

Adult learning in educational tourism

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This article explores notions of learning in the niche market sector of educational tourism, with a focus on organised recreational tours that promote a structured learning experience as a key feature. It analyses the qualitative findings of surveys and interviews with a cross-section of educational tourism providers in Australia, their lifelong-learning client markets and Australian academic scholars participating in this sector. The paper examines the differing perceptions of providers, participants and academics to what they expect from such tours, what constitutes learning within them and how particularly adult learning occurs through them.

Introduction

Notions of travel and education are inextricably linked, yet the words “tourism” and “education” seem to be more problematic bedfellows.

While the words “tourism” and “travel” are used by some scholars interchangeably, for many observers, tourists are an inferior type of traveller; a ‘homogenous group of dopey beasts, who take cattle-class flights at 3am, organise stag nights in Prague, and demand egg and chips and a beer whose name we can easily pronounce on a sunny beach in Spain’ (Thomas 2009: 51). Succinctly, Feifer (1985: 2) observes that ‘no-one wants to be called a tourist’.

The term ‘educational tourism’ has been linked to niche tourism, although the extent and spectrum of travel experiences that fall within this category are still being debated. As an ‘information centric’ pursuit (Hecht, Starosielski & Dara-Abrams 2007), most niche tourism markets are populated by clients motivated by a desire or need to learn. Ritchie (2003: 9) has argued, ‘the concept of travel for education and learning is a broad and complicated area, which explains why tourism academics and industry have to date largely ignored this field’. There is value in exploring the type of learning that occurs within a particular form of educational tourism that has existed for some time in the broader sector, but which is still relatively under-valued and under-researched by both the tourism and education sectors alike. We refer specifically to organised recreational tours (usually commercial), aimed at the general public (as distinct from, for example, for-credit study tours for students) which promote an intentional and structured learning experience as a key component. This learning component is explicit, and core, to the delivery of the product. This study examines the centrality of adult learning within this niche market, analyses the kinds of learning that companies promote and the pedagogic processes in such organised recreational tours and investigates the relationship of this learning to broader lifelong learning agendas.

Background: Educational tourism and learning

Research into the role of tourism as a learning experience is relatively scarce. Certainly the 1980s witnessed the appearance of new tourism designs that recognised tourism's negative impacts and imagined a more positive role for tourism (Zurick 1992). 'Positive' has been in many cases conflated with emancipatory aspects of personal development, when referring to its effect on the traveller (for example, Moscardo 1996). Yet these studies generally understand tourism and travel as an unstructured and unmediated experience. Educational tourism, by contrast, involves a deliberate and explicit learning experience. The most significant in-depth studies of this domain stem from research commissioned by companies themselves about their client markets and their learning needs (Elderhostel 2007), or ontological investigations conducted by company personnel (Wood 2008). Yet the perceived nature and organisation of adult learning that occurs within educational tourism remain relatively under-researched, although further knowledge could assist in the development of tourism products that better fulfil adult learners' needs and illuminate our understanding of forms of incidental learning. As part of a larger research project, this study examines the differing perceptions of providers, participants and academics regarding what they expect from such tours, their perceptions of what constitutes learning within them, and how they perceive pedagogic processes occurring through tours.

Method

Understandings of educational tourism were investigated through an analysis of varied data collected from a cross-section of educational tourism providers in Australia, their client markets and Australian academic scholars participating in this sector. Tour operator literature (such as website material, advertising flyers and brochures, specific tour itineraries, and detailed tour handbooks) was analysed for descriptions and understandings of adult learning. The literature

was analysed for concepts related to educational tourism, language regarding ideas of learning or teaching, and discussions of learning objectives, and the educational qualifications of tour providers, leaders and designers, as expressed by the tour companies when marketing to potential clients. Phrases were analysed for content (content analysis) with a view to identifying recurring concepts, understandings and perceptions.

Two online surveys were then conducted containing a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions. A “participant survey” collected data from individuals who identified themselves as having had previous experience of educational tours or as being interested in doing so in the future. A total of 1,091 participants were directly contacted and asked to complete the survey and 612 responses from travellers/potential travellers (hereafter referred to as learners) were received. Second, scholars were approached primarily from humanities and social science departments of Australian universities, due to the high representation of their disciplines in educational tour itineraries (history, art, languages, built environment, and so on). A total of 228 scholars completed the survey.

