



Using Theatre to Develop an Understanding of the Meaning of the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ to Students in the Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management

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Keywords

Resource use, sustainability, responsibility, impacts, solutions to negative externalities.

Group

Originally delivered within a first year module for all students completing degrees in leisure, tourism, hospitality and events management. The topic however, as presented here, lends itself to critical engagement by students at all levels of study including taught course Masters programmes.

Activity

A play in three acts with ‘intervals’ composed of questions to prompt understanding, through debate, on issues derived from the consumption of natural and cultural resources in the creation and use of leisure, tourism, hospitality and events products.

Aim

The session is one element within a module that introduces key concepts associated with consumer behaviour in leisure, tourism, hospitality and events

(for the sake of brevity 'leisure') management. The play acts as an opportunity to introduce students to the nature and consequences of consumption of 'resources' and an argument for a possible management framework based upon the idea(s) of sustainability, responsibility, and commons management within the context of leisure management.

Context/Background

This is one session within a compulsory module that introduces key elements associated with consumer behaviour and society contextualised in terms of leisure, tourism, hospitality and events management. The focus of the module is on consumer behaviour within a framework that requires managers to create products based upon an understanding of consumer characteristics and needs. This session acts to complement this focus by introducing a critique of consumerism and the liberal doctrine of choice promoted through the market. It does this by highlighting issues that leisure, tourism, hospitality and events managers might face when making management choices. It also serves to remind students of their more everyday role as consumer-citizens in a contemporary society.

The basis of the session is Garret Hardin's 1968 essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons'. Hardin's essay raises key resource management issues associated with resource use, negative externalities and solutions that can act as the foundation for discussion. These matters might be considered by using concepts drawn from a diversity of academic disciplines; this situation is what makes it such an exciting essay to explore in the leisure management context. Such discussion prompts might therefore include:

- The concept of common pool resources
- The idea of political authority
- Markets and neo-classical economics
- Individual choice and consumer society
- Collective action and the nature of the individual
- Values in society and decision making
- The role of education in informing individual action

The idea of a play to explore resource use and issues derived from production and consumption of leisure products emerged in response to the challenge of engaging a large group of students in active listening and learning. This was to replace a previous formal lecture on the topic which delivered complex ideas associated with the behaviour and roles of individuals in society as they produce and consume leisure products.

Example

The play requires active participation from the class, firstly by their taking up roles as actors within the play, and secondly through breaking out into small groups during the intervals and responding to questions within a class discussion facilitated by the leading tutor.

The session begins with the presentation of facts based on resource use (natural resources and people) in the production of leisure and tourism products and the negative (and positive) externalities of this process. These facts serve to capture the attention of the class, who are asked rhetorically to address 'so what does this mean for me in leisure, tourism, hospitality and event management?'

The class is then invited to participate in the presentation of the play. Volunteers are cast and dismissed to rehearse before being recalled to perform in front of their peers. They are given about 15 minutes to rehearse their parts. A key role, with considerable dialogue, was assigned to the Narrator; this part was 'pre-cast' in order to enable the Narrator to become familiar with the script in order to coordinate the rehearsal (the script in itself is not overly taxing).

The audience is, at this stage, excited as they anticipate the up-coming performance and the chance to evaluate the thespian qualities of their friends. This group are brought back into focus through a brief session based upon a series of questions on their understanding of: resources and their use in creating leisure products, the role of the managers in the production of leisure services, and the context in which the leisure sector operates; defined as the role of government in regulation and planning and both public sector and private sector provision of leisure services.

The actors are called in and the performance begins with the Narrator leading the first act. A brief overview of each act and focus of the interval questions are provided below to gain a feel for the session.

Act 1: The Village and the Common

A rural idyll acts as a backdrop to introduce the concepts of resource use and negative externalities as by-products of production and consumption and possible solutions involving technology.

Interval 1: Interpreting the commons dilemma

A series of questions serves to clarify: the issues derived from resource use, offered solutions and possible reasons why they did not work

Act 2: The Solution: a dialogue

Outside a village pub acts as a backdrop to introduce the concept of 'the market' and the merits of market and non-market solutions to negative externalities derived from resource use and consumption. Reference to political authority and attitudes towards individual responsibility and collective action is made.

Interval 2: Developing an argument to support preferred solutions

A series of questions serves to clarify the arguments used to support both market and no-market solutions to resource use, and prompt students to develop an argument to support their own preferred solutions.

Act 3: What does it mean to me?

A 'talk-show' studio acts as the setting for a discussion designed to clarify the type and nature of negative externalities resulting specifically from leisure use of resources and also to highlight some current management practices to address these issues, including: reference to the 'moral agenda', education, regulation, codes of conduct and certification by sector bodies.

Plenary (or break-out session)

The last interval is based around addressing 'whether managers/producers of leisure experiences should be responsible for the negative externalities of resource use?' The class is left to draw its own conclusions to this debate, based upon its members' understanding of the issues and potential solutions.

Assessment

The key issue for the teaching team in both the execution of and response to the play remains the depth of an informed discussion. The issues and arguments for various solutions are complex; there is a need for students therefore to come to the lecture prepared. The minimum preparation required is to read Hardin's essay, but students struggle to see the immediate relevance of his thesis to their own study programme.

A second issue debated amongst the staff was the optimum size of groups to enable purposeful exploration of the meaning of the tragedy with students; should this take the form of a break-out into small group subject based tutorials or remain as a large group 'mixed leisure' cohort. It was decided that a mixed cohort was the preferred option because it promoted the interrelationships that are evident within the leisure, tourism, hospitality and events sectors and that no single sector is immune from the issues derived from the use and consumption of resources. It also gave students a chance to hear and interpret responses from as wide an audience as possible, thus enabling them to appreciate that differing points of view exist and therefore to acknowledge the challenges that decision-makers might face when developing and promoting solutions.

Feedback

The play ran for the first time in the 2009-10 academic year, and was conducted as part of a 45 minute lecture. The initial script was only one act long and this played out the tragedy of the commons. Its meaning to the leisure, tourism, hospitality and events sectors was interpreted for the class by additional lecture material. This was followed by one hour small group tutorials that were subject-based and used to discuss the main themes introduced during the lecture; (this 'lecture- followed by tutorial' format was

used throughout the module in which this session was housed). The outline above represents changes to the 2009-10 format as a result of evaluation by students and staff.

An evaluation of this session conducted with staff and students highlighted the three issues that this new format goes partway to address (some elements are clearly explored in other modules within their respective study programmes). Students wanted:

- 1 a more detailed debate of market and non-market solutions;
- 2 further explanation of the wider political and economic context in which leisure, tourism, hospitality and event products are manufactured and consumed; and
- 3 further opportunity to debate both why resource use should be a concern for leisure, tourism, hospitality and event managers, and the possible industry solutions.

This interesting appraisal by the group, I believe, is a significant indicator of students taking charge of their learning opportunities. It also represents a mature engagement with important global and industry specific problems. The play and its intervals remain a work in progress.