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# What to do about how to do: Reflections on the future direction of hospitality education and research

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Hospitality management provision in higher education in the UK is well established, though most courses are overly concerned with developing "how to do" skills in graduates. This paper argues that this "how to do" culture is reinforced by student learning needs, as well as the industrial experiences and learning preferences of staff. This "how to do" agenda is also reflected in much research output. The paper reports briefly on the 2018 Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) research conference, and confirms that much research is practitioner linked and overly reliant on a narrow band of research methods. A more research-active academic culture would lead to more critical thinking in research methods as well as in course delivery and assessment. The inclusion of increased social science content in hospitality management programmes would also create a scientific underpinning to these courses that engage critical thinking. Finally, the paper suggests that programmes might benefit from the deliberate inclusion of topics that are purposely *not* relevant to the vocational mission.

Keywords: critical thinking, hospitality management education, liberal arts content, scientific objectivity

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

As the holder of a diploma of one of the first courses designed to develop professional managers in hospitality operations, I have first-hand insight into the pragmatic nature of higher education provision (from Huddersfield College of Technology from 1959 to 1962). More recently, research undertaken for the Higher Education Funding Council defined the provision of hospitality management training as "characterised by a core which addresses the management of food, beverages and/ or accommodation in a service context" (Higher Education Funding Council – England [HEFCE], 1998, p. 15). A follow-up study of graduate careers in the sector stated that "[t]he research found that hospitality education was providing graduates with the range of knowledge and skills that the industry required and that they were preferred to graduates of other more general disciplines" (Doherty, Guerrier, Jameson, Lashley, & Lockwood, 2001, p. 4).

This paper critically discusses the educational implications of undergraduate programmes design exclusively aimed at the hospitality sector's management needs. It suggests that an unquestioned concern with the pragmatic demands of management reproduction can lead to limited development of graduates' critical thinking skills. By shifting the focus of courses from the industry to the student, it is argued that this shortcoming may be resolved. A more active engagement of all staff in research activities would establish a culture of scientific enquiry. Furthermore, the curriculum would be strengthened by content that is both informed by more social science content, as well as some elements that are intentionally not relevant to industry needs.

## How to do hospitality

It is now almost twenty years since Airey and Tribe suggested that hospitality management programmes were dominated "by the tyranny of relevance" (Airey & Tribe, 2000), an illuminating phrase that I have made reference to on many occasions (e.g. Lashley, 2003; 2013; 2017a). Essentially the content of modules, assessment instruments and the aims of these courses, in common with many other vocationally focused courses, are pre-occupied with preparing students for careers in an industry, in this case, hospitality management.

This vocational focus informs the narrative about the purpose of education and the role of educators within it. Courses are supposed to involve content and educational experiences that enable the development of industry managers who are both fit for purpose, and deemed to be job ready after completing the programme. Indeed research conducted for the Higher Education Funding Council (Doherty et al., 2001) confirmed that 80 per cent of graduates enter hospitality industry jobs after their course. Three out of four of those entering the industry work in large, multisite and frequently multinational firms. Slightly fewer than 25 per cent of graduates start employment in small firms, or owner management, despite that fact that 90 per cent of hospitality firms employ less than 50 people (Lashley & Rowson, 2017).

Industry practical skills in the UK are also developed through training kitchens, restaurants and bars. In other countries, it is not unusual for college provision to include training hotels. In recent study for the Hospitality Institute, I, with Andy Heyes, (Heyes & Lashley, 2017) contrasted and compared programmes across six high profile international hotel schools in the USA, UK, the Netherlands, Dubai, Hong Kong, and Switzerland. Most of these international training providers run an on-campus hotel. Thus the vocation-specific content is further reinforced by the development of operational-specific skills in food production, food and drink service, reception, and accommodation services. These "practical sessions" are typically located in the first two years of a degree programme. Finally, most first-degree courses are designed to include a one-year work placement that gives students the experience of industry work as a feature of the programme. Typically this occurs in year three of a four-year programme. The "how to do" managerial tasks are underpinned by operational skills development within the programme, and via the industrial placement that enables experience of working as a feature of the course.