Third, five Australian educational tour operators agreed to recorded interviews. These companies were uniquely positioned across the education/tourism divide. Some companies were tour operators who had evolved to concentrate on educational tourism as a niche market. Others emerged from universities, via their institution’s adult education services. Thus, some could be said to be educators turned tourism providers and the others essentially the reverse. Detailed interviews were conducted with company directors, tour program developers, tour leaders, tour managers and trainers, operations managers, and marketing and sales staff.

Finally, ten scholars working in Australian universities agreed to give in-depth interviews from their experience as tour leaders, program designers or course material designers, or as organisers of study

tours and volunteer tourism for university students. Others were interviewed as interested future leaders.

Adult learning in educational tourism

The Australian tourism sector that identified itself as providing educational tourism offered many kinds of educational experiences ranging from mature-age study tours and programs to participation in academic research programs such as archaeological digs and ecological fieldwork, for-credit on-site university units, school group tours, and professional development tours. Tour operator literature identified learning or enquiry as a key differentiating point of its niche in the tourism market: from the passive 'audience interested in travelling to learn', to the more dynamic 'enquiring minds' which focus on 'stimulating ... the active, inquisitive traveller'. Companies' advertising material promoted the notion of an in-depth engagement with other cultures through the opportunities they provided to gain contextualised knowledge as well as a deeper (often longer) appreciation of particular sites. One company proposed a quote that summarised its target audience identity in this way: 'I want to have time to absorb the environment and to learn something about what I'm seeing'.

Learning was unmistakably the dominant principle defined by survey respondents and was explicitly referred to in more than 83% of the definitions of educational tourism. Responses expressed three key ideas about the form of learning in educational tourism. First, it was intentional, such as 'taking a trip specifically to broaden my horizons or enhance my knowledge'. Second, it was experiential, involving notions of 'immersion', 'hands-on', 'vivid' and 'evidence' and described as 'engaging with ideas in their original context'. Third, it was structured, such as one male academic's description of 'the combination of travel with a structured educational program'.

Likewise, the academics and travel providers interviewed also stressed the intentional and experiential learning dimensions to educational tourism. However academics were more likely to define the learning component as a non-leisure pursuit, such as one tour leader who said that educational tourism was ‘for those people who want to take it seriously, rather than those who just want to come along for a holiday’. There was a tendency for academics to identify the more formal, structured elements of educational tourism, for example, stressing the need for it to be ‘structured, with a theme to pursue and requiring some background knowledge of the sites being visited and some attempt to analyse on the spot’. In contrast, tour providers were more likely to focus on the leisure aspect of educational tourism. One director saw his company’s focus as ‘enhancing the travel experience through learning for fun’. Another experienced, non-academic tour leader described how he ‘shuddered when people took their pens out—that’s not what this is about’. Educational tourism providers emphasised the challenge to provide a learning experience that did not alienate their market since, in the words of one marketing manager, ‘some people think they’re not smart enough’. Experienced tour leaders appeared to recognise that learners wanted different types and quantities of information—as one male tour leader observed, ‘they all want to learn ... but there’s only a certain amount that they want to learn’. This accorded with learners’ own perceptions of learning on such tours, where they tended to approach the educative experience in a more holistic, multi-disciplinary manner. More than 70% surveyed described the learning experiences in non-specific or multi-dimensional ways, such as ‘exploring a country through its history, art, food and culture’ or ‘travelling to other places and learning about them’.

Whilst these conceptualisations of academics and tour providers were not in direct tension, the pedagogical functions of educational tourism were understood in subtly different ways. For learners, educational tourism was more often a means of understanding a location, whereas

for the academic it was more likely to be a vehicle for transmitting abstract knowledge. Indeed, some academics perceived their role of tour leaders in this domain as a means of sharpening their own specific, disciplinary knowledge and conveying it to the adult learner. One art historian interviewed described the importance of 'pursuing particular themes' of learning for the benefit of the learner. As well, many of the academics described using educational tourism as a way of supporting core research, such as funding travel to archaeological sites. Thus, the educational tourism experience performed a second function as a professional tool for many scholars.

