To be published in "Journal of hospitality & tourism education", which should be cited to refer to this work.
DOI:10.1080/10963758.2021.1963739

The Best of Both Worlds: Experiential Problem-based Learning Approaches in Hospitality Education

Nicole Rosenkranz[a]*

[a]*Strategy & Entrepreneurship, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne, HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Lausanne, Switzerland*

Dr. Nicole Rosenkranz

EHL (Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne)

Route de Cojonnex 18 | 1000 Lausanne 25 | Switzerland

Tel.: +41 21 785 15 50

Email: Nicole.rosenkranz@ehl.ch

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the editor Prof. Miyoung Jeong as well as the three anonymous reviewers for their commitment and supporting comments. Further, my gratitude and thanks go to all the students that have provided their time and made their insights available to make this research possible. All remaining errors are the authors own.

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Hospitality education has long integrated experiential and problem-based learning for their positive effects on students' learning outcomes. Yet, these types of learning have inherent shortcomings – while experiential learning is mostly conducted outside the classroom and thereby costly, time consuming and complex in ensuring learning outcomes, in-class problem-based learning suffers from an abstraction from reality and lack of authenticity. To address these shortcomings, this study conducted an in-class experiential problem-based learning activity within the corporate strategy class in 2018 at a university in Switzerland. The study showcases how a combined learning approach allows to marry the best of both worlds. Further, these insights contribute to research on experiential and problem-based learning by extending knowledge beyond *what* the benefits of both approaches are to *how* these benefits are generated. The inductive method applied generates insights that explicate the levers in making the learning process successful and warrants important boundary conditions.

Keywords: Experiential problem-based learning, industry collaboration, hospitality real-world challenge

Introduction

The hospitality industry is flourishing, employing one out of every ten employees globally (Gursoy, Rahman, & Swanger, 2012; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). Hence, it is not surprising that enrolment numbers in the leading hospitality schools are thriving and that many general business schools have been introducing specialized master programs with a hospitality major (Lugosi & Jameson, 2017). Another trend that has recently emerged is the fact that hospitality graduates have been popular candidates even with industries that are not considered the traditional core business segments such as hotels, food and beverage companies or travel and transportation, but rather general service-oriented industries such as insurance, banking or retail.

One of the reasons students with a hospitality education have been enjoying a high degree of employability and are considered to hold a strong competence set, may reside in the balance that these curricula strike in marrying the benefits of practical training with the increasingly theoretical rigor of a university business degree program (e.g., Morrison & O'Mahony, 2003; Ruhanen, 2005). A cornerstone of most of these hospitality degrees, is the direct application of theoretical material through the use of different experiential and problem-based learning approaches. Both learning approaches are designed to make the student an active participant in the learning process rather than being passively exposed to material (e.g., Boer & Otting, 2011; Lin, Kim, Qiu, & Ren, 2017). Shifting the responsibility of the learning experience to the student, has shown to kindle higher levels of motivation and curiosity (Eyler, 2009). Further research has documented higher confidence of the student and in the learned material (Armstrong, 2003), the acquisition of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Lyu, Li, & Wang, 2016), as well as essential soft skills, such as communication and teamwork (Lin et al., 2017).

While an extensive body of research has pointed out the benefits with regard to achieving students' learning outcomes, there are inherent limitations to both experiential and problem-based learning approaches. Most experiential learning approaches are conducted outside the classroom in the form of field trips, internships, or cooperative education, making them costly, time consuming and inherently complex in ensuring planned learning outcomes (Croy, 2009; Xie, 2004). On the other hand, experiential learning activities, which take place within the confines of a classroom, often integrate a problem-solving element and take the form of role-play, games, simulations or case studies (Luy et al., 2016). While these forms of experiential learning mitigate the above shortcomings, they often suffer from a limited representation of reality and lack of authenticity. While companies are generally involved when designing cases or simulations, there is an absence of integration of the company in the learning process when in-class experiential learning is applied. This is a crucial shortcoming as the interaction with company representatives makes the case "come to life" as well as allows the class to discuss different options to one challenge.

To address these empirical shortcomings as well as to further extend research on experiential and problem-based learning, this study addresses the following research question: "How do industry-centered experiential problem-based learning (EPBL) approaches accomplish the reported benefits in light of their operational limitations?"

The empirical context to study the above research question was provided by a university in Switzerland, which conducts an industry-centered EPBL activity, a strategy project in its final academic year. This strategy project is conducted in the context of the corporate strategy course in conjunction with a hospitality partner and stands out in that students work on a real-life problem the company is facing at the time of the course. In doing so, this study contributes to the broader discussion of experiential learning, specifically problem-based activities that are conducted within the context of the classroom.

