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# On making silk purses: developing reflective practitioners in hospitality management education

**Conrad Lashley**

School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK

## Keywords

Graduates, Hospitality industry, Learning styles

## Abstract

Objectives being set by governmental, educational and industrial bodies suggest that future managers need to be reflective practitioners, and this issue will have to be addressed by hospitality educators. The paper suggests that if educators are to meet targets to achieve general standards of gradueness which require theoretical and critical evaluation as well as the demonstration of practical and organisational skills, they need to be systematic about their understanding of students' learning preferences. Results from the pilot study reported on in this paper suggest that hospitality students have learning preferences which do not naturally include theorising or reflection. This paper furthermore reports on one set of educational concepts which can be useful in tracking students' learning styles and in encouraging the development of more reflective approaches to study and management tasks.

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## Introduction

This paper reports on the early stages of what will be a longitudinal study. This will track the development of student learning through teaching strategies which start from an understanding of the preferred learning styles of students entering hospitality management programmes.

Recent work undertaken by the Council for Hospitality Management Education for the Higher Education Quality Council established an agreed national definition of "gradueness" on hospitality management programmes. This suggests that student outcomes reflect the South East England Consortium's descriptors of gradueness together with the ability to achieve level 4 NVQs. Using other conceptual models, graduates are expected to negotiate the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), and demonstrate the qualities of reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983). They are, therefore, required to be practical and pragmatic in their actions, but also capable of analytical and theoretical thought.

Much current practice on hospitality management programmes has a robust record of developing "practitioners". Indeed the recent Higher Education Funding Council – England *Hospitality Review* (1998) recognised the central role and value of "laboratory work" in hospitality management programmes. This paper argues, however, that, if educators are to encourage "reflection", they need a strategy that recognises and builds from these students' learning style preferences. Success in producing graduates who are comfortable with reflection and theorising depends first on an informed analysis of the learning preferences of entrants. It also depends on the design of teaching strategies which move students learning through the experiential learning cycle (Lashley, 1995). Specifically, the paper reports on one approach to the design and delivery of hospitality management programmes.

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## Experiential learning

Kolb's explanation of experiential learning is a useful model for understanding the process of learning about the world: in particular, making reference to the preferences which individuals have about the way they prefer to learn and the implications that this holds for what they learn. Kolb (1984) provides a model which hospitality management educators might use as a basis for course modelling (Lashley, 1994). The Kolb model suggests that learners tend to have learning preferences that are located in one of four quadrants which are produced from features of personality. The degree of introversion/extroversion, and preferences towards using the left or right hand side of the brain are influential in producing preferred styles of learning which prioritise learning from the concrete or abstract and reflection or action. These shape student's learning styles and preferences for learning.

Whilst Kolb's model provides a useful framework for understanding learning style preferences, the research instrument with which to identify styles is somewhat difficult to use. Honey and Mumford (1982) using a similar conceptual framework have a much more student friendly instrument. In fact, this study adopted a revised version of the Honey and Mumford's 80-question test by allowing students to select numerically weighted responses (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Thus far unpublished work being undertaken in a project being conducted at both Leeds Metropolitan University and Nottingham Trent University suggests that students on hospitality management have strong preferences to learn from concrete, action based situations. These tendencies are so strong that, if not addressed, they can create difficulties in the development of reflection and theorising.

Table I reports on a sample of students on the first year of the hospitality programmes at Nottingham Business School. Students on

**Table 1**

Preferred learning styles of a sample of hospitality management students at Nottingham Business School (1995/96)

Strength of preference	Activist		Reflector		Theorist		Pragmatist	
	HND	BA	HND	BA	HND	BA	HND	BA
<b>Very strong preference</b>	5	5	1			1		1
<b>Strong preference</b>	6	6	1	1	1	0		0
<b>Moderate preference</b>	9	3	10	5	4	5	4	5
<b>Low preference</b>			6	7	13	8	14	8
<b>Very low preference</b>			2	1	2		2	
<b>Total respondents</b>	20	14	20	14	20	14	20	14

**Note:** Total population of 60 HND students and 36 BAIHM students

the Higher National Diploma in Hotel, Catering and Institutional Management and BA (Hons) International Hospitality Management programmes reveal similar preferences for Activist learning styles. In addition they also register low preferences for Theorist and Reflector learning styles – those qualities are essential in developing reflective practitioners. As stated earlier, these findings report only on a pilot study, but results from a similar exercise from Leeds Metropolitan University’s School of Tourism and Hospitality Management reveal similar findings – perhaps not surprisingly when we consider the concepts underpinning these models of learning style preference and the nature of work in hospitality industry.

