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ACTION RESEARCH: TOURISM EDUCATION – ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION
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ABSTRACT

International students will be encouraged to study in Australia, so long as economic remuneration to Universities remains. This educational imperative enables engagement of domestic students’ including tourism and business students, to develop greater cross-cultural awareness. Experience has proven that these visiting students incur both educational obligation and cross-cultural difficulties in their new environment. The intention of this paper is to conceptualise how innovation, in terms of assessment, combining participative action learning-action research (PALAR) and work integrated learning (WIL) has assisted in creative adaptation and learning that has enhanced cross-cultural relationships. This new radio interview assessment has enhanced cross-cultural learning.

Keywords: tourism education; participative action learning-action research (PALAR); work integrated learning (WIL); student commitment; cross-cultural education.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity in regional universities brings depth to tourism and business education. International students’ integration in learning experiences with domestic students at regional universities enhances cross-cultural understanding (Cameron & Allen, 2013). Notwithstanding this, high levels of stress can be felt by the international student who must in one semester, integrate into their new educational and social environment. Adaptation new study skills can place considerable strain upon them (Russell, 2005). Australian scholars must choose carefully in terms of what are the best means to support student adaptation (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This was the third cycle of PALAR for this course and for the first time, supported by a peer assisted teaching scheme (PATS). The third cycle’s focus being, adaptation of assessment from: a multi choice quiz (MCQ) to an innovative radio interview. Students’ adaptation to their new assessment task was strengthened through the use of (PALAR) teams (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011), providing ‘real world’ work integrated learning experiences. Preliminary findings include: 1) the benefits of the new innovative WIL assessments; 2) the benefits of PALAR; and 3) the benefit of creativity in engagement. This adaptation from a traditional assessment model to an innovative radio interview has encouraged cross-cultural student co-operation engagement and learning.

LITERATURE

Adaptation into new educational environments must be dealt with as quickly as possible to assist visiting international students. Students’ trials of adaptation include: English, if it was not their first language; the differences in academic philosophies and techniques for the visiting international student (Nambiar, Radha & Noraini, 2012); different western social behaviours including independent thinking and social satisfaction concerning Chinese students (Yang, 2007); educational cross-cultural relationships and other “cultural” forces consisting of “people, students and inter-communication” and “technical teaching” (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 267); and, academic educational systems with teaching and assessment needing to be aligned to a variety of educational and work opportunities (Cambell and Li, 2008). Herein lies the key to this third PALAR cycle. In an attempt to adapt to the visiting students’ needs the business and tourism university lecturer must attempt to be innovative in designing engagement activities that enhance the study abroad experience.

University lecturers and visiting international students can develop both formal and informal social relationships as part of the study abroad experience (Trice, 2003). Adaptation to new educational environments and can be assisted through engagement and participation in innovative and creative activities (Kwon, 2009). Boud Boi and Falchikov (2007) suggest assessments need a long-term
emphasis contextualised toward participation and practice. Work integrated learning (WIL) underpins this philosophy, as students engage in activities that apply disciplinary knowledge and skills in a real-world cross-cultural context. WIL should “provide [an] authentic learning experience … [and] is crucial to having an impact on student learning” (Lawson, Fallshaw, Papadopoulos, Taylor and Zanko, 2011, 67). Such activities are integral to business and tourism students at undergraduate level (Smith 2012). The WIL “industry–professional component tier”, applied theory to work practice (USC 2014).