In doing so, this study makes three contributions. First, this study connects the two streams of research on experiential learning and problem-based learning, creating a bifurcation that demonstrates how industry-centered EPBL combines the best of both worlds. Second, the inductive approach chosen sheds light on which levers in the EPBL process drive the achievement of positive learning outcomes attributed to both learning approaches. This moves the discussion away from *what* benefits these learning approaches have to *how* these benefits are created. Finally, the process analysis also points to important boundary conditions that need to be met in order to support the student body as well as the supporting hospitality company to benefit from the activity.

In sum, this study allows hospitality and tourism educators to engage in the larger discussion on how hospitality schools spearhead the design of pedagogical training that empowers students to become well-educated employees who are able to address the dynamics of the hospitality industry through critical thinking skills and stewardship (Claussen & Andersson, 2019; Sheldon & Fesenmaier, 2015).

Literature Review

Experiential learning is a collective term that comprises different teaching approaches that, at their core, define students as active creators of their learning outcome (Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2002; Kolb, 1982). In fact, experiential learning is defined as a "process by which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience; knowledge results from the combination of understanding and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Many of these experiences rely on the interaction or full immersion with industry partners outside of the classroom to enhance the learning effect through vibrant, multidimensional approaches (Lin et al., 2017). These may include, but are not limited to, internships, field trips, exchange programs or service learning. Academic subjects and practical skills can also be taught to students through in-class experiential learning such as role play, simulations, gaming or case

studies. To this end, Lyu et al. (2016) provide an extensive summary of different experiential learning approaches along with their definition and anticipated learning outcomes.

Most research conducted in the field of experiential learning has centered on the anticipated benefits of experiential learning in hospitality education. Specifically, research has focused on the ability of hospitality education to bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge and practical application, which is a concern that is often brought up by hospitality educators (Lin et al., 2017; Maier & Thomas, 2013; Ruhanen, 2005). The benefits of experiential learning approaches on hospitality include the focal professional skills hospitality graduates need to have to be effective, efficient and service-oriented citizens of the hospitality community. Researchers, who have focused on the study of approaches outside the classroom report strong effects on professional growth, higher relevance of the learned material to the individual student, and behavioral grooming through increased career awareness (Eyler, 2009; Feinstein et al., 2002). For instance, in 2017 Lin, Kim, Qiu and Ren found that the engagement in a service learning project triggered the development of professional competences, effective communication skills and ethical leadership. Experiential learning in the classroom creates a more controversial yet controlled learning experience, where knowledge retention is higher and interpersonal and team skills can be practiced in a risk-free environment (Feinstein et al., 2002; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). Richardson and Kleiner (1992), for instance, found that engaging students in role-play leads to higher knowledge retention rates, which may be explained by the observation that personal involvement in an activity increases motivation.

Although the benefits of experential learning are both empirically and theoretically irrefutable, several shortcomings should be mentioned. Most evidently, all activities that are conducted outside the classroom impose dramatically higher coordination efforts on the institution, and particularly the faculty. Costs, time intensity and a burden on the institution

to ensure students reach the anticipated learning outcomes in a complex setup pose challenges (Croy, 2009; Xie, 2004). Further, as most outside-of-class experiences are over a prolonged period of time, they constitute learning approaches complementary to in-class activities (with the exception of field trips). While in-class experiential learning activities fall less prey to the above limitations, there are other potential shortcomings, most notably the level of abstraction from reality and lack of authenticity. Whether gaming, simulations or case study, the vast majority of activities are designed around a problem-based approach with a finite set of variables that fail, however, to fully simulate the complexity of reality. Consequently, the learning—while enhanced—falls short of the true complexity a student would face when exposed to a real decision-making scenario. A second limitation of in-class activities lies in the fact that they are designed with an implicit ideal solution. This may originate, as with case studies, from the historic account they typically illustrate and the chosen path that had led to a successful outcome. Prior research points to this disadvantage, as students may "view the case as unrealistic, they may have trouble recognizing the applicability to them. It could be also that the solutions do not always apply to real-life situations" (Richardson & Kleiner, 1992, p. 24). In sum, there seems to be a trade-off between the controlled in-class learning environment (where learning outcomes are likely to be achieved) and the benefits of out-of-classroom immersion in the industry. As McCarthy and McCarthy (2006) deduct from their empirical study comparing out-of-class and in-class experiential learning activities, "students found the job-shadowing experience to be more helpful than the case studies at the 95% confidence level" (p. 203). In other words, the rigor in the learning environment comes at the cost of the relevance of the outside experience.

One way that the relevance of in-class experiential learning could be increased is by incorporating industry-centered experiential problem-based approaches into the curriculum. This would confront students with real-life challenges, either industry-level (e.g. a common

challenge faced in an industry, like digitalization in hospitality) or concrete firm-level problems (e.g. a five-star hotel brand's internationalization challenge). The core of the activity relies on the perceived relevance of the problem statement, creating a condition within which students feel inclined to apply and test their acquired theoretical knowledge. This approach creates a deep learning experience, which allows students to convert isolated knowhow into transferable skill sets (Ruhanen, 2005). As Claussen and Andersson (2019) point out, students "receive a holistic view of the problems to be solved by bridging the theoretical knowledge and the learning by doing" (p.132).