Academic staff developing, teaching and assessing these programmes are themselves mostly ex-practitioners. The specific hospitality sector content is taught by former industry managers who are academics with a specialised knowledge of hospitality service provision in hotels, restaurants, or bars, etc. In some cases the more generic management content - marketing, people management, finance, etc. - may be taught by those with applied sector experience. In the UK, however, many hospitality management programmes have been integrated into business schools. In other countries, these would be taught from by hotel school staff. Wherever the programme location, teaching staff on hospitality degree programmes are likely to be practitioners in their field, as well as holding appropriate academic qualifications in the subject. The vocational narrative of hospitality education is, therefore, reinforced further by the experiences and perspectives of staff designing, delivering and assessing content.

Students applying for recruitment onto hospitality management programmes are clearly making educational choices that are vocational and pragmatic. Research suggests that a sizeable minority have prior working experience in the sector. Many enjoy the "buzz" of the service encounter and the uneven work pace. "No one day is the same as the next" (Lashley, 2011, p. 19). They like working with other people, as colleagues or customers. Many are activist learners (Doherty et al., 2001) and prefer to work and learn from practical contexts. Lecturers too are frequently activist learners with industry experience that has been dominated by concrete operational experience.

Clearly, vocationally focused programmes like these under discussion have industry links that inform programme design and delivery on a number of levels. Advisory boards enable on-going contact with programme teams and these provide insights into current industrial practice, needs, and concerns. In some cases, industry managers act as external examiners for courses. The establishment of industrial placement for students also embeds links between industry and academia. Most students on industrial placement would receive at least one visit from a member of the academic team during the placement year, and these personal contacts with industry provide further insight into operational and managerial practices in the industry (Heyes & Lashley, 2017).

The "how to do" agenda is dominant in the educational experiences of students on hospitality management programmes. Programme aims and objectives, content, teaching and learning, assessment, "laboratory" sessions in kitchens etc., together with industrial placement, are all intended to deliver "industry-ready" graduates who will slip seamlessly into the workplace after graduation. Students themselves have chosen a vocational/action-orientated course rather than a course that has liberal, or reflective, orientations (Airey & Tribe, 2000). Industry practitioners and staff assess both programmes and graduates through the prism of industry relevance and appropriateness. Hence Airey and Tribe's (2000) observation about the "tyranny of relevance" being dominant in hospitality management education.

#### The downside of doing

While these programmes appear to answer the needs of students and industry practitioners, they are flawed by their pre-occupation with relevance. On one level, relevance assumes a constancy that is unchanging. In a world where the only certainty is that "tomorrow will be different to today", the checklist of knowledge and skills needed for tomorrow are informed by the perceived realities of today, together with industry and academic experiences of vesterday. Both these actors in the delivery, and recruitment. of hospitality management graduates see the "real world" through the narrow window of their own experiences in work organisations. Research (Heyes & Lashley, 2017) suggests that many programmes are focused on the five-star hotels, and haute cuisine restaurants, despite this "luxury offer" representing a small fragment of industry GDP, and employment opportunities for graduates. Research on graduate careers suggests that many may start their career in these "top notch" establishments, but later move to other sectors or leave the hospitality industry workplace all together (Doherty et al., 2001).

The point is that the defined model of "industrial relevance" is narrow and not appropriate to future careers because the industry content is too skewed to the elite end of the market. Few course teams include insights into mass-market operations in branded mass circulation budget hotels, restaurant chains or pub groups, yet these provide opportunities for quick promotion and rewards. It is highly unlikely that a manager of a deluxe hotel will be appointed to a general manager position before her/his fortieth birthday. Graduate managers of Wetherspoon pubs, or McDonald's restaurants are likely to be a unit manager in their late twenties, or early thirties. Career opportunities in contract catering, industrial catering, schools or hospital catering are rarely, if ever, mentioned (Doherty et al., 2001).

Apart from this narrow definition of industrial relevance, the "how to do" focus limits students' educational ambitions and promotes a functional view about the purpose and values of a higher education. Education is valued as a means of securing a career. While some educators look beyond the immediate sector concerns, the key focus is industrial relevance and ensuring that students are industry ready. The consequence of this preoccupation with the pragmatic and the relevant is that students are myopically focused "inside the box", and few look outside it.

The "here and now", and the "how to do", limit the development of student imagination and critical thinking. An implicit assumption is that this is the way things are, have always been, and will always be. An ethos of conservatism dominates the culture of many organisations. Change is seen as being potentially risky and threatening. Paradoxically, many recognise that change is all around but many hope that it will somehow pass them by. Graduates should not just to be accepting of change: they themselves need to be change agents. Graduates' abilities to be effective in the dynamic future is at risk of being limited by the "how to do" agenda.

