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PRACTICE PAPER

## Activist, Pragmatist, Reflector or Theorist? In Search of Postgraduate Learning Styles in Tourism and Hospitality Education

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### Abstract

Provision of higher education for international students has become an important source of income for British universities. These students have attracted some research attention. This paper considers the learning styles adopted by postgraduate students at one British higher education institution. It is based on their approaches to a specific assignment relating to Krakow, Poland, and utilises multiple methods of data collection. Results from utilising the Learning Styles Questionnaire are presented and tentative conclusions drawn. It is argued that a didactic approach is not sufficient on its own and that assignments need to play to the individual's personal characteristics where possible.

**Keywords:** Learning styles; International students

### Introduction

The provision of education and training services for people from overseas has become an increasingly important source of income for certain countries, including the UK (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999; 2002). International and particularly non-EU students have inevitably attracted attention from academics in various subject areas.

There were 74,235 international students (UKCOSA, 2006) who embarked on full-time 'taught' postgraduate programmes in 2003-04, compared to 30,205 UK-domiciled students (HESA, 2006): a ratio of more than 2 to 1. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine why

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this might be the case, although it is noted that a large proportion of non-EU international students are Chinese. Barron and Arcodia (2002) present a cogent explanation for the dramatic growth in numbers of Chinese students embarking on programmes outside China. This includes limited supply of tertiary education, staffing issues, perceptions of quality and limited facilities in the home nation.

This paper reviews the learning styles adopted by postgraduate students undertaking a specific assignment at one higher education institution in the United Kingdom. It utilises multiple methods of data collection in order to secure triangulation (reassurance, in the broad sense) of the findings. The scores from the assignment are compared to the individuals' learning styles in order to identify any relationship.

## Learning Styles

Keefe (1979: 4) argues that "learning styles are characteristic cognitive, effective and psychological behaviours that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to the learning environment". In the last two decades, several models and measurement instruments have been developed to classify individual learning preferences.

Kolb (1984) considers individuals' approaches using the Learning Styles Inventory, in which four stages of learning requiring specific learning abilities are identified. Based on Kolb's theories, Honey and Mumford (1986) developed the Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) and suggest four basic learning styles: those of the activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist. While everyone has a mix of learning styles, some people have a dominant style of learning, with far less use of the other styles. Others may find that they use different styles in different circumstances. Critically, there is no correct mix. Honey and Mumford's LSQ has been widely used in management training and development (see Hayes and Allinson, 1988; Sadler-Smith, 1996).

A simple process of logical analysis applied to the semantics of the terms *culture* and *learning style* leaves little room for doubt about the existence of cultural influences in the development of individual learning preference. Hayes and Allinson (1988) investigated whether culture accounts for differences in learning styles by comparing the styles of British, Indian and East African managers. Using Honey and Mumford's LSQ, their results suggest that there are important differences between all three cultures.

In reviewing Honey and Mumford's four learning style categories, it is useful to consider the descriptive terms that are associated with them. See Table 1.

<b>Activist</b>	<b>Pragmatist</b>
Suited to experiential rather than lectures Not keen on implementation	Favours independence Could undertake more research
<b>Reflector</b>	<b>Theorist</b>
Conscientious but hard to get started Assimilates information	Much time spent working it out Much redrafting Detailed investigators

**Table 1: The learning styles of Honey and Mumford**

*Source: adapted from Honey and Mumford (1983; 2000)*

Several recent studies have attempted to identify the learning preferences of tourism and hospitality management students. Lashley's study (1999) suggests that the vast majority of students who are attracted to hospitality management programmes in the UK have learning styles which favour practical activity and that these students are less comfortable with theorising and reflection. Wong *et al.* (2000) found that domestic students studying programmes at various colleges and universities in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan

display preferences for reflector learning styles. Research carried out on Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students registered on programmes within the School of Tourism and Leisure Management at the University of Queensland suggests that when CHC students study hospitality and tourism management at a Western university they adopt an activist learning style preference similar to their Western peers (Barron and Arcodia, 2002).

It could be argued, however, that the approaches used in the research projects above are similar in nature. Essentially, the students are studying similar programmes in their home country or they are foreign students in a foreign environment. Furthermore, the above projects identified preferred learning styles simply by analysing the LSQ without explanation from the students. There are a number of problems with such research. For example:

- Many of the studies have been based on students from Hong Kong rather than mainland China.
- Assumptions have been made about the attributes of Chinese students that haven't been fully tested (for example, explaining their learning styles with reference to their 'Confucian heritage'). This has reinforced prevailing cultural stereotypes.
- Direct comparisons have not been made with 'Western' students - those studying in China and those studying similar courses in their own countries - to establish whether or not their behaviour differs from that of Chinese students as much as is often supposed.