Research Method

Research Context

As the knowledge of the process of EPBL is limited, the research question warrants an inductive research approach. Specifically, this study seeks to shed light on the learning process that maximizes the effectiveness of industry-centered EPBL. As such, the context particularly matters and the theoretical constructs developed are 'hard-to-measure' (Eisenhardt, Graebner & Sonenshein, 2016). Hence, the research question required a prolonged engagement within the context of study and a level of depth that large-scale deductive work would be unlikely to uncover (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

The empirical part of this paper is based on an industry-centered EPBL project executed within the context of a corporate strategy course. Students in their last year of studies assemble themselves into small teams of five members to function as a strategic consulting team to a hospitality company. They are exposed to a real-life challenge that is determined by both the supporting company and the faculty of the course prior to the start of the class. In the specific case of this study, the class under research conducted a strategic repositioning of a hotel brand and its subsequent geographic expansion. The degree of authenticity of the projects was evidenced by the fact that students had to sign an NDA on

the material they would receive on the projects, signaling the sensitivity of the information provided and realistic nature of the projects they would be working on.

In addition to the general exposure to actual challenges in the industry, the activity teaches students about the complexity involved in making real-life decisions. Strategy is an umbrella subject, meaning it draws on multiple individual disciplines like economics, finance, marketing, etc. when analytically devising where a company is or should be strategically heading. Consequently, the project requires students to move away from textbook decision making and forces them to justify their choices, individually as well as collectively, with the knowledge that there is no one perfect solution. In sum, the real-life exposure and the necessity to translate theoretical concepts into managerially sound decisions speaks to the skills and competences needed to successfully manage strategically complex situation, particularly in a dynamic environment such as the hospitality industry.

Data Collection

The data collection for this study took place in the context of the corporate strategy class in 2018. The study is based on three main data collection sources, namely observations, semi-structured interviews and archival data. The data collection efforts started with participant observations throughout the entire duration of the strategy project. This full immersion is particularly important for 'hard-to-measure' concepts such as perceptions and where process capture requires a prolonged exposure to the context of interest. As Eisenhardt, Graebner and Sonenshein (2016) highlight, "concepts such as identity, image, paradox, and *perception* [highlight added by the author] present measurement difficulties because they are rarely available in archival sources and difficult to access using other sources […] Instead, precise identification and measurement may require contextual understanding and enough time to establish rapport with informants" (p.1117). Having fully immersed in the strategy project, formal and informal interviews were conducted, which are described in greater detail below.

The interviews helped to compensate for the two shortcomings of participant observations. First, it is not possible to record class interactions, or participate in out-of-classroom group work. This inevitably results in the loss of detail, especially with regard to individuals' perceptions of the project process. However, knowledge of these details emerged in part through the interviews and archival data, making it possible to receive insights into these unobservable, otherwise lost insights. Second, collecting interview data counterbalanced potential biases, which stem from the active involvement in the observation. While participant observation provides for a great level of detail, it may jeopardize the neutrality of the participant observer and therefore involve the risk of 'going native' (Yin, 2009). Finally, anonymous student evaluations as well as material produced by students in the process of the project were used as a form of archival data, which complements both observational and interview data in that it provides a neutral and more objective backdrop against which the information from the other two sources could be triangulated. Beyond the limitation inherent to observational data, archival data also allowed to mitigate the potential for impression management or retrospective sensemaking from interviewees, making it possible to assess internal consistency. All data sources and their use are provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interviews

Formal, semi-structured as well as informal interviews of 20 minutes on average were conducted with 17 students. Following a theory-driven sampling approach (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), students from different small groups were interviewed to receive a holistic understanding of how the project conducted was affecting the individual learning trajectory.

While formal interviews were supported by a set of questions that remained

consistent over the full length of the data collection, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, allowing new ideas to emerge during the interview as a result of the interviewee's responses to the open-ended questions. The questions raised with students focused on the project progress, the learning opportunities and challenges, the industry exposure and areas of improvement. The interview guide included the following questions: "Could you please provide me with an overall impression of the strategy project?", "How would you describe the process?", "Have there been any challenges, if so, which?", "Is there anything you like to point out as a strength or limitation of the strategy project?", "How would you describe your learning outcome of the strategy project?". Similarly, company representatives were probed on the perceived performance of students on the project, the overall assessment of accomplishment across teams both qualitatively and quantitatively, as well as feedback on possible areas of improvement. Questions posed to the different company representatives included the following: (a) "What is your overall assessment of the collaboration with our academic institution through group projects focusing on the concrete challenge you are currently facing?", (b) "How relevant/useful are the insights gained from the group projects for your company?", (c) "Where to you see particular strength in the delivery of the projects", and (d) "What do you identify as the critical skills and/or knowledge gaps that are most observable across the group deliveries?".