**METHOD AND ANALYSIS**

The method and analysis in this paper discusses the third cycle of an ongoing PALAR project. The model combines the action research cycles of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) with the PALAR methodology recommended by Zuber-Skerrit (2011). The PALAR model combines Revans (1980) action learning methodology which enables “real people [to] tackle real problems in real time” to learn “from and with each other” it is about having a vested interest in the outcomes of their actions (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p117). This third cycle informs a triangulated method recommended by Bazeley (2007) including: a literature review; survey and focus group. The students included 119 domestic and international study-abroad undergraduate students from business including, tourism, leisure and events, 41 of which were study-abroad students. The six step action learning paradigm was chosen as follows. Phase one – the problem: to what extent can the adoption of new innovative assessments help develop creative ‘work ready’ skills while building relationships between both domestic and international students. Phase two, students responses included an open ended questionnaire and informal group discussions. Phase three, transcripts were coded and analysed using NVivo 10® software. Phase four, curriculum changes enabled the replacement of MCQ with a PALAR innovative WIL radio interview assessment. Working together, to research and answer the radio interview questions, students PALAR teams: researched, answered, recorded and upload their individual radio responses to probing questions. Phase five, interventions were assessed to examine the benefits of the new assessment task. Data was again coded and analysed using NVivo 10® which produced interrelated themes and frequencies of the themes (Mason 2006). These themes denote the prominence of innovative assessments and WIL outcomes and other interactive discussion activities as part of the multi-cultural learning experiences. Phase six, the next PALAR cycle will be informed of the benefits of combining PALAR innovative assessments and WIL in developing ‘work ready’ skills and building cross cultural relationships between domestic and international students.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This third PALAR cycle was developed with the support of a peer assisted mentoring scheme (PATS) (Carbone, 2012). Phase one had identified that both domestic and international students experienced cross cultural relationships and engagement difficulties (Cameron & Allen, 2012). The WIL radio interview replaced a multi-choice test, and supported by a (PALAR) design that encouraged domestic and international students to work creatively together informed the first research question: to what extent has adaptation to the new innovative WIL assessment contributed to the students learning experiences? This new radio interview assessment aligned to Menkhoff & Bengtsson’s (2012) work that found academic staff can contribute to student engagement by implementing and embracing innovative activities that nurture student learning. Using SPSS to analyse numerical responses, [see Figure 1 below], 26.9 percent of students found the new WIL task very important or extremely important, while a further 33 percent, found it contributed moderately to their learning experience.
Themes of comments using ‘word cluster’ confirmed positive attitudes toward the new assessment. For example, ‘it required careful analysis...[you needed] to make sure you fully understood all aspects’, that is, the student had to think about their answer, providing an ‘authentic learning experience’ not just tick and flick. This attitude aligns to Lawson et. al. (2011) who suggests WIL is crucial to learning. Yet another student confirmed the benefits of WIL, suggesting ‘it was far more realistic’ and yet another – it gave us a ‘real world application of theories’.

The radio interview required students to develop their responses in cross-cultural PALAR teams. This PALAR team process, Zuber- Skerritt (2011) suggests, broadens the learning experience. Similarly, Singh (2008 241) found that applying PALAR to interactive oral assessments led to ‘improved learning of content for learners’. Figure 2 below confirms that 30.6 percent found that PALAR played a very important or extremely important contribution to their ‘work ready’ skills, while a further 24.7 percent found it moderately important.

Students when recounting their PALAR teams experience had many similar comments, for example: ‘having a [PALAR] team to work with for advice and help with understanding’ and ‘communicating with PALAR teams assisted in developing work ready skills’ while yet another ‘working with international student [PALAR] teams ... [learn] to work with different cultures’ was beneficial to both domestic and international students. This aligns to Ramsden’s (2007) work which identified integrative activities as contributing to cross cultural peer engagement and improve class room commitment. The adaptation of PALAR teams aligned to Trice’s (2003) recommendation that formal and informal relationships can assist peers and academics to help study abroad students.

Creative skills were one outcome of combining WIL and PALAR. In Figure 3 below it can be seen that creativity was extremely to very important in over 40.9 percent of students while a further 26.1 percent found creativity moderately important. Reinforcing George’s (2007) findings that creative
ideas are stimulated by divergent thinking of group members in a collective. The cross-cultural perspectives and insights of individual members contribute to the PALAR outcomes through engagement with one another’s ideas (Harvey and Kou, 2013).

Figure 3: Creativity - WIL and PALAR

These results identify the benefits of enabling students’ to express their creativity through PALAR and WIL engagement through the new innovative radio interview assessment. It is evident that innovation of this new WIL assessment with the support of PATS mentoring has helped teaching staff to develop creative students with ‘work ready’ skills.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Innovation and adaptation of new and creative assessment tools for tourism business students studying at an Australian Regional University has contributed significant to domestic and international student engagement. This new WIL assessment task supported by PALAR has contributed to enhancement of the cross cultural study experiences by combining creativity and engagement. While the support and encouragement of the PATS academic mentor scheme also made a significant contribution to this new innovative assessment design.

REFERENCES