Activist learners are described as tending “to act first and consider the consequences afterwards”, and “they tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer-term consolidation. They are gregarious people involving themselves with others ...” (Lashley, 1995, p. 16). Therefore, consistently with the model, they have extrovert tendencies, and are prone to use the right hand side of the brain. The personality traits which probably attract students to hospitality occupations also shape their learning style preferences.

Indeed these preferences are likely to have shaped learning experiences and educational outcomes at earlier stages. Learning style preferences may be a factor which influences the generally lower A level grade points of students entering hospitality management programmes. At Nottingham Trent University for example, the mean A level points for the cohort on the BAIHM sampled in Table I was 15.5 points. In the same year the average points for students entering the BA (Hons) Business Studies was 23.6 points.

The development of the “rounded learner” capable of being a reflective practitioner starts from a point where most students on hospitality programmes have no “natural” attraction to theoretical or reflective

thinking. It is essential, therefore, to adopt approaches to teaching and learning which start from an understanding of these preferences but which also move the students into reflective and theorising modes. The design of programmes, lecturer support for students and the delivery of learning experiences all need to be shaped to students’ learning preferences; a process through which learners: explore – assimilate findings – build findings into new ways of thinking – and shape actions in future (diverge – assimilate – converge – accommodate, Kolb, 1984).

Bawden (1991) goes on to develop the links between these ways of learning about the world by adding a third dimension which also has relevance in the hospitality, leisure and tourism context. The distinction between integration and separation is the focus of the investigation. Each represents ways of looking at the world. In the first case the assumption is that it is only possible to understand a situation by studying the whole system (holism), whilst in the second case the assumption is that the whole is far too complex and that understanding best develops from studying elements (reductionist). Modular courses designed round discrete semester based modules tend to reduce education to “bite-size” chunks of knowledge. In the extreme, lecturers deliver subject specific modules with little or no reference to wider objectives across the programme. The delivery of discrete abstract topics which have little apparent connection to the student’s world require levels of theorising and abstract conceptualisation which do not come naturally to these students. If unchanged, this approach can produce considerable learning difficulties for students who learn by preference through “concrete experience” (Kolb, 1984).

In conclusion the approach taken by the team in Nottingham originated from an understanding that the vast majority of students attracted to courses leading to hospitality management qualifications have

preferred learning styles which enjoy practical activity but who are less comfortable with theorising and reflection. The team has developed an approach to teaching and learning which builds from these preferences with the aim of developing reflective practitioners.

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### **Developing reflective practitioners?**

The learning and teaching strategy developed in Nottingham is informed by the experience of offering and managing these programmes since 1991. Programme design acknowledges students' preferred learning styles, is based on a critical analysis of past provision and aims to benefit all students from the "best practice" developed on the HND programme. Thus this paper reports on an approach which has been developed over several years and which is now being applied to the learning experiences of all students on hospitality management programmes. Specifically the strategy aims to:

- develop students who are "reflective practitioners" by working from students' preferred learning styles;
- set learning in applied contexts which assist learners to develop skills of reflection and theorising;
- support all students in learning to learn; and
- encourage the growth of independence and reflection in study.

In practice the approach involves attempts to overcome some of the potentially harmful effects of the introduction of a modular and semesterised structure which requires students to study six modules per semester. The study of six topics at a time can be problematic for most students. However, this can produce added difficulties for students who have preferences for more concrete modes of learning. Without proper planning and integration courses structured in this way can produce a suite of disjointed experiences where students focus only on the assessment package. In other words it is a recipe for producing mechanistic and instrumental learners who do what is needed to pass the course, but who do not engage in the learning experience.

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### **Cross modular themes**

One of the changes on which this paper reports relates to the introduction of integrating blocks of study at Levels One and Two of the programme. This approach has

proved to be a successful feature of the higher national programme and the team has introduced the approach to the undergraduate courses, particularly in first two years of academic study. Figure 1 provides an example of the current final year of the higher national diploma programme. In essence the approach takes one set context, usually based on a "real" organisation and the core modules each are focused at the context.