At the end of the course an unstructured focus group with the entire class was conducted in the form of a feedback session during which students discussed the project first in the presence of the company representatives and afterwards in a separate session only with the faculty. The corporate session would last 60 minutes, while student-only discussion would last 90 minutes, leading to an overall review of 150 minutes (~ totaling 2.5 h).

Observational Data

Observational data was collected during class time of the data collection effort. These observations allowed for inside information, which is commonly not accessible to external researchers. As a consequence, a deep understanding of the modus operandi in different groups was established. For instance, insights gained ranged from information on bottlenecks, general struggles with the project definition, process challenges, to the interpersonal effects on the learning process.

Archival Data

The archival data totaled 12 pages of qualitative commentary as well as two quantitative assessments obtained from the anonymous student evaluation form. Perhaps the most relevant quantitative question was "The teacher uses an effective teaching method (or methods) to deliver the course". Further documentation included PowerPoint slide decks, text documents, company web pages, internal company documentation and publicly available information from tertiary sources. While they provided objective evidence on their own, they were also used to both substantiate subjective evidence provided in the commentary from students and triangulate evidence collected through observations.

Data Analysis

To distill the theoretical insights gained from this study, a three-step data analysis procedure was applied in this study, to move from "a highly personalized account [...] to one that was more abstract and analytical" (Pratt, 2000, p. 462). Throughout the data collection and data analysis, a continuous 'iteration' was performed to remain loyal to the research focus, the collected data and extant literature (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). Finally, the analysis conducted was put in perspective with prior research relevant to experiential and problem-based learning. Such comparison revealed the most relevant findings of this case study. Post analysis, insights were reported back to students of the corporate strategy course and

discussed with other strategy faculty. This allowed to corroborate the theoretical insights gained both from the perspective of the interview partners who had experienced the project as well as a more theoretical reflection from faculty who had conducted the strategy project themselves and were thus proficient in the pedagogical approach applied.

Step 1: The beginning of the data analysis consisted of shaping the raw data obtained from the different sources into a coherent picture of the process. The result was a holistic reflection of the chronological process students were experiencing. The objective of this preliminary analysis was to understand how the project was perceived, how students engaged with the material provided, how they structured their approach and what challenges they were facing along the way. Thus, the outputs of this first step were highly descriptive.

Step 2: The focus lay on detecting recurring topics that were mentioned by different groups. The first coding of the data intended to identify the key constructs in the data. This first level of coding resulted in more than 100 codes that were reflective of diverse aspects of the EPBL process. Where possible, concept labelling was kept in-vivo, to remain faithful to respondents' responses, to the greatest extent possible. Subsequently, to clarify the data structure, these initial codes were clustered into a first level abstraction, reflecting topics such as emotions (e.g., anxiety, stress, frustration, pride), process steps (e.g., research, data, sources, pre-emptive solution), and perceived benefits and limitations of the project (e.g., authenticity, complexity, ambiguity, task difficulty). By reviewing internal consistency of data clusters and relevance to the research question, one could exclude irrelevant themes, merge others and extract the core elements (Miles et al., 2014).

Step 3: The last step of the analysis was to abstract the learning from the concrete information to connect first-order codes into higher abstract levels relating to one another. This phase sought to identify the relationship among themes in a final objective of producing the most consistent 'generalizable' findings (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). The final step of the

analytical process consisted in grouping the established second order categories into theoretical aggregate dimensions that synthesize the EPBL process. The study themes and data structure that resulted from this process is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Findings

Setting the Stage

An aspect that excites students from the outset of the strategy course is the opportunity to work on a real-life challenge and present their solution to company representatives:

> "I did enjoy the opportunity to present in front of external people in a real-life case scenario" (Student A)
>
> "The fact that we could present a new strategic action to a hotel company and also meet with the executives was an absolutely great experience" (Student B)

Given that the institution of this study fosters an environment that is characterized by continuous academic and corporate exchange, students do indeed gain real exposure to representatives of hospitality companies. Still, the project adds a more important layer to the exchange that is centrally driven by the fact that the company functions as an active sponsor of the project and has highlighted the relevance of the students' solutions and their potential as viable action plans. This turns an exercise into a responsibility for students. That students perceive this project as authentic and relevant was encapsulated in this student's comment:

> "I am curious to get a follow-up from the company afterwards in case they implement any of the students' suggestions" (Student F)

Developing an entrepreneurial mindset

Students generally want to obtain first and foremost high grades and receive positive feedback. In other words, they don't want to fail. At the beginning of the project, failure had

a strong negative connotation and from the outset of the project the ability to succeed was pivotal. Yet, in a project that only provided a loose definition of the challenge at hand, students quickly realized that this was a much harder criterion to define. What marked a success over a failure? In fact, the biggest concern students had when first exposed to the strategy project, was the difficulty to define what would make for a perfect project outcome. As one student recalled:

> "I was in conflict between 'I know there is not a right, not a single right answer', but we were thinking 'I am sure [the faculty] (anonymized by the author) has that one answer that [the faculty] would like to hear more than the others. So, we need to figure out which one is the favorite and get that one to do better." (Student P).