While acknowledging educators' obligation to industry management development, our principle obligation is to our students, individually and collectively. Education is essentially empowering because an informed awareness of the social, political and economic environment enables students to make more sound choices in both the workplace and in their personal lives. Fundamentally, the educator's mission is to encourage a thirst for learning and knowing, to be ever questioning and critical. The full version of Rene Decarte's famous observation is "I doubt therefore I think; I think therefore I am" (Descartes, 2009). The doubt is removed in many versions of the quotation, but that is the most essential part. The development of critical thinking skills and encouraging students to view the world through the prism of scientific objectivity is a life skill that enriches and empowers their future lives.

The scientific mind-set looks for principles, evidence and proof. Nothing is accepted at face value and all is to be questioned. The "why are we doing" is crucial when considering the "how to do". For graduates themselves, an awareness of the boundaries of their own knowledge and the desire to know more are the most important insights that educators can provide. It is a sad truth that "[i]gnorant people think that they know everything; while informed people are aware of how little they know" (anon). Shakespeare makes a similar point in the play, *As You Like It*, when he writes that "[t]he fool thinks himself to be a wise man, yet the wise man doth think himself a fool". Encouraging students to develop a life-long thirst for knowledge is both liberating for them, and ultimately essential for their role as industry professionals.

Paradoxically educators have the conceptual tools that are supposedly applied to all programmes, but could be employed more forcefully in hospitality management programme planning and delivery if they were implemented more creatively. The South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) descriptors of the qualities say that "[c]redit level descriptors define the level of complexity, relative demand and autonomy expected of a learner on completion of a module or programme of learning. They provide a description of levels of learning through a hierarchy of knowledge and skills" (SEEC, 2010, p. 15). These stress the need for "conceptualisation and critical thinking" for graduates from first degree (Level 6) and master's degrees (Level 7) as well as doctoral awards (Level 8). These qualities are expected of all programmes, including vocational awards. Bloom's taxonomy also suggests a hierarchy of thinking skills from "low-level to high-level thinking" that is helpful in assessing student outcomes. The taxonomy defines evaluation as the highest of the thinking skills and defines this as "[t]o justify. Presenting and defending opinions by making judgements about information, the validity of ideas or guality of work based on a set of criteria" (Bloom, 1956). Both the descriptors and the taxonomy are helpful to educators because they establish common frameworks that apply, in principle to all programmes. The practical reality is that they are utilised within the context of industry relevance and the constraints of pragmatic utility.

#### Studying hospitality

Hospitality programmes are clearly aimed at studying hospitality for application to the industry; however, the study of hospitality enables the development of more critical thinking and student empowerment. The potential content for the study of hospitality from social science perspectives is discussed more fully in the following section. This section explores insights from an analysis of the research papers presented at the recent Council for Hospitality Management Education (CHME) research conference which took place in Bournemouth in May 2018. The analysis focused on how papers were concerned with the study of and for hospitality as well as the research methods engaged. Some papers were discussion papers aimed at stimulating debate and/ or future research, but the vast majority reported on primary research undertaken by the author(s). As with all social science research, methods can be based of surveys using various forms of questionnaires and interviews. They might also use experiments or quasi-experiments where independent variables are manipulated so as to observe the impact upon the dependent variable. Clearly there are difficulties with this approach in non-laboratory settings, but there are research approaches than can be employed in an "all things being equal" setting (Eaglen, Lashley & Thomas, 2000a; 2000b; Lashley 2003; 2009). Ethnographic studies might also be used. Here the research is conducted in the workplace, reporting on the lived experiences and interactions within the organisation. This approach has particular relevance when student or staff work placement experiences inform the research. Being a critical participant in the workplace has the benefit of being able to capture informal practices, and the feelings generated by particular experiences.

Of the sixty-seven conference papers viewed, just one is a study of hospitality focus because it examined the experience of migrants as guests and their reception by the receiving, host community. All other papers were focused on the study for agenda, aimed at exploring various facets of commercial hospitality organisations and their management practices. Eight papers were discussion papers that highlighted avenues for further research. One paper employed an element of guasi-experimental research, and one contained an element of ethnography. The vast majority of papers presented to the 2018 CHME research conference employed survey-based instruments. Ten papers used solely questionnaires, while sixteen employed only semi-structured interviews, and others used a combination of both. Some research conducted analysis of webpage content. All in all, the impression gained from the overview of these research papers is that various forms of survey instrument dominate the research methods employed and that virtually all were concerned with research for the hotel and restaurant sectors.