Educational tours and personal development

Several companies indicated that their tours could be claimed by learner participants as professional development or used for academic credit. However, the general access educational tours stress the broad, generic nature of their educational component, designed for the satisfaction of individuals rather than to meet professional or scholarly requirements. 'Experience', 'explore' and 'discover' were key descriptors of the learning experience within company literature. 'Learning' was not commonly used and was typically replaced by less directed (and less quantifiable) verbs such as 'enquiring'. In general, the learning described was implicitly about personal development rather than testable information.

Companies emphasised that no specific academic qualifications were necessary to participate in a tour. Rather, participants required a willingness to explore another culture in detail. Attitude rather than qualification was thus a key requirement for learners. The degree of knowledge attainment was determined by the individual, with phrases such as 'broadening your knowledge' conveying a sense of learning that was measurable only at the level of each participant. Company personnel saw explicit learning objectives as potentially off-putting to clientele of different educational levels and experience. With educational tours, they insisted, learning must progress in

an enjoyable way. The director of one educational tour company described the learning that they provided as ‘what we’re about is continuing education, lifelong learning. So it’s about learning for fun without examinations attached’. Another tour designer believed that her company’s offerings were transformationally educative in that the learners ‘come away from it having learnt something and having very special experiences that I think helped aid their learning’. These discourses accorded with a humanistic perspective of lifelong learning, whereby learning throughout life and via varied fora is a means by which individuals develop personally and socially (Strain 1998). With these principles and objectives not to alienate potential clients in mind, the following section considers the perceptions and functions of the pedagogic processes that providers put in place to enable participant learning—through the learning community, the expert tour leader and the provision of support materials.

Community learning on tour

For most survey respondents, educational tourism suggested the idea of an intentional, structured, *in situ* learning experience. Being *in situ* was seen for many to provide distinct pedagogical insights. The delivery required and the value of being in place was articulated by one academic tour leader: ‘there is a different dynamic and you can draw on that shared experience without having to spell it out’. Another observed that it was unlike classroom lectures because of the immediacy of the content: ‘depending on what we’ve seen that day, they may be more focused perhaps on what they’ve just seen. For instance ... you know what XYZ looked like, you’ve just been down it, therefore you can visualise it. So there’s a difference’. The influence that being in place had on the production of new knowledge could not be understated, according to tour leaders. As one academic observed, ‘doing it *in situ*, absolutely there are things that you can teach only when you are there. It’s partly indescribable, just the sense of place ...

that you can't convey in the classroom. There's also an intensity to the teaching'.

Beyond 'being in place', however, academics observed important learning which learners experienced outside of site visits. The importance of *post-facto* reflection has been well-documented by experiential learning theorists and educationalists (Kolb 1984, Mezirow 1991) and is equally valued by the providers and their clients. Scholars and tour leaders alike observed the important learning which participants experienced outside of site visits. Many leaders use informal times on tours to promote reflection, much like a tutorial or workshop. One academic tour leader articulated his technique in this way:

Everybody on that tour is going to have a different story, from just from the day's journey. And so over dinner at night I'd go round the table. I mean, I'd still run a constructed sort of workshop, if you like. ... And then that becomes quite interesting because we've all seen the same things and yet they've all had different experiences of the same things. That's what leads to the creative discourse.

Other leaders described the advantages of the group-learning environment as an exchange not only of information, but enthusiasm for what had been experienced. One male academic explained that he enjoyed 'the interaction with other people and it's really good when you have a group of people who share the same interests. You can sit around the hotel at drinks times and discuss what we've seen'. There was thus a consensus amongst those interviewed and surveyed that it was important to seize the moment; that is, to encourage reflective practice whilst still on tour and close—both temporally and spatially—to the actual learning experience.