This was not for the lack of guidance though learning objectives, official project guidelines, or grading rubrics for each of the deliverables. Students did not struggle with the evaluation criteria or the material provided by the company, they struggled with a project that had no clear defined end result. As the following two students pointed out:

> "One difficulty with the strategy project was to assess the boundaries and the scope of the project." (Student H)
>
> "The project really went from A to Z. It was not just market research it also required to understand what you needed to look at when expanding or growing a hotel company or even buy a hotel, the whole financial aspects, the whole research behind it. Whether or not it's feasible." (Student M)

The project sponsor, a large European hotel brand, had provided students with detailed information – their performance, internal memoranda, competitor definition, business model outline etc. – comparable to what they would have given to a consultancy company they would hire for the task the students were charged with. Overall, students were looking at a hospitality brand that was under distress and required strategic repositioning. Beyond this point, students were asked to collect data and further define for themselves what

it concretely meant to address this challenge:

> "The kick-off was really the hardest – getting our heads around what we were doing. Because it was not an easy one to start off with, but the less easy ones are the most interest ones. At least that is how we felt afterwards." (Student M)

In many ways the strategy project was increasingly perceived as an insurmountable problem that seemed to have no boundaries. Students began to realize that this project differed from alternative case studies or simulations on which they had previously worked. Some students reflected on the fact that the educational framework had mostly been in line with acquiring 'ways of doing things', which reflected the dominance of standard operating procedures (SOPs) common in the hospitality industry. They highlighted at various occasions that the requirements of the project stood out when compared with other exercises they had been exposed to thus far.

> "There was ambiguity – that was unpleasant and it was not very common to feel that way. In most of [the institution's] courses you have a problem and there is a proper answer to it, a proper way to reply". (Student I)

> "You really needed to see the big picture and not just the details, on which we generally like to focus on in hospitality." (Student C)

In order to provide students with an intermediary feedback, but also to prepare them for the questions they could face in the final presentation, individual feedback sessions were conducted. These feedback sessions allowed teams to present their data collection and preliminary assessment. A pattern that became evident was that some student groups had pre-emptively moved from the definition of the problem to possible solutions. They had done so in an attempt to control for the perceived ambiguity. This, however, posed a problem: students had already settled on a solution that they intended to pursue and then retrospectively search for data that would support the chosen trajectory. This approach to the challenge, however, prevented students from defending their choice over alternative solution

routes that may have been equally, if not better, suited to tackle the challenge at hand. Consequently, most teams were asked to go back to the assessment side and develop a sound argument that would justify a chosen solution, i.e. 'why' it was better than the other alternatives and 'how' this was supported by relevant criteria. Moreover, they had to prove that the criteria they had chosen were appropriate given what the organization was aspiring to accomplish. As the following student summarized it briefly:

> "We had multiple situations where our ideas were leading us into a dead end - some of them would not fit the customer profile others were not really solving the problem…and that meant we had to go back to the beginning." (Student C).
>
> "We played devil's advocate in our team. We looked at individual ideas, what did not work about them and then took them apart. Then we often rebuilt new solutions from individual prior components." (Student N).

Overall, one of the takeaways that students mentioned both during the semester and in the course evaluation was the need to fundamentally challenge the way in which they were approaching problems. Rather than taking the provided information as a given, they had to assess which information was relevant and what was missing. This particularly held true for their understanding of customer centricity – the core of hospitality training and education.

Training 'Strategic' Customer Centricity

At the core of hospitality education and training is the 'customer'. Service and its delivery are inherently tied to understanding the customer in order to excel in hospitality. Students had come to the strategy course with a clear understanding of customer service, instilled by years of practical and university training, corporate exchange, internships and class exercises. Yet, a point that students had never considered was that there was a difference between the strategic design of customer centricity and the operational side. On the operational level, the execution of customer service was clear. Operationally it meant to

understand, ideally anticipate, the needs of a given customer and excel in the providing a solution. Yet, as students started the strategy project they realize that part of the challenge lay in the fact that the customer had never been properly defined in the first place and would likely need to change. Consequently, the operational side of the customer services could not be defined without first identifying to whom they wanted to cater. This became apparent in multiple conversations with students, as the following quotes highlight:

> "I remember we came to you as we were struggling with defining these different personas, whom we will be actually catering to. I remember this probably took most of our time." (Student I).
>
> "I believe we are really good at customer relationships, but when it comes to customer segmentation and understanding customer profiles that was posing a challenge for us." (Student C).

