



# Enhancing Hospitality students learning outcomes in Universities: From an Instructional to a Learning paradigm

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## Abstract

Many students with greater diversity of characteristics now access higher education to study hospitality management in larger numbers than ever before. An undesirable outcome attendant to massification is the unsatisfactory performance levels that many hospitality students experience in their learning as attested by unsustainably low pass and throughput rates. This raises a series of critical questions that are at the core of this paper and calls for a critical inquiry into the match between a hotel school's espoused theory and its theory in use. In simple terms, this implies inquiring into how hotel schools in universities can align their activities with their beliefs and vision concerning how students learn. This conceptual paper seeks to argue for the transition by universities from an instructional to a learning paradigm, as a *modus operandi* to help hospitality students learn and succeed in their chosen career.

**Key words:** Higher education, paradigm, learning, success, hospitality students

## Introduction

Many hotel schools in universities the world over, are unanimous that the student should occupy the centre stage of all teaching and learning processes and initiatives. This is one way to ensure that all teaching and learning arrangements are predicated on enabling student learning to happen. Paradoxically, the way most hotel schools in universities operate is at variance with their convictions about how student learning should occur. This is a paradox in the sense that although most hotel schools in universities purportedly seek to improve student learning outcomes as attested by their elaborate mission and vision statements, they invest much of their time in trying to improve their instructional practices instead of trying to understand how students learn and enabling learning to happen (Newble & Entwistle, 2009). This is disturbing in the sense that instruction is somehow assumed to be synonymous with learning and yet the former is supposed to give rise to the later.

In the South African Higher Education context, the unsustainably low throughput rates experienced by hospitality students in universities can be taken as an epitome of how hotel schools in universities are largely failing in their roles of helping hospitality students learn. A report by CHE (2013) for instance has indicated that the overall success rates of hospitality students in South African universities are relatively low as compared with similarly developed countries. A study conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry, (2007) in respect of the 2006 cohort

showed that only 50% of hospitality students entering HE will ever graduate at any one time. Student success is influenced by an interplay of factors that operate at the academic, socio-economic and cultural level. Social factors include such factors as school background, socio-economic status, while academic factors relate to factors such as pedagogical approaches, language literacies, teaching and assessment practices. The massification of the HE system, which has seen hospitality students with greater diversity of characteristics accessing HE in increasing numbers has exacerbated the problem of low success rates (CHE, 2016). While hotel schools cannot solely be held accountable for all the factors that affect student success in hospitality, it is important to note that hotel schools remain key in stirring processes and initiatives that help reduce the impact of these problems. One critical area in which university hotel schools can make a contribution is through their facilitation of learning roles.

This requires hotel schools in universities to reflect critically on who their students are and how hotel schools can contribute in making learning transpire. As part of their reflections, hotel schools in universities need to engage with a series of questions which are at the core of this paper. First, hotel schools need to interrogate the question relating to how the existing calibre of hospitality students should be taught so that they experience ongoing success. On a deeper level this means asking whether hotel schools should concern themselves with teaching or learning.

In order to grapple with this question, hotel schools need to have a clear understanding of the dominant paradigm that drives university teaching and learning. This paves the way to the last question that gives leverage to this paper that is: Should student learning be premised on the instructional or learning paradigm? This paper seeks to argue for the transition by university hotel schools from an instructional to a learning paradigm as a *modus operandi* so as to help students learn. In arguing in this manner, the paper is not suggesting that the instruction process has no place in the university learning process. Instead, it is to argue that the instructional process should not be seen as the end in itself but a means to an end. The ultimate end that is implied in this case is student learning. Therefore the paper posits that the instruction process should be predicated on enabling learning to happen which is the ultimate end and purpose for the existence of hotel schools in any university. Given the low throughput rates of Hospitality students in hotel schools in South African universities, research within this context is necessary. The theoretical contribution relates to critically analysing and examining the key assumptions that characterise the instructional and the learning paradigm and the attendant teaching and learning implications which could be useful for academic and management endeavours.