There was strong agreement among learners that learning was enhanced on tour when the group shared their experiences. Many tour participants surveyed were tertiary educated. Almost two-thirds

of respondents (65%) to the client survey held a university degree. Almost one-quarter (24%) had completed postgraduate coursework studies and a further 13% held a higher degree by research (Masters or PhD). The idea of creating a tour learning community was commonly found in provider literature, through phrasing such as ‘sharing experiences with like-minded travelers’. Learning communities included concepts of ‘belonging’, shared experiences and emotional connections. Three assumptions underlie the support for learning communities—that they will create a group that will work together, increase intellectual interaction, and enhance learning (Huerta 2004). Whilst research has been conducted on learning communities that use tourism to further their goals (Guevara 1996), educational tourism itself as a learning community appears to have been somewhat overlooked. In survey responses for this project, leaders and clients both identified the group experience as a valuable learning resource and rated group learning/travel experiences higher than individual experiences. Learners equally saw the sharing as an enjoyable aspect of the tour, valuing not only its educational but social aspect.

Thus, the structured organisation of the travel experience was in itself perceived to be a stage in the learning process of participants. Travelling with other learners who shared similar motivations, drawing together a learning community—in fact, even the act of defining these tours as educational—all had potential to contribute to the associated pedagogical processes.

The expert educator: facilitating educational tourism

The role of the ‘educator’ was central to most learners’ definitions of educational tourism. Explicit academic connections mattered to educational tour companies, with provider literature making clear the academic qualifications of its personnel. Companies frequently defined their tourism therefore as engaging with academic expertise. Importantly, one marketing manager in an educational tourism

company saw the involvement of academics and experts as crucial in the distinction of their company from other tourism providers: 'we believe educational tourism is having group leaders who know more about the place and can put it into a sense of its era and the perspective of where it's come from'. A company director connected expertise to academic qualifications explicitly by stating that he or she 'must bring with them an educational standard of some level, they have to be a recognised expert, not a self-proclaimed expert'. One experienced, male tour leader reflected that learners used academic qualifications as a proxy for quality, or as he phrased it, 'they look at me and say okay, this person's worked there that long, they lecture at this university so we can rely upon what they say'. As tour leaders, therefore, academics imitated their professional function; that is to say that for the adult learner, as for the student, they were a teacher, enabler and facilitator and for the tour operator, as for the university, they were a physical manifestation of 'quality' and a marketable commodity. Overwhelmingly, knowledge was identified as the most sought-after quality of a tour leader, included by two out of every three respondents in both the learner and academic surveys.

While academics tended to conceptualise expertise for leading an educational tour in terms of scholarly qualifications, first-hand, experiential knowledge was particularly highly regarded by learners. There was a strong sense that having been there denoted superior knowledge and manifested itself in the ability to speak the language, recall anecdotes and identify sites or events of interest that were 'off the beaten track'. Additional to the tour leaders, many tour companies provided a suite of other knowledge experts such as 'local guides', 'local lecturers' or 'on-site experts', who were designed to enhance the learning experience. Typically, tour leaders drew distinctions between their role and that of local experts in terms of the material and contexts they provided:

The local guy, if we have one travelling with us, might talk about social, gender, political issues of the current day which are things which he or she would know in more detail than I would. Then I might talk a bit about the sites that we're visiting and their cultural impact. Certainly the interpretation of that I can bring ... is by putting these things in a much wider cultural, political, historical context which would be beneficial for people.

Furthermore, to cater for the range of skills required in tour leaders, most companies created a division between an organiser/manager role and the accompanying expert. The manager was responsible for administrative tasks such as organising day tours, arranging visa and other documentation and attending to other daily, routine tasks. However, the social aspects of group cohesion and dynamics were very much seen as the role of the academic tour leader and fundamental to the learning process. One academic leader described his input on a photography tour in the following terms: 'I was there as a kind of creative mentor, I suppose, that is the term that I like to use. And that worked very well'. Thus, the organisational culture of an educational tour in many ways resembled that of a more formal educational institution; with tour leaders as lecturers, local guides as sessional tutors or invited speakers, and tour managers as school managers.