As much as customer centricity was second nature to the students, their conception was largely centered on the operational level with an existing customer base. Now, they were forced to decide to whom they wished to cater before defining what would qualify as proper customer service. In many interviews, students voiced that it was as difficult to choose their target market as it was to decide whom not to focus on. Students were hesitant to define a clear market for their project for fear of alienating other 'potential' customers. Yet, they had to acknowledge that a 'jack of all trades' would turn their project into 'a master of none'.

Learning to appreciate Ambiguity

Students in many hospitality programs (i.e., also at this study's institution) conduct internships. Students generally come back highly excited and motivated. They have experienced the management side of some of the leading hospitality companies in the world and been exposed to daily tasks in the working environment where they apply what they had learned in the classroom. Yet, even on the basis of this exposure, the expectations with

which students went into the strategy project were challenged early through the perceived ambiguity. In internships they were working alongside managers, in the case of the challenge they had to make their own decisions. For many students, that felt like an alienation from prior experience. The below comment exemplifies a request regularly expressed:

> "My team and I are not sure how to tackle the research for the project. Do we have to implement a new [hotel] (anonymized by the author) somewhere else? We are wondering if we have to base ourselves purely on academic articles or can we also use any type of information? Could you kindly let us know if we are on the right track or if there is another way to proceed?" (Student M)

> "Two sets of data would give your two different answers […] we were wondering which one do we go with." (Student P)

In many interactions that would then follow either in coaching sessions with the teaching assistant or informal conversations, it was obvious that students were motivated to engage with the problem, but felt overwhelmed in defining from which angle to tackle the problem first. Students were continuously encouraged to make assumptions based on data they either had or were in the position to collect from secondary sources, which would allow them to narrow down the aspects that would need consideration in their further assessment. Often students echoed the following comment:

> "My team and myself were inclined to tie in many more current courses into the project which went beyond the strategy course." (Student H)

> "It was difficult to really understand the problem we were solving to determine one correct answer. I have the feeling, we as hospitality students, are really good at giving answers to concrete questions, but with these open scenarios it was much more challenging" (Student C)

Additionally, students were made aware of the benefits of an analytically reached solution, which would empower them to support their course of action with objective lines of argument and data. While corporate representatives may still challenge their ideas, it would

be on the grounds of a well-founded analysis that they would not need to fear. Rather than assuming that being challenged by the company would mean a mistake or the wrong solution (and hence in their understanding a failure), they were encouraged that being challenge could equally mean that the company was trying to understand which options they had considered, allowing them to follow their decision-making process. To expand on this exchange, the project included an intermediary formative assessment allowing students to present their acquired information. These meetings regularly pointed to the difficulty of students working under high uncertainty and ambiguity with a strong desire to operate with a tightly controlled outline instead. This was voiced by various students:

> "It would have been better if we had more help/coaching on our strategy challenge instead of 1 one-on-one session" (Student E)

> "The challenge was a bit vague thus making it a lot more challenging than it should be, it's taking way too much time for it to be crushed by the executives of the hotel" (Student G)

Yet, as student groups reverted back to collecting more supporting data, their ability to defend their initial solution became feasible or new solutions appeared that allowed them to detect a potential success and ability to narrow down their options:

> "Understanding what is working with the company and what is not working with the company. Not necessarily seeing what to do, but what not to do." (Student M)

Increasingly they were in the position to argue for or against alternatives based on solid data they had assessed. Students were reflecting on the trajectory they had gone through during the strategy challenge and acknowledged that the experience had been highly demanding because it had pointed them to the difference between the perceived reality with the boundaries of a hospitality education and the reality of the hospitality industry. Further it had highlighted the stark difference between making decisions in an internship under the

supervision of a manager versus forming and defending a decision without help. This was reflected in the following feedback:

> "The challenge is hard but put us in a real-life situation and able to train us to face challenging and stressful situation. (Student J)

> "For a student project this was the closest to reality you can get." (Student A)

Closing Comments

At the end of the project the client was asked about the results obtained from the project. The company representatives highlighted that different elements of the analysis pointed them towards new avenues to pursue, allowed to confirm an initial idea that had been internally proposed. Still, the project not only urged a sense of stewardship with students, it also spoke to a broader skill development. While the strategy challenge involved a high degree of ambiguity and difficulty of making decisions in complex environment, the ability to overcome these hurdles and arriving at a solution that was defendable in front of industry experts improved students' confidence substantially. As two students summarized:

> "The project really helped me understand the course material and I really enjoyed the fact that the challenge was done for a real-life project as this encouraged motivation to learn and gave me more confidence to potentially pursue a career involving strategy/consulting upon graduation." (Student H)