## **Methodology**

The research involved an extensive literature search of strategies of enhancing Hospitality students learning outcomes in Universities in southern Africa, followed by several interviews with key personnel at six South African hotel schools. In order to select respondents purposive sampling, which is a non-probability based sampling technique was used. Choosing respondents with a specific objective in mind is termed purposive sampling (Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins & Van Wyk, 2010).

## **The Concept of Paradigm**

The notion of instructional and learning paradigm forms the linchpin of this discussion. It is therefore important that at the onset, a conversation around the concept of paradigm be sought as a way of reaching a common understanding of the concept. According to Maree (2008) a paradigm is a set of assumptions or beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality which give rise to a particular world view. It addresses fundamental assumptions taken on

faith, such as beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between knower and known (epistemology) and assumptions about methodologies. It serves as a lens or the standard by which social reality is interpreted. The ontological question seeks to understand what the form and nature of reality is, what lies out there that can be discovered, the reality of how things work and the real existence of things (Ponterotto, 2005; Creswell, 2007).

The epistemological assumption questions how the world is known (Smit, 2001). An epistemological assumption concerns the essentials of knowledge, its form and nature as well as the process of acquisition of knowledge (Cohen et al, 2007). It is the search for knowledge truth as well as knowledge transfer *viz* how knowledge is communicated from those who know. This discussion commences by giving an exposition of the salient ontological and epistemological attributes of the instructional and learning paradigm and the attendant implications in terms of teaching and learning. A discussion of these is important since every act of teaching or facilitation of learning rests upon some form of implicit theory or paradigm of learning.

### **The Instructional Paradigm**

The instructional paradigm is informed by the positivist logic which assumes that there is a separation between the learner and that which has to be learned (Smit, 2001). This paradigm depicts students as generally lacking in knowledge and this serves as justification for their dependence on the lecturer for all their knowledge needs. As a result, the instructional paradigm puts an overwhelming emphasis on the teaching role.

Since teaching implies the presence of dedicated lecturers, this paradigm therefore depicts lecturers as the most important elements in the teaching and learning situation. Placing instruction/teaching at the centre of the university business naturally leads to a teacher-centred approach with a strong focus on, teaching styles and approaches, teaching design, and teaching outcomes. It therefore comes as no surprise that the instructional paradigm prides itself on the lecture method. One of the major assumptions that drives this paradigm is that for hospitality students to understand something the lecturers have got to teach them first. A major assumption of this paradigm is that there is a correlation between the amount of teaching that hospitality lecturers expend and the amount of learning that the students experience. Consequently, if hospitality students do not master a particular concept then the best solution is to provide more teaching to the students with the hope that they will eventually understand it. Thus, the instruction paradigm depicts the students/learners as empty vessels who need to be filled with knowledge from the talented lecturer so that they become knowledgeable (Sengodan & Prosser, 1990).

Although this paper depicts the instructional paradigm as significantly different from the learning paradigm, in practice the distinction between the two may not be as neatly defined as the description made. That is to say, that in many respects some elements of the instructional paradigm are also reflected in the learning paradigm and it might be appropriate to treat these as two ends on a continuum.

### **The Learning Paradigm**

The Learning paradigm is informed by the Constructivist theory which stems from the premise that students are creators of their own knowledge. The theory has it that hospitality students construct their own knowledge and understanding of phenomena through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Newble & Entwistle, 2009). The learning paradigm starts from the premise that universities' primary purpose is to prompt learning of hospitality students from diverse backgrounds. Barr and Tagg (1995) argue that the learning paradigm envisions the university itself as a learner over time as it continuously learns how to produce more

learning with each graduating class and each entering hospitality student. In this way each graduating class learns more than the previous graduating class. Unlike the instructional paradigm where the emphasis is on what the lecturer does, namely lecturing, the learning paradigm has student learning at its heart. While the learning paradigm does not prohibit lecturing, it advocates for interactive lectures that are interspersed with engaging activities that help promote maximum student learning.