This research aims to determine the links, if they exist, between approaches to assessment and the preferred learning style of students studying postgraduate programmes in MSc Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Plymouth, UK.

## The Cohort, Methodology and Student Task

Of 15 students enrolled on the MSc Tourism and Hospitality Management award at the University of Plymouth in the academic year 2005-06, nine were Chinese (60 per cent), four were British, one was Indian and one was Polish. The proportions of international students and UK students therefore mirror the 'bigger picture' reported in the introduction. What must not be forgotten is that differences between students in terms of learning style are as inevitable as they are between academics (Haggis, 2004).

The following research process was adopted. First, the students visited the library, studied the questionnaire (Honey and Mumford, 2000), and self-assessed their individual learning style. Second, the approaches the students employed for the specific assessment were identified by analysing evidence from their emails, telephone calls and face-to-face enquiries with staff. The dates of these were recorded. See Table 2. It was also necessary to undertake overt observation, with the researcher taking on the role of "complete observer" (Mason, 1996: 64), because some of the data were collected during the period when the specific assignment was being undertaken.

Honey and Mumford questionnaire	Pertinent to entire MSc learning process
Email, telephone and face-to-face enquiry collation	Relevant to assignment
Personal observation pre- and in-field trip	Relevant to assignment

**Table 2: Sources of data**

Details of the specific assignment are provided (see Table 3) because it is argued that the *context* is very important in moulding learning style. In this research study, the need to pass the assessment was crucial, whereas lectures and field trips may induce a different learning style. As Honey and Mumford (1983) observe, learning styles overlap. The individual may be an activist in class but a reflector when viewing Wawel Castle (Krakow) on the field trip (see Plate 1). Critically, what determined the learning style in Krakow was what had been learned about the concept of 'the marker' (MacCannell, 1976) from the literature and other sources

MacCannell (1976) suggests that all visitor attractions comprise three elements – the sight (site), the visitor and the marker/s.

In an informal report format (meaning sub-headings are encouraged), analyse how the concept of the marker applies to the city of Krakow. To avoid 'contamination', avoid talking to each other about possible markers. Your response should provide a thorough literature-based background to the concept, followed by analysis of the range of markers – you may wish to be 'creative' following identification, meaning are all markers equal?

Maximum word limit: 4,000

prior to the visit. The assignment was issued on 13 January 2006 with a hand-in deadline of 17 March. The pass score was 50 per cent.

**Table 3: MSc Tourism and Hospitality Management assignment 2005-06  
Krakow and the marker**



**Plate 1: Wawel Castle, Krakow**

Adapting the quantitative terminology of corroborative criteria, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four measures against which the trustworthiness of qualitative studies can be evaluated. These are *credibility* (internal validity), *transferability* (external validity), *dependability* (reliability) and *confirmability* (objectivity). In order to meet the requirements of sound research, and to minimise personal or methodological biases, triangulation was implemented in the research design. In qualitative research, triangulation implies strengthening the richness and corroboration of findings by considering the same phenomenon or research question from different angles. This may involve collecting data from various sources or applying more than one data collection analysis technique or more than one theoretical framework. The more it can be demonstrated that combined data sources, methods or theories converge, the sounder the search results are. The following approaches were taken to achieve credibility or internal reliability in this study: method triangulation; theory triangulation; data triangulation; and investigator triangulation (Decrop, 1999). These are illustrated in Table 4. With such a small sample, and the possible relevance of other variables, it is argued that transferability cannot be secured. The involvement of two researchers is considered to contribute significantly towards securing objectivity.

The third stage of the research process was to analyse any possible links between the approaches to the assessment and the preferred learning styles adopted by the students. Content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. It is argued that the multiple methods of data collection help to ensure triangulation of the findings.

	Triangulation	Details
<b>Credibility</b>	Method triangulation	Email; face-to-face discussion; telephone discussion; complete observation Multiple methods were used to interpret the various sets of data
<b>Transferability</b>	Data triangulation	Multiple data sets from multiple methods; primary and secondary data
<b>Dependability</b>	Transparency of the research process	
<b>Confirmability</b>	Investigator triangulation	Both authors and also some input from two other colleagues on the field trip

Table 4: Approaches to triangulation

## The Findings and Discussion

Table 5 summarises a more detailed identification of communications between students and lecturers. These included the dates of face-to-face enquiries, emails and the single telephone call, but the dates are not provided because there appears to be no relationship between timing of communication and score. As can be seen, two of the British students had no communication whatsoever with staff and still secured pass scores. Furthermore, three of the British individuals did not undertake the Learning Styles Questionnaire.