A frame of industrial contexts suggests that the providing of food, drink and accommodation might consider a distinction between those where the provision of these services are direct from those where the hospitality services are indirect. Direct hospitality services include all organisations providing food, drink, and/or accommodation as the core activity – hotels, restaurants, licensed retailing, contract catering. Indirect provision includes organisations providing hospitality services as an adjunct to the main organisational purpose – cruise liners, retail shopping venues, holiday parks and campgrounds, schools, hospitals, prisons, etc. These wider provider organisations are rarely the subject of hospitality research. Even hotel and restaurant research tends to be dominated by the upper end of the market. Research involving budget hotels, fast food and chain restaurants does surface, but it is rare and certainly does not reflect the share of GDP and employment generated by these operations. The management of brand standards, service quality and profit generation across hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of units is fascinating and worthy of much more research attention than it currently generates.

At the time of writing, I have attended all twenty-seven annual CHME research conferences, and without doubt there has been a marked improvement in both the volume and guality of research reported to the conference. However, there is still a long way to go in terms of the array of hospitality service contexts covered, and with the research methods employed. In addition, more outputs concerned with agenda provided by the study of hospitality might include a cluster of social science insights that help generate more scientific underpinnings to research in the field. Going a step further, the study of host-quest relations can be employed as a metaphor that can be used in any context where one person enters the space of another. The paper alluded to earlier used the concept of hospitableness to study the treatment of migrants, but this could be used in studies of hospital patients and staff, prison guards and in-mates, transport staff and passengers, and so on. The study of hospitality offers up rich themes for future research that extend beyond the hospitality industry and traditional host-guest encounters.

# What is to be done?

It is a given that hospitality management education is clearly aimed at developing the skills and talents of future managers, just as hospitality research is primarily concerned with developing insights and informing practitioners. That said, educators have a principal obligation to students. Their mission is to enlighten, enthuse and empower the women and men who graduate from these programmes. Similarly, researchers have an obligation to uncover objective truths, and to pursue knowledge for its own sake, extending beyond research principally focused on industry improvement and profit maximisation.

While acknowledging the educators' mission in industrial practice, there is a need to liberate themselves from the shackles of relevance. Educators have to be less constrained by the boundaries of the box, and look beyond it. Developing student insights into different perceptions and definitions of reality is essential. They need to have some insight into different philosophical and political perceptions.

The recent Routledge Hospitality Studies Handbook (Lashley, 2017b) includes contributions from an array of social

science disciplines. These insights are valuable in showing that the commercial provision of hospitality can be better understood though wider perspectives. Social scientists such as anthropologists (Selwyn, 2000; Welten, 2017), sociologists (Ritzer, 2007; 2017; Wood, 2017), philosophers (Berenpas, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Telfer, 2017), historians (Still, 2017; Walton, 2017), geographers (Bell, 2007; 2017) feminists (Brownwell, 2017), for example, enrich our understanding of hospitality by enlightening through their discipline's perspectives, publications and research.

Anthropology, history, geography, sociology, etc. allow the development of understanding of commercial hospitality provision through the application of scientific objectivity. Understanding the principles that impact both the external environment and internal operational actions allow practising managers to make more informed rational decisions. Managers, who are themselves "reflective practitioners", are more able to critically evaluate current management practice. These social sciences develop insights that enable critical evaluation by managers that is ultimately more effective than the uncritical stance implicit in the "how to do" approach.

The creation of something approaching Goffman's (1959) "total institution" in hospitality education would see the educational environment from the student's perspective. All modules would be perceived and delivered with concern for their contribution to the whole learning experience and the development of "high-level thinking" and "evaluation". A culture of research and scientific objectivity is a ubiquitous feature of the higher educational construct. All academic staff must be engaged in the dual activities of knowledge dissemination and knowledge acquisition.

Figure 1 suggests that the nature of the research activity varies with the balance between knowledge dissemination and acquisition. All academic work is, by definition, involved with the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, though the balance between the two varies across academic roles. Those working in a predominantly teaching role have to engage with research and publications in the topic they teach. There needs to be on-going research on teaching and learning. Consultancy, applied research and dissertation supervision may involve existing models being applied in more specific contexts. Doctoral or professorial roles are mostly concerned with developing new knowledge.