> "It was not only been beneficial for the last semester, but for myself now as it has stayed with me. It certainly has paved my path to where I am now." (Student M)

Discussion

In hospitality education, frequently makes use of learning types – such as experiential learning or problem-based learning – that define students as active agents in their learning trajectory (e.g., Boer & Otting, 2011; Lin et al., 2017). Indeed, these learning types focus on bridging the divide between academic rigor and practical relevance, driving many positive

learning outcomes and, as often noted, a high level of employability (e.g., Armstrong, 2003; Eyler, 2009; Lyu et al., 2016). Yet, the execution of both types of learning have inherent shortcomings – while experiential learning is mostly conducted outside the classroom and thereby costly, time consuming and complex in ensuring the achievement of defined learning outcomes, in-class problem-based learning suffers from an abstraction from reality and lack of authenticity. Hence, while prior research reports a wide range of positive effects of these different types of learning on soft and hard skill acquisition as well as an increased level of motivation, little is known about *how* these effects come about.

This study's institution incorporates an industry-centered EPBL activity in the form of a strategy project, which seems to be speaking to the relevance and authenticity generally experienced in outside experiences, while complementing the rigor of in-class problem-based learning. This study's insights contribute to an extant body of research of experiential and problem-based learning by showcasing how a combined learning approach unites the best of both worlds. The inductive method of this study allows us to explicate the central levers in making the learning process successful and warrants important boundary conditions.

Implications for Research

The first contribution points to the fact that EPBL approaches encourage the development of an entrepreneurial mind-set. The empirical findings of this study reflect a challenge in the adoption of a critical and analytical thinking style, which was only overcome over time. As the findings show, many students struggled both with the lack of a clear problem definition to solve and subsequently with regularly questioning ones approach. These findings echo the insights gained from de Boer and Otting (2013), when capturing the voice of students during problem-based learning. They reported that students are rarely motivated to search for a variety of sources and unable to assess their respective relevance. Students in this study moved through a similar experience and frequently reported to be overwhelmed by the

complexity of their problem statement. However, our findings point to an important lever that empowers students to subsequently develop these skills, namely 'playing devil's advocate'.

While the long-standing benefits of real-life exposure have been acknowledged (Eyler, 2009; Lee & Dickson, 2010; Maier & Thomas, 2013), more recent research has highlighted that providing the opportunity for a real-life experiential learning experience is a necessary but insufficient condition for deep learning to occur. In fact, while Isacsson and Ritalahti (2015) point to the necessity of students critically reflecting on the material and taking ownership, Claussen and Andersson (2019) go even further by proclaiming that without a perceived meaning to a student's further development, the experiential learning approach will not reach its objective. This study corroborates the above assumption. Further, while Yardley, Teunissen, and Dornan (2012) assert that learning requires participation, this study suggests strategies in getting students to engage in learning. The study shows that it is essential to tie the experiential learning approach into the broader picture of a student's overall development. For instance, in acknowledging that much of the industry's dynamics are controlled by standard operating procedures (SOPs) students were encouraged, in the context of this course and exercise, to break free from pre-established thinking and play 'devil's advocate'. Students were forced into a position where they had to make choices within a real decision-making context with no guardrails. This provided for a whole new learning experience and developmental opportunity.

Further, these learning approaches train students to develop problem-solving skills. More specifically, EPBL encourages students to immerse in the process of truly understanding the problem and investing enough time in the creation of possible options to consider. To creative and analytical thinking there are two complementary building blocks – divergent and convergent thinking (Cropley, 2006). Divergent and convergent thinking are fundamental cognitive processes to creative problem-solving. Both types of thinking are

essential and co-depend on each other for creative idea development (Goldschmidt, 2016). Divergent thinking is the process of mentally opening up and coming up with ideas. It is the process by which the brain is asked to venture out and explore possibilities. Convergent thinking, on the other hand, is the mental process of evaluating the ideas one develops, analyzing and reflecting on them and thus prioritizing them to eventually come to a decision about a preferred course of action. As much as both processes are innate to individuals, our environment often makes it hard to reach our full potential. First, when looking at society at large, including our educational systems (but also the work environments), people are often better trained in convergent thinking processes because most of what their daily tasks encompass is about coming up with quick decisions - evaluating and prioritizing the actions to take. Unfortunately, people are often less trained in divergent thinking, because many of the situations in which they find themselves are not conducive to further develop their divergent thinking abilities. This is where the EPBL approaches provide an essential training ground for divergent thinking. However, as the data revealed, it is not sufficient to simply provide the opportunity. Given the dominance of convergent thinking activities, students require guidelines and support to understand and gain trust in the ability to mentally open up and take the time to engage with the problem, rather than pursuing the first opportunity. These insights on convergent and divergent thinking may further refine our understanding of Kolb's theory of experiential learning, specifically the first step – reflective observation (Kolb, 1984).