Knowledge was clearly critical in a leader but pacing its delivery was equally emphasised by both learners and tour providers. A good leader, according to one provider, possessed 'skills in communicating this knowledge to an interested audience'. This signified an important facet of educational tourism as it was marketed by companies: that the learning should be made both accessible and fun. It was not surprising, therefore, that companies highlighted the people-skills of their leaders. They were 'caring' and 'willing to adapt to the pace of the group'. This was reflected in the personal qualities desirable in a tour leader rated in the survey, such as a good sense of humour and empathy to the group's mood. One director summarised the brief for

the best tour leaders as: 'Excellent qualifications, be good at their tour leader experience and social co-ordinator'. Leaders' sensitivity to the diversity of knowledge and experience of tour participants was an important marketing emphasis for educational tourism providers.

Tour leaders too commonly spoke of the need to be sensitive to the different ways and environment in which learning occurred. The importance of gauging the variety of learning styles and levels in a tour group was noted by one female academic leader who observed 'several of them will be taking notes. And with some of them they will also come up to you later and ask for clarification of certain of the points that you've made'. The opportunity to pose questions over the course of the tour was highlighted by many leaders as a common feature of participant learning. This indicates that beyond the formal delivery of lectures, an important aspect of learning takes place in informal, often *post facto* settings. These might be places where participants felt comfortable and supported, unafraid to ask questions, to verify their learning or to reflect upon the sites visited and their meanings. As one tour leader put it, 'If they say, "We'd like to learn more about this", I say, "Okay, let's get together after dinner"'. As these examples suggest, tour leaders' skills included not just knowledge expertise but also critical social skills in detecting levels of engagement and responding appropriately to them. However, whilst both academics and learners saw this prior experience as something that enhanced the quality of the educational product, scholars had greater faith in abstract knowledge, seeing 'prior expertise' as more valuable than 'prior experience'. Conversely, learners rated first-hand experience as more desirable than formal expertise.

For providers, academics and learners, therefore, the tour leader and local experts were universally perceived to be critical aspects of the process by which learning occurred on tour. However, the choice of key qualities of such personnel for facilitating learning differed

between respondents. Typically (and unsurprisingly), tour providers and learners were more usually aligned in their notions of a good leader's requirements for knowledge, accessibility, sensitivity and tour experience, whereas academic respondents tended to prioritise quality and depth of knowledge as a more powerful component of a leader's facilitation of client learning.

Learning beyond the touristic experience

The influence of tourism paraphernalia on the touristic experience has been well documented; however, discussions have almost exclusively focused on their marketing and promotion potential (Ateljevic & Doorne 2002). Learners as well as educational tour providers, however, saw pre-tour documentation and events as a crucial element of the learning experience. Survey participants were asked to rank in importance a series of statements regarding preparation for tours. The results indicated that prior information, such as handouts, books and other educational aids, was highly valued. Female learners showed a much stronger preference for preparing their learning. Maps were considered to be the most valuable educational aid pre-tour, ranking above handbooks and study notes. Survey participants were also asked to consider what types of educational aids they would find useful for learning on an educational tour. Again, maps were considered to be the most valuable educational aid, consistently ranking highly at all stages of the educational travel experience. A tour leader for one educational tour company described the value of maps as being invaluable for focusing historical discussion points; for example, including individual plans of buildings to help visualise, and direct, a learning experience.

Nonetheless, more formal educational aids, most notably handbooks, were almost as highly valued as maps pre and during tour. Handbooks often included suggested reading containing novels as well as scholarly textbooks. One leader reflected on how his group used their textual resources on tour:

If we're walking around and we have these available to us, people can jot notes down in that sort of way or above all, when we meet in the evening, we've got this shared resource to actually work with. So these take the place fairly obviously of visuals, overheads, things like that which we would use in the teaching classroom setting. So it does enable people, I think, to have a fairly good and comprehensive aid memoir for what's going on, a bit of resource which can actually be used in the field, in the hotel to enhance their knowledge.

How such material was used varied depending on the teaching style of the tour leader. As one male academic leader observed from his experience, 'the people who come on these tours don't want to go overseas for three weeks and study in the way that we would think it. They don't really want to do much reading in the evening'.