Figure 2 suggests a graphic representation of a changing balance between knowledge acquisition and dissemination across various academic roles. The key point is that teaching and research activities are too often separated out in hospitality management programmes by pragmatic, relevant, and "how to do" content. Research, and the associated critical thinking, is not an omnipresent feature across the curriculum of the learning experience from day one. Every module presented to students has to be informed by the research agenda that encourages critical thinking, and the desire to know more. Students are to be encouraged to develop a thirst for knowing

KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

Researching subject<br/>being taughtResearching teaching<br/>and learningResearching applying existing<br/>models to new contextsResearching developing<br/>new knowledge

#### KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION WITH SOME ACQUISITION

Teaching role			
			Researcher role
Lecturer	Research lecturer	Active researcher	Professor

Figure 2: Academic staff engagement with research

and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The social sciences are the "key to the door" to this approach. They provide both underlying theory and principles, but also ways of looking at the world in a manner that evaluates arguments for the rigour of their content.

This section has suggested that the "how to do" agenda could be improved by changes in curriculum content, together with teaching and learning strategies that support "how to think". This then shifts the focus of programmes towards the students and away from the industrial sector. The operational provision is an important context, but it must not dominate the educational process. "Students first" is not inconsistent with a vocational focus, because it can assist in providing a concrete context that aids the development of critical thinking. As activist learners, many students on these programmes learn best when learning is set within a tangible and concrete context (Lashley & Barron, 2005).

The "how to do" agenda supported by "how to think" development is essential for developing graduates that are "reflective practitioners" and more empowered citizens. However, this education thinking is still constrained by the "box" of vocational education and the concern for content that is perceived to be relevant for their future careers in industry. The following section suggests that educators be encouraged to think outside of the box.

# How to enrich?

If the "box" is defined by the immediacy and pragmatism of relevance to the industry and future careers, then thinking outside of the box needs to consider curriculum content that is not relevant. The arts provide a number of fields that have the potential to enrich. They enable students to engage in creativity and action.

The performing arts might be a starting point. Playing a musical instrument, or singing, both individually and collectively, might be added to programmes. Acting and stage production also involves performance. The performing arts will enrich students in their abilities to engage with their emotions, a helpful activity in itself, but one that is particularly relevant for those providing emotional labour in the workplace. The need to display one emotion, while feeling another during the service shift, frequently requires some period of relaxation before returning home. The performing arts may provide the emotional engagement that helps relaxation.

The visual arts, through painting, drawing, etching, sculpting, etc., involve a physical activity that relaxes and sooths the artist. Creating a work is relaxing and fulfilling for the artist and can also assist in the post-shift impact of emotional labour. Apart from the benefit flowing from the creation itself, the individual develops a greater visual sense that has both personal and workplace benefits. Ballroom dancing and ballet are art forms that involve physical exercise for the dancer, as well as empathy with music and rhythm. This may well appeal to those who relax through physical activity. It is also attractive as a spectator activity where individuals gain pleasure observing others dancing. Clearly these appeal to both individual needs and the collective experiences of being involved in clubs or competitions.

Social events and team building help individual employees bond with other workers. Friendly relations in the workplace help individuals feel more secure. This is particularly relevant when frontline employees may be under pressure or angry because of the way they have been treated by guests. The collective support given by colleagues helps reduce the impact of the emotional labour dimension of the service interaction between hosts and guests.

# Conclusion

This discussion about hospitality management education provision has argued that programmes are overly focused on the vocational role and perceived skills needed by future managers. This dominant "how to do" agenda constrains students in the development of critical thinking skills. The paper has argued that more social science-informed content is one way forward to developing these critical thinking skills by laying down theoretical principles on which actions are based. The paper also advocates a strong engagement by all academic staff in some form of research activity. There are clearly different levels of intensity of research, but even at its most fundamental level, teaching should be informed by current research in the module topic. Going a little further, the paper suggests that the curriculum could embrace some content that is deliberately not relevant. Painting and sculpture, the performing arts, music and dance are all potential topics that enrich the individual student, but also have the potential to round out the education of a future industry practitioner.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> This is an amended version of a paper presented at the 2018 CHME research conference.

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