In order to make the assumptions that inform the instructional and the learning paradigm apparent, the two paradigms will be compared in terms of six pedagogic dimensions namely, mission and purpose, values, learning theory, teaching and learning assumptions and nature of roles.

### **Mission and Purpose**

In the instructional paradigm the hotel school's unquestionable mission is to provide instruction or to teach whereas in the learning paradigm, the purpose of the university is to facilitate effective learning. Thus, a hotel school that is driven by the instructional paradigm depicts the student as lacking knowledge and hence the role of the lecturer is to provide the needed knowledge through the teaching process. In other words, a hotel school that operates on the basis of the instructional paradigm regards its main role as that of transferring knowledge to the students.

On the contrary, the learning paradigm regards the student as having prior knowledge which will be used to his/her advantage to learn new concepts through the guidance of the lecturer. While the instructional paradigm is predisposed with the transfer of knowledge, the learning paradigm seeks to empower students so that they are able to construct and discover knowledge. As (Drisoll, 2000) put it, the instructional paradigm depicts the education of the learner as a quantitative knowledge acquisition process while the learning paradigm regards it as a qualitative transformation process. From these statements it is clear that the two paradigms are grounded on different perspectives. The instructional paradigm is based on the lecturer's perspective while the learning perspective is based on the student perspective.

### **Values**

The instructional paradigm operates in terms of an ideal student and ideal curriculum that is delivered in a structured and uniform manner (Zheng, 2010). For instance lecturers operating in terms of this paradigm have to prepare their curriculum and related learning activities well in advance without having an idea of who the students are. The lecturers will then be expected to teach and reteach concepts over and over to students until they understand them. Since students are subjected to the same material and are treated as a homogenous group, this predispose them into developing habits for competition. In the instructional paradigm learning is reduced to a competition for grades by both students and lecturers.

In such a competitive environment, it is believed that more learning can be induced through the award of external rewards such as certificates, prize and others. It therefore comes as no surprise that extrinsic motivation plays an important role in this type of learning environment. At the same time lecturers also compete against each other, just as departments, schools and faculties compete against each other in much the same way as premier league teams compete to climb to the top of the table.

By contrast, in a hotel school environment that is predicated on the assumptions of the learning paradigm, the curriculum is always work in progress and it is constantly revised and adapted to suit the diverse needs of the class. The learning paradigm thrives on the collaboration and cooperation of students from diverse backgrounds and abilities. Understandably, such hotel schools therefore tend to promote intrinsically rewarding goals.

## **Assumptions about teaching**

In the instructional paradigm the hotel school is always viewed as an institution whose sole aim is to provide instruction. In other words the teaching function becomes the cause or end purpose for the existence of the hotel school (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Letseka & Maile, 2008). In the instructional paradigm, it is commonly taken for granted that any expert in a particular field can teach well. For instance if someone has a PhD in Hospitality then he/she is naturally considered able to teach it to any group of students irrespective of whether or not he/she has had any pedagogical training. Thus, knowledge of the subject matter is considered the most important variable in the teaching and learning process. This thinking is not consistent with findings from research and practice. For instance, Trigwell (2012) argues that teaching is a complex application of theory and research that requires considerable teacher training and continuous refinement of skills and procedures. Boughey (2010) also makes a cogent observation that while it is necessary that hospitality lecturers possess theories relating to their content discipline, they also need explicit and well-structured theories that relate to teaching their disciplines.