The importance of access to educational aids continued post-tour; again, maps were considered to be the most valuable. Perhaps surprisingly, the web appeared to play little part in post-tour reflection according to respondents, although at least one academic interviewed had extended the educational experience both before and beyond the on-site engagement with his group by creating a website to make accessible the reports from the tours as well as his detailed notes. Generally speaking, female learners expressed a greater interest in continuing the learning experience post-tour than did males. Post-tour, scholars had greater faith in the power of informal meetings to extend and stimulate the quality of the educational experience than did the learners. However, learners preferred the ongoing analysis of maps, handbooks, web research and novels. It appears, therefore, that learners prefer group interaction *on tour* followed by individual reflection *post tour*, with scholars effectively inverting the preference.

Discussion

Although academics tend to hold more diverse ideas of what educational tourism could be than did learners, a number of shared understandings were apparent from our survey. Both groups considered the primary outcome of the educational tourism experience to be learning, and furthermore, that the learning was intentional. A series of distinctive features in the design and marketing of such tours contributed to their perception as pedagogical experiences for participants, but these components must cater to a wide range of learning needs, styles and interests and therefore cannot be too prescriptive or rigid. First, their explicit identification as ‘educational’ was an important aspect to what makes such tours learning experiences for their clients. Such terminology drew together like-minded individuals and provided a shared intention and expectations to the activities beyond simply visiting a series of destinations. Second, tour operators in this niche market were perceived to provide particular knowledge, expertise or experience, through the tour leader as well as local lecturers and guides. Social skills, as well as knowledge expertise, were vital because these enabled leaders to identify levels and degrees of capacity and engagement in the clientele and to respond accordingly in a variety of formal and informal contexts on tours. Third, learners, academics and providers agreed that support materials provided before and after the tour added to the opportunities for client learning associated with educational tourism.

Significantly, the learning experience in educational tourism is perceived to extend beyond the actual touristic experience and encompassed pre-travel considerations such as product development, personnel recruitment and learner preparation. Equally, the learning experience had a life after travel, as learning communities were forged to maintain learners’ social links. Educational tourism, therefore, has great potential to offer a meaningful, lifelong learning

experience for both its consumers and practitioners. It supports many of the distinguishing features of a lifelong learning agenda, such as those offered by Watson (2003), including the recognition of the importance of both formal and informal learning, the importance of self-motivated and self-funded learning, and the universality of learning.

This research suggests three types of learning experience associated with travel. On one end of the continuum, study abroad or credit tours organised as part of a university curriculum infer formal learning, especially since that learning is invariably credentialled. At the other end lies travel for reasons such as family holidays or backpacking rites of passage. These are generally informal learning experiences. Situated somewhere between these two lies the focus of our study—educational tourism. It can best be described as non-formal learning, one which has the potential to provide benefits at both ends. On the one hand, it is essentially a personal/pleasurable pursuit rather than a professional/study activity, and thus its power to motivate and engage the learner is significant. On the other, it is learning that is to a large degree structured and directed, facilitated by a knowledge expert, and supported by a range of relevant materials, giving it increased potential to transform the adult learner.

In many ways, the ‘look’ of the learning experiences on an educational tour resembled those occurring in more formal settings such as higher education institutions. Organisational structures, roles, teaching styles and educational outcomes were all apparent, as were implicit hierarchies, proxies of quality and learner perceptions of quality teaching. This raises interesting questions for adult educators and researchers. Were these structures apparent because they provided the best environment for learning to occur? Were the norms, ideologies and beliefs of formal educational institutions deliberately inculcated in these commercial operations, as a way of attracting academics as tour leaders and clients familiar with tertiary

institutions? Or was it rather that the academics unintentionally brought these norms with them? Was there an expectation by the learners that this was what education looked like? The effects the organisational structure, knowledge expert and tour documentation formats have upon less formal, experiential learning events deserve to be further explored.

Educational tourism is a topic that could benefit from a wide range of disciplinary and methodological approaches to explore more fully its impact on both participants and local communities. Ethnographic studies—similar to Neumann’s (1993) account of an alternative bus tour through the American Southwest—are one way in which adult educators could shed further light on the social interactions between tour participants and their host communities. Equally, critical educational researchers could further explore the pedagogical relationship between the travel participant and tour leader. This is particularly relevant given the transformative potential of adult education and the way in which knowledge/power is notionally ascribed to the ‘academic’ in an educational tourism framework.

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