Student	Nationality	Face-to-face enquiry	Email	Telephone	Result %
1	British	0	0	0	60
2	Chinese	3	0	0	50
3	British	1	2	0	72
4	Chinese	2	0	0	30
5	Indian	0	0	0	0
6	Chinese	6	1	0	57
7	Chinese	0	0	0	45
8	Chinese	2	1	0	52
9	British	1	0	0	51
10	British	0	0	0	51
11	Chinese	2	0	1	45
12	Chinese	5	3	0	56
13	Chinese	1	0	0	40
14	Chinese	2	1	0	60
15	Polish	0	1	0	52

Table 5: Student approach to the assessment

As is the case with many postgraduate cohorts, some of the students left during the year. The Indian student did not submit the assignment, having left some weeks before, and one of the Chinese students (No. 4) left for China shortly before the deadline, having submitted the assignment. A range of financial and other pressures facing students is argued to be as pertinent to students not completing their courses as the identification of individual learning styles. For example, Scheyvens *et al.* (2003), in their analysis of postgraduate students,

make the point that language difficulties are likely to be the single greatest obstacle for international students.

Turning to the assessment of LSQ scores, Honey and Mumford (2000) point out that, while the highest possible result for each of the styles is 20, the highest overall score does not indicate the predominant learning style. They maintain that it is necessary to view the results "in relation to those obtained by other people who have completed the questionnaire" (Honey and Mumford, 2000: 15). The authors provide learning style norms for a range of occupations, including finance managers, marketing managers, and sales personnel.

For the purposes of this research, Table 6 is provided, indicating the individual style results set against the assignment score. As can be seen, those individuals achieving an assignment score of 50 per cent or less appear to have scored low against the theorist style (the highest score is 10). This bears out the operationalisation given in Table 1, which states that theorists spend time working it out and making detailed investigations. At the same time, these individuals are seen to have had contact with lecturers (see Table 5). It's more a case of implementing the advice given - or not, as the case may be. Furthermore, those achieving low LSQ scores on the activist category did not receive good assignment scores.

Student	Nationality	Activist	Reflector	Theorist	Pragmatist	Result %
1	British					60
2	Chinese	14	10	7	12	50
3	British					72
4	Chinese	8	20	9	8	30
5	Indian					0
6	Chinese	15	17	14	15	57
7	Chinese					45
8	Chinese	10	20	15	11	52
9	British					51
10	British	10	13	14	17	51
11	Chinese	11	13	10	19	45
12	Chinese	12	10	7	11	56
13	Chinese	7	5	8	14	40
14	Chinese	11	16	15	13	60
15	Polish	14	11	9	5	52

**Table 6: Student LSQ results and assignment score**

While admittedly this is a small sample, what is interesting is the similarity in scores between the British, Polish and Chinese students for the activist and reflector scores. This finding is at odds with Barron's study of differences between CHC (Confucian Heritage Culture) and non-CHC students in Australia (Barron, 2005). Perhaps, given the passage of at least four months from registration, the Chinese students discussed in our research had become acclimatised to higher education approaches in Britain.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered the situation of postgraduate tourism and hospitality students undertaking a specific assignment at one British university. Utilising Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire, individual scores have been mapped by ethnic origin and forms of communication with module staff. There appears to be little relationship between assignment score and learning style scores. Other variables are likely to have greater impact.

During the weeks prior to the assignment deadline, module staff observed a certain level of competitiveness, a feature remarked on by Dale and McCarthy in their study of Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality students (Dale and McCarthy, 2006). Indeed, for non-EU students, it is argued that the scale of the fees encourages instrumentalism; achieving more than just a pass score is crucial. Furthermore, given the large proportion of Chinese students, Huang's observation that such individuals may "suffer from a lack of creativity" appears to have been borne out (Huang, 2005: 37). Much of the face-to-face enquiry time was spent explaining *how* the field trip related to the academic literature and *how* examples could be found of the various forms of 'marker' in Krakow.

On the other hand, didactic methods alone do not stimulate students in higher education. Considered assignments such as the one detailed here provide an opportunity to undertake pre-visit research together with on-site interpretation. However, what must not be forgotten is the necessary academic underpinning. The face-to-face and email communications were principally to discuss the range of interpretations and academic supporting material for MacCannell's concept of the marker. This paper emphasises the need to use more than one method when attempting to ascertain individual learning styles.

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