In the learning paradigm, knowing the subject matter, while important, is not sufficient as teachers also need to study and get to know their students in detail so that they can create appropriate learning environments in line with their individual needs. Thus the idea of situated learning lies at the centre of a learning experience that is informed by a learning paradigm. Unlike the instructional paradigm that depicts the university's existence as to provide instruction, the learning paradigm regards hotel school's role as that of enabling learning to happen through the activities of teaching (Yarkova & Cherp, 2013). This means that the teaching role of the hotel school ceases to be the end in itself but the means to an end, which is student learning. Whereas in the instructional-paradigm driven learning environment certification is key, in a classroom that is inspired by the learning paradigm learning is driven by the need to develop competence. Consequently, the learning experiences in the former are structured around the rigid dictates of the curriculum, while learners' experiences, needs and context drive the learning experiences in the later.

## **Learning theory**

The instructional paradigm is informed by the positivist logic which assumes that there is a separation between the learner and that which has to be taught (Cohen et al, 2007). In terms of this paradigm learning can only happen if the hospitality lecturers, who are regarded as specialists in their areas of training impart knowledge to the students. This has implications in terms of the approaches that will be adopted to inform the teaching and learning process. Because the paradigm lays an overwhelming emphasis on the teaching instead of the learning process, a teacher-centred approach is adopted. Hotel schools that operate in terms of this paradigm invest a lot of time and resources in the development of lecturers and paying very little or no attention to thinking about how students learn and the manner in which their learning can be enhanced. Teaching approaches that fits well within the instructional paradigm include the lecture, demonstration, telling and others. Exposed to such methods students are predisposed to learn through memorisation and mere listening. Such methods do not engage students in deep cognitive learning and as a result they tend to promote a surface approach to learning (Marriss, 2010).

On the other hand, the interpretivist/constructivist-inclined learning paradigm, prides on collaborative and cooperative learning in a supportive environment (Northege, 2003). Hospitality lecturers who use this paradigm, recognise the qualitative value of students' culture, social context and language as enablers in their learning process. In terms of this

paradigm learning is predicated on the understanding of students' unique and diverse needs. Learning activities and experiences can then be structured in such a way that they are able to respond to students' needs and realities. This contrasts sharply with the instructional paradigm where students are exposed to a structured and standardised teaching under the assumption that they are homogenous. Exposing all hospitality students to similar learning experiences and treating them as if they were homogenous naturally leads to competition amongst students, teachers, departments and faculties.

As Barr and Tagg (1995) put it, a hotel school that is informed by the instructional paradigm regards its role as that of delivering knowledge. The primary aim is to offer courses. In contrast, in the learning paradigm, the purpose of the university is to create environments and experiences that help hospitality students discover and construct knowledge for themselves. Whereas the primary concern in the instructional paradigm is to improve the quality of instruction, the learning paradigm's overwhelming concern is to make students members of community of learners that make discoveries and solve problems.

### **The nature of roles**

In the instructional paradigm there are clearly defined roles between lecturers and students. For instance, faculty members are regarded as disciplinary experts whose role is to impart knowledge through the lecturing process. In other words the lecturers are considered key features of any instructional delivery system. In this environment the lecturer is regarded as an expert whose special role is to convey instruction. Therefore the lecturer exercises a centrally important role in the education of the learner. What this simply means is that the teacher's role is a directive and rooted in authority. As a result, a culture of unquestioning acceptance of dispensed knowledge is promoted in the classroom (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012). In the learning paradigm lecturers do not assume the role of experts as they are regarded as designers of learning environments that help produce student learning. In the learning paradigm, lecturers are regarded as coaches who interact with a team of learners. The learning paradigm depicts both the lecturer and the students as partners who are actively involved in the learning process. Contrary to the instructional paradigm where the teacher directs the process of learning, in the learning paradigm classroom the teacher's role is interactive and is entrenched in negotiation. As a result, a classroom environment that is entrenched in the assumptions of the learning paradigm tends to promote a culture of inquiry.