In this example, the first six weeks use the students' own work placement experience, and the modular contents explore issues which encourage the student to reflect upon and analyse experiences. A series of assignments provide written and verbal reports of the themes taken from the core modules. In Block B the theme for seven weeks involves the students studying and reporting on the service quality of major high street hospitality retail brands. As part of this exercise they act as "mystery diners" and their report brings together concepts and theories developed in the core modules.

Block C provides an integrating context for the whole of the final semester. The assessment package is based round a hospital "hotel services" context which provides both the setting for developing knowledge and understanding, and the scenario for a suite of assignments including the final examination.

This integrated approach has been fundamental to aiding student learning, because it meets the learner's learning style preferences. It sets students' learning experiences in concrete situations where it is possible to apply theories and concepts to the analysis of "real" situations. It is "holistic" and students can more easily recognise the inter-linkages between various subjects and their impacts within the context set. The nature of both the learning activities and the suite of assessed tasks encourage students to reflect and theorise. The approach, therefore, is key to the team's aspiration to develop hospitality managers who are "reflective practitioners".

By Level Three experience has shown that students are able to become more independent. The success of so many former HND students on the final year of the degree programme bears witness to the strengths of the approach. Table II shows that students entering the one year top-up degree from the higher national programme achieve comparable degree classification profiles to students with higher initial A level grades.

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### **Learning to learn**

An additional benefit of this cross modular and co-ordinated approach across the core

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modules in Level One and Level Two is that the team are able to plan the development of student learning. As was shown above, the cross modular contexts assist in providing students with concrete contexts within which to build study. It is also possible, through the planning of learning and teaching activities, to move students round the various stages of the Kolb's (1986) "Experiential Learning Cycle": explore – assimilate findings – building findings into new ways of thinking and shape actions in future.

The planned stages of activities assist students in improving the quality of their outputs in the form of written and verbal communications. This has proven to be an effective way of developing students' study skills in a way which is realistic to their needs. The text *Improving Study Skills: A Competence Approach* (Lashley, 1995) is used as the basis for addressing a variety of issues, through the co-ordinated organisation of the learning process. In the early stages of the programme students are required to address issues relating to their preferred learning styles, organisation of study activities, accessing information and the presentation of

findings in a variety of media. In the second and third levels of study, students are increasingly required to undertake research, gather information and report findings in independent studies.

Experience of adopting this approach with HND students suggests that it has assisted students in lifting the quality of their outputs. In particular the approach helps students to develop a good range of business related communication skills, and those students who go on to the "top-up" degree programme are able to quickly make the adjustment to the requirements of a final year degree programme.

### Group advisory sessions

Given the central requirement to work with others in most work organisations, activities will frequently involve group co-ordination of individual efforts. In the past, group work has presented students with some genuine difficulties. Support is given to students in dealing with these problems through the planned activities and the learning strategies involved. Students are organised in small permanent "work teams" (four/five students) and two of these comprise a GAS Group (Group Advisory Session). The support of the Group Advisory Tutor further strengthen these activities. In most cases, these arrangements have proved to be successful in helping students build harmonious, self-disciplining, working relationships. Feedback from students registers high approval ratings for this aspect of the programme.

The Group Advisory Tutor provides a mechanism for giving individual students the benefit of guidance and advice. The GAS Tutor works with a group of eight/ten students for one full academic year, and is able to monitor progress, encourage student reflection, assist student learning, assess common skill development, provide a focus for the students, and acts as a source of knowledge about individual students. Team members report that the approach has also been useful in removing the anonymity which can be a feature of large modular courses. Thus, every students is well-known to at least one member of staff.

The GAS Group and GAS Tutor approach is now applied to all first level students. Undergraduate students benefit from the support which this provides, and the approach assists students in making the adjustments needed for supervised work experience. At Level Two the approach is continued for the students on the Higher National Diploma programme. Students on

**Figure 1**

Example of the integrated cross-modular approach – Level Two

Semester 1			
Property & Facilities Management	Food & Beverage Management	Marketing for Hospitality Management	Financial Management for Hospitality
<b>BLOCK A The Work Placement Organisation</b>			
<b>BLOCK B Quick Service Restaurants</b>			
Semester 2			
Hospitality Management	Human Resources in Hospitality	Hospitality Decision Making	Rooms Management
<b>BLOCK C Excellence in Hospitality Services</b>			

**Table II**

Comparing student performance on BAHCM, BAIHM and BABS courses academic year 1997/98 Nottingham Business School

	BAHCM [one year top-up]		BAIHM [four-year sandwich]		BABS [four-year sandwich]	
<b>Av. A level entry points</b>	Mean grade of degree result	Av. A level points	Mean grade of degree result	Av. A level points	Mean grade of degree result	
<b>8.1</b>	58.5	15.5	59.2	23.6	60.3	

the undergraduate course are allocated Personal Tutors, but the GAS Tutor system is not applied. Undergraduate students are more quickly able to make the adjustment to independent approaches to study.