The second contribution speaks to the broadening of a student's understanding of 'customer-centricity'. In other words, hospitality students are systematically trained in understanding how to best serve a customer. While the practical part of their education strongly focuses on this concept from an operational viewpoint, students have little understanding as to how customer-centricity is reached from a more strategic angle. The empirical findings of this study point to both an inability to define 'their market' and a

hesitation to exclude anyone from being a customer. Yet, from a strategic standpoint, it is pivotal to declare who the targeted customer is in order to define and tailor the service and/or product offering. In mitigating this selection, one runs the risk of being a 'jack of all trades and master of none'. However, in prior experience students are rarely forced into the position to operate with an unknown (or changing customer base). Indeed, the strategy project facilitated this learning. Moving students into a position where they had to declare whom they like to cater to and why enriched their understanding as to how customer-centricity is established from a strategic standpoint. Hence, in broadening the concept of customer-centricity to encompass the operational and strategic perspective allows students to be more critical in their thinking. Rather than remaining with surface level definitions, students learn to understand their customer base on a deeper level and are able to identify and select them.

The last contribution of this research speaks to the benefits of learning to operate under high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Having been exposed to an industry environment that provides for many structures, routines and SOPs, the EPBL in this course context endorsed a thinking approach that focuses on capturing the benefits of uncertainty through which individuals enhance their flexibility, creativity, and continuous innovation (Ireland, 2003, p. 968; McGrath & MacMillan, 2000). Being exposed to industry-centered EPBL allowed students to engage with the realistic 'messiness' of information collection and assessment. Based on this experience, students overwhelmingly reported high learning outcomes and levels of aptitude. Whether it was for intermediary setbacks or a disagreement with the company representatives in the final presentation, the overall feedback was geared towards a very positive experience that allowed for deep learning experiences that left students more motivated and with higher levels of confidence. This is distinct from many alternative PBL approaches where the perceived "optimal" result often leaves students with a negative experience if they fail to attain the best possible outcome. These findings contest

established insights in that experiential learning outside the classroom supersedes in-class experiential learning approached (e.g., Lee & Dickson, 2010; Maier & Thomas, 2013). Our findings point to the ability to leverage the best of in-class and outside experiential learning when using industry-centered EPBL.

Implications for Education and Corporate

Developing these insights may explain in part the high employability of students that have been exposed to EPBL approaches. The effect is two-fold. First, industry-centered projects, such as the strategy project researched in this paper, speak directly to the employability of students in that they are equipping students with the skills and competences to respond to the changes that the hospitality industry is experiencing and will continue to. Whether looking at the market entry of OTAs some 20 years ago, the development of the private rental market or the ongoing digitalization phenomenon, hospitality students need to be equipped with malleable skill sets that are adaptable to a changing environment. By exposing students to industry-centered EPBL they are not only in a position to train their skill sets on contemporary challenges, but they also learn to understand and apply their skills to realistic uncertainty (Claussen & Andersson, 2019), which cases and simulations cannot fully represent. Industry-centered EPBL is much higher relevant in terms of the accuracy of what they convey to students. Second, industry representatives get a first-hand experience of students' competencies, their ability to incorporate feedback, treat sensitive material and develop feasible solutions. This is a notable assessment method for recruiting suitable candidates, beyond assessing candidates through an isolated interview.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that require acknowledgment, but warrant further future research opportunities. First, this study has reflected on EPBL in a course setting that is defined as a general management context, i.e. corporate strategy. While the

project context encapsulated a hospitality challenge, it remains to be seen whether these findings can be replicated in other academic contexts. In an accounting course, for example, there is less leeway when it comes to determining 'sound solutions' than in a strategy course. This poses a research opportunity in testing whether the assumptions put forth in this study will replicate for these study contexts. Second, teaching environments are affected by the faculty teaching a class. In this study, the effect of the faculty was not part of the research objective and hence no conclusions can be drawn in how far the personality, teaching philosophy or interaction style with students may have affected the outcome of the experiential learning approach. Finally, a project could be integrated across multiple classes, thereby leveraging the knowledge integration across subject areas. This could contribute to breaking down knowledge silos that often develop, as students mentally compartmentalize learned material within the respective subject areas. This may be an interesting further area of investigation, which would allow researchers to show how holistic projects crossing knowledge domains may affect the learning experience and knowledge uptake.

Conclusion

Hospitality is a complex, multi-disciplinary working environment that demands a highly integrated learning environment spanning not only diverse areas of competence, both operational and managerial, but also proactively bridges theory and practice. Here experiential problem-based learning approaches that are actively backed by hospitality companies help students develop their skills and shift from static knowledge acquisition to a dynamic competence portfolio. Being equipped with competencies that can be applied to the ever-changing needs of the hospitality industry is a tremendous asset for all students.

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