### **Discussion**

Aligning hotel school structures, processes and behaviours around the main tenets of the learning paradigm has implications for teaching and learning. If one considers the highly massified higher education system in South Africa and the subsequent diversity of student characteristics (CHE, 2016) one is tempted to argue that hotel schools cannot continue to treat students as if they were a homogenous group. Instead, the need to customise teaching and learning so that it responds directly to the needs of the individual students that constitute the class comes to the fore (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2016). Academics need to understand who their students are and on the basis of this understanding, design teaching and learning experiences that will help students achieve the desired learning outcomes. Viewed in this light, it would appear that the one-size fits all approach to curriculum design, implementation, assessment, pedagogy that is implied by the instructional paradigm can no longer be sustainable. Instead, the situated-ness of the learning environment should be brought to the fore in line with the assumptions of the learning paradigm.

The theory of situated learning, which is central to the learning paradigm, looks at the learning phenomenon in a broader and holistic perspective that recognises the interaction among students, their disciplinary knowledge, their environment and the role of situation (Drissoll,

2000; Trigwell, 2012). Academics who are inclined towards the learning paradigm would thus realise that students learn more if they are actively involved in the learning activities. Academics who structure their learning environments in terms of the learning paradigm will thus design most of the classroom activities from the student point of view with the lecturer only playing a facilitating role. Yarkova and Cherp (2013) believe that academics who incorporate the situated learning approach in the classroom will among other things:

- (a) identify situations that will engage the students in complex, realistic, problem centred activities that will help students realise the desired learning outcomes.
- (b) provide differentiated scaffolding for students in accordance with their level of understanding. This scaffolding is gradually reduced as students acquire the required skills.
- (c) alter their roles from information transmitter to facilitator of learning by tracking progress, providing formative and meaningful assessment of students work, building collaborative learning environments as well as encouraging reflection.

Lecturers inclined towards the learning paradigm therefore attach a lot of value in approaches to teaching that involve service learning, work integrated learning, educational tours, experiments and problem-based learning as these help in advancing the frontiers of learning. This is so because such methods promote learning in natural settings where students interact with the environment and culture in which the learning is located. As Devlin and Samarackrema (2011) put it, every human thought is situated because what people perceive, how they conceive of their activity and what they physically do develop together. Much of the learning that occurs in a classroom that is inspired by the instructional paradigm occurs through transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the students. The lecture method thus plays an integral part in the knowledge transfer process. The instructional paradigm as encapsulated in the behaviourist and cognitive learning theories regards learning as the search of knowledge that is external to the student and the world (Northege, 2003). The student that is implied by these learning theories is a passive one. As a result, the curriculum, syllabi, modules and the learning activities are designed by external experts in a standardised way without involving the students.

Such a curriculum will then be implemented through lectures and seminars. In an instructional paradigm-mediated learning environment, the student is relegated to a peripheral and passive status. Lecturers working in this type of environment conceive their main role as imparting knowledge to the student predominantly through lectures and seminar presentations. Thus student learning is equated to the taking of notes, listening and memorising presentations from the lecturer. In terms of ascertaining whether students have achieved the desired learning outcomes, students will then be subjected to standardised tests and examinations that are administered at the end of the term, semester or learning phase. This type of assessment is summative and high-stakes with very limited opportunities for feedback to assist the student in future learning as the focus is on grading the students (Case, 2013).

In contrast, the learning paradigm, focuses on situated learning whose main assumption is that knowledge is a meaning-making process which cannot be separated from the context in which it is used. The theory of situated learning looks at the learning process in a wider and all-inclusive perspective that recognises the interaction among students, their disciplinary knowledge, their environment and the role of situation (Marris, 2010). At the heart of this theory is the assumption that human thought is situated or adapted to the environment because what students perceive, how they conceive of their activity and what they physically do develop together (Clegg, 2009; Vajoczki et al, 2011). In the learning paradigm "learning" is not regarded as a mere accumulation of information but a transformation of the individual student who is

moving towards full membership in a learning community (Zheng, 2010). Therefore lecturers who are inclined towards the learning paradigm will not attempt to decontextualize learning nor try to separate learning from doing.

