodes. But when we pass beyond the barrier when the findings and methods of science get through to us, when we understand and put this knowledge to use, many feel deep satisfaction. This is true for everyone. I know personally from having science

explained to me and from my attempts to explain it to others, how gratifying it is when we “get it”, when obscure terms miraculously take on meaning, when we grasp what all the fuss is about, when deep wonders are revealed.

In its encounter with nature, science invariably elicits a sense of reverence and awe. The very act of understanding is a celebration of joining, merging, even on a modest scale, with the magnificence of the cosmos. And the cumulative worldwide build-up of knowledge over time converts science into something only a little short of a trans-national, trans-generational meta-mind. When we recognise our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of the ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. Science, especially hospitality science, is not only compatible with spirituality, it is a profound source of spirituality (see Bailey, 2007).

How can a highly evolved species such as ours, with its natural instinct for happiness and hope, stop doing some of the things we do and turn the tide to create a better future? Our world has evolved to a point where one animal, the human species, has the power to influence the evolution and destiny of the planet, for better or worse. Put simply, the future direction of life on earth is now in human hands. What happens from here depends on the choices we make personally and globally. At last we (humans) appear to begin to realise how science, religion and spirituality can work together to enlighten us about reality and creation – and where our life fits into it all. Our quest is to balance what science is telling us about the nature of physical reality, biological evolution and life in general with what religions and spirituality have been teaching throughout the centuries in their calls to eternity, “divine” experiences, and life beyond ourselves.

Research

Mastery of the hospitality and culinary research discipline includes having a focus, in the form of a research question, or an hypothesis that you seek to explore. This requires much reading, ordering, and organising your references, and information retrieval on your research topic by use of reference and technical libraries, as well as local and global web-based information networks; you will need competence in analysing and evaluating the information, research and development processes in culinary hospitality and tourism processes. And of course you will need to be able to write.

The key tasks of mastering hospitality research are as follows:

- Learn the language and professional terminology of research
- Perform reference and information retrieval on the topic of research methods
- Formulate methodological foundations of the research
- Understand the organisation of the research project
- Report (make a presentation) on the research topic to your audience.

Throughout this paper I refer frequently to “academic research”. My intention here is not to imply that research can be carried out only in the academy. Experience has taught me that much excellent research is carried out, outside the academy or university, by management consultants, individual practitioners, hospitality managers and by independent researchers.

Becoming critical

My aim here is to encourage you (the reader) to become critical, to critically review and question what you do, why you do it, and to present you with food for thought by encouraging you to share your experiences with your colleagues so that together we may all help shape the future of hospitality and culinary research.

Throughout the paper I refer to phrases like “hospitality management research”, “hospitality researchers”, “culinary researchers”, and I ask the question how we can become better at doing hospitality and culinary research to shape the future of hospitality and the culinary arts.

I was prompted to begin this journey by sharing with a number of colleagues who are professors in hospitality and tourism schools located in universities, and directors of hotel and catering schools who feel frustrated by the resistance to the academic development of hospitality and culinary research as a discipline in many institutes and universities. Further, in some areas, proposed developments in doctoral hospitality and culinary education is curtailed by law, by convention, or simply a lack of credibility in the subject.

It is useful to recall Gary Hamel’s realisation that “the future is coming faster than you think”, and that one may cling to traditional assumptions about hospitality (hotels and restaurants) at one’s peril.

Having made the transition from a salaried academic position to an unaffiliated researcher, I found the articulated frustrations of my colleagues, mentioned earlier, were magnified. Using the experience of my EdD days at the University of Sheffield, I started to engage with beginning researchers as a “critical friend”, until I was offered an appointment as Associate Lecturer tasked with supervising a Doctor in Business Administration student. One of the benefits of being unaffiliated and working on one’s own is being able to choose what one wants to do and how to do it, without having to worry about fitting into others’ perspectives of the situation or fitting into the culture and objectives of the organisation’s hierarchy that do not fit with one’s own. All this begs the question, how can we expect to influence anybody if nobody, especially hospitality and culinary educators and practitioners, reads what we write? For far too long hospitality has taken a back seat in promoting its own “professionalisation”. It has not provided the opportunities to engage in theorising and research. This is evidenced in a variety of ways: not fully engaging with curriculum development, or with research-based continuing professional education and professional self-evaluation projects. These are just some of the signs of the ways that the hospitality professional as researcher may become a reality in the not too distant future. The reasons why hospitality professionals are becoming researchers vary. Some become researchers because they are products of a period of increased intellectual and social ferment: they are committed to a view of themselves that is bound to reflect upon their professional practice, to justify it and transcend its limitations. Others have been drawn to research and evaluation roles as they have been required to publicly debate and justify innovative practices for which they have been responsible. Still others have more or less spontaneously arrived at the general idea of the practitioner-researcher simply as a reasonable aspiration for a hospitality professional.

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