## Evaluation

The foregoing has reported on the experiences of developing students on hospitality management programmes in Nottingham. Staff at Nottingham Trent University and at Clarendon College, Nottingham have offered the HND in Hotel Catering and Institutional Management since 1985/86. However, the approach outlined above was introduced after programmes were redesigned and first offered in 1991/92. In particular, the widening of the intake to include an A level entry route and the development of a one-year "top-up" degree make it possible to study student progress through all three levels of undergraduate study, and to compare outcomes with students who were taken in with higher A level profiles.

Table III highlights the preferred learning styles of students completing the programme in 1998. It must be stressed that this is not tracking precisely the same individuals who reported in Table I. The full study intends to do that over the full period of a student's study experience. It is possible, therefore, that changes in preferred learning styles are due to changes in maturation rates and not due to the teaching and learning strategies adopted. Having made that caveat, the results in Table III confirm the team's impressions that students who have experienced this approach adjust more quickly to the final year of the degree programme. Indeed Table II confirms that students on the HND + "top-up" programme have entered with lower A level points than students on both the BA International Hospitality Management and the BA (Hons) Business Studies but come close to matching their final degree classification profile.

**Table III**

Preferred learning styles of a sample of BA (Hons) Hotel & Catering Management students at Nottingham Business School (1997/98)

Strength of preference	Activist	Reflector	Theorist	Pragmatist
Very strong preference		2	3	2
Strong preference	2	4	3	3
Moderate preference	10	5	4	6
Low preference		1	2	1
Very low preference				
Total respondents	12	12	12	12

Note: results based on 12 respondents from 27 students on the programme

As indicated above, caution needs to be exercised in assessing these results. The whole study process needs to be tracked carefully, and all the linked claims explored, but these results do suggest that the emphasis of learning style preferences has changed over the period of study. Indeed results suggest that students appear to have reduced their strong preference for the Activist learning style and increased their preferences for Reflector, Theorist, and Pragmatist styles of learning. Analysis of individual results shows that there has been a levelling of learning style preferences in many instances. Individual students are reporting less of a preference for one style or other.

Again, caution needs to be exercised with these results as there may be a number of independent variables at work which influence these results. One factor might be variations in examiner expectations on different modules. Results in this case are subject to internal moderation and six of the 12 final year modules are common to both sets of students. In this case hotel and catering students' performance is being assessed by main stream Business School lecturers.

## Conclusions

This paper reports on the early stages of a study which could well inform hospitality management educational practice in the new millennium. The paper suggests that students on higher national and undergraduate hospitality management courses have preferred learning styles which indicate preferences for learning in concrete settings. On entry to programmes of study they have low preferences for theoretical learning and reflection in general. Objectives being set by governmental, educational and industrial bodies suggests that future managers need to be reflective practitioners, and this issue will have to be addressed by hospitality educators.

The paper suggests if educators are to meet targets to achieve general standards of graduates which require theoretical and critical evaluation as well as the demonstration of practical and organisational skills, they need to be systematic about their understanding of students' learning preferences. They need to address these learning preferences through the adoption of course design and delivery strategies which support and develop students towards desired objectives.

This paper has reported on one set of educational concepts which can be useful in

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tracking students' learning styles and in encouraging the development of more reflective approaches to study and management tasks. It has also reported on one approach to managing these processes. The use of cross-modular scenarios which provide contexts for the development of more reflective and theoretical approaches to learning are designed to address the learning needs of Activist learners. Similarly the adoption of deliberate strategies to develop student learning skills, together with directed support through the use of Group Advisory Sessions and tutorials, assist students in broadening their approaches to study.

Fundamentally this paper is not making claims to have discovered "the" way to develop educational strategies for hospitality management students. The paper shares the experiences of one team of educators and the early results of a pilot study designed to provide a better understanding of student learning development. In the long run the paper invites other educators and practitioners to engage in debate and to join in some joint multi-site research projects

which may assist future educators to better understand their task.

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