Learning is regarded as a dynamic process in which situations shape students cognition while at the same time individual student thinking and actions help shape their situations. The importance of participating in the knowledge-building process is thus key in any classroom that is inclined towards the learning paradigm. Therefore, adopting the tenets of the learning paradigm necessitates a change in the culture that prevails in the classroom from that of knowledge dispenser into a learning community (Shulman, 2001). In such a learning environment both the lecturer and the student work collaboratively to achieve the desired learning outcomes. The learning environment and culture should thus emphasise distributed expertise where students are respected for the knowledge, interests and experience which they bring to the learning situation and are further provided space within the learning community to learn new things. In this type of learning environment students learn from different sources of knowledge distributed in the learning situation ranging from peers, text books, themselves, the teacher and others.

The critical issue here is that unlike in the instructional paradigm where the lecturer appear to have a monopoly over knowledge, in the learning paradigm both the lecturer and students act as potential sources of knowledge. In terms of pedagogy lecturers subscribing to this paradigm tend to adopt cooperative learning and participatory learning pedagogies such as the use of case studies, study groups, active debates, structured classroom discussions which are anchored on interaction and participation.

In the instructional paradigm, assessment of students is done in a rigid, summative and judgmental way for the main purpose of getting a mark. This is usually done through the administration of tests and examinations. This contrasts sharply with the assessment that is inspired by the learning paradigm where the focus is on assessing the process of learning and problem solving skills. Lecturers subscribing to the learning paradigm thus ensure that their assessment strategies and methods become integrated, ongoing and seamless part of learning. The defining character of this type of assessment is the provision of consistent, interactive feedback which a student uses as a tool to improve further learning. This discussion should not be construed as implying that tests are eliminated in a classroom that is driven by the learning paradigm. Rather, their importance is reduced as students are afforded the opportunity to demonstrate their competence through a variety of assessment methods. Thus, while exams and tests remain important, the main emphasis shifts from the assessment of learning to assessment for learning where the focus is on assessing the process of learning and not just the final product.

The question “whose responsibility is it to influence learning?” will evoke different responses from the instructional and learning paradigm. While lecturers subscribing to the instructional paradigm believe that education is the sole responsibility of the teachers and lecturers, those operating on the basis of the learning paradigm tenets will argue that the whole organisation and its structures should be actively involved in the enhancement of the learning environment. As Tinto (2013) puts it, improvement in rates of student success requires intentional and structured action that is systematic and coordinated in nature involving many people across campus.

Whereas the instructional paradigm always assumes that learning should be linear and sequential, this may not necessarily hold in a massified and diverse university classroom where students bring with them different levels of aptitudes experiences and cultural capital. In such an environment the need to make learning non-linear and hyperlinked takes precedence.



## Conclusion

The transition from instruction to learning paradigm represents a major shift by universities from a focus on the “what” to the “how” of learning. This transition is justified especially when viewed against the backdrop of the so many hospitality students who fail to succeed in their studies. However, the transition, while absolutely necessary, will not be achieved easily or quickly due to a number of exigencies.

First, and naturally, people are sceptical about the perceived uncertainty and turbulence that is normally associated with change. Secondly, hotel schools have a propensity to perpetuate their established traditions of teaching and learning irrespective of whether or not they are serving the desired ends. Those who may seek to transform the paradigm of hotel schools in institutions may be regarded as deviants and out of touch. This paper posits that when the ruling paradigm is no longer able to solve problems and to generate a positive vision of the future that is the right time to change it. This paper infers on the basis of the current unsatisfactory performance patterns of hospitality students’ in universities across the higher education sector that the time for a change of paradigm has arrived. Naturally this will require a gradual process of experimentation and modification so as to align organisational structures and cultures with the envisaged vision of learning as encapsulated in the learning paradigm. For this to succeed, the collaboration and efforts of many people across the university will be key. It is high time universities, executive leaders, deans and hospitality lecturers and support staff become what they want their students to be.

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