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To cite this article: Barry O'Mahony & Ada Lo (2020) Learning through active engagement: case teaching in hospitality management, *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 25:10, 1059-1061, DOI: [10.1080/10941665.2020.1838845](https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2020.1838845)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2020.1838845>



Published online: 03 Nov 2020.



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INTRODUCTION



Learning through active engagement: case teaching in hospitality management

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Critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, and problem solving represent the higher order skills of Bloom's taxonomy and form an important component of the Higher Education standards of most countries (O'Mahony, 2015). These skills are seen as essential to providing work ready graduates and, as a result, universities have sought to embed them into their curricula and supporting assessments. Case based teaching, which originated at Harvard University in 1910, is a problem-based approach to teaching and learning that provides opportunities to develop these skills.

Cases involve a narrative about an organisation and characters within an organisation, who seek solutions to industry challenges. Solving these industry problems involves conceptualising a problem, evaluating and analysing the facts of the case, and presenting plausible solutions. Active engagement with cases provides students with opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills because these skills can be learned and refined over time (Abdulaeva et al., 2020). Active engagement is stimulated by true to life cases that involve the collection of primary data about industry challenges (Pnevmatikos et al., 2019; Snyder & Snyder, 2008). Exposing students to realistic challenges also provides context to learning about the world of work. Consequently, the case method allows educators to not only inculcate the deeper thinking required to solve complex challenges, but also provides practical context to theoretical concepts (Ellet, 2018; Walker and Finney, 1999).

The aim of this special issue is to present a series of real cases based on hospitality companies based in

Asia or companies targeting the Asian market to support teaching and learning in undergraduate hospitality management curricula. The Asia Pacific is the fastest-growing tourism region in the world. It is home to hospitality companies of different sizes and characteristics, serving both tourists and the local markets that make contributions to various countries GDPs (Statista, 2020; UNWTO, 2019).

We have been fortunate to receive submissions for this Special Issue that range in the levels of complexity of the dilemmas to be resolved. All cases are factual and based on issues that are either currently happening or have happened in the relatively recent past. As can be seen, the challenges of some cases have re-emerged, such as, the infectious outbreaks that occurred at Metropark hotel in Hong Kong. COVID-19 has shown the vulnerability of the hospitality and tourism sectors on a macro scale, and thus how the challenges presented in the Metropark case were managed will resonate with hoteliers. The framework presented by the authors to manage such crises also has value beyond infectious diseases.

Attempting to understand what the future holds is also inherent in the case of Nam Long Restaurant in Hoi An, Vietnam. This case presents a number of challenges that the restaurant owner faces, which include an over reliance on the Korean group tourist market and the dilution of the unique cultural heritage of the city by modifying its authentic Vietnamese menu to suit the tastes of emerging markets. The case requires students to understand not only restaurant operations and strategic marketing, but also the tourism industry in a UNESCO listed heritage city.

The use of Asian heritage and culture is also exemplified in the servicescape, culture, and management style of the M. Mandarin Hotel in Singapore. This case allows students to assess the extent to which an Asian hotel should maintain its current position as a unique and diversified East Asian themed hotel or to conform with similar competitor hotels by adopting a fusion approach of east meets west in their management philosophy and hotel operation.

The Bird Bird Restaurant case, also located in Singapore, allows students to make high stakes decisions that many restaurant owners encounter: to revamp the menu, to reposition the offering, or to bite the bullet and close down a restaurant that is losing money. This case requires students to understand the Singaporean food and beverage market and to apply various tools such as financial analysis, BCG matrix and SWOT analysis to come up with recommendations that can provide the information needed to make informed decisions, all of which have significant consequences.

The next case in this Special Issue features Wharf Hotels in Hong Kong, SAR where the decisions which the President needs to make to transform Wharf Hotels into a preferred international hotel brand are presented. The case describes the initiatives rolled out by the President, the challenges faced by Wharf Hotels in achieving its strategic objectives and the available opportunities that could be capitalised on.

The case of the Swiss start-up KITRO, reminds us of the resources that are used to service hotel customers. In this case, seeking innovative sustainable solutions to the management of food waste is but one element of the dilemma. Another is to educate users to embrace technology so that sustainable practices become key managerial priorities for the industry.

The final case is that of Hong Kong's Hotel ICON. This case highlights the importance of sustainability to the hospitality industry by focusing on sustainable operations through innovation to create value for the different stakeholders. After rolling out numerous sustainability initiatives, the general manager now ponders how the results can be evaluated and reported; and how sustainability features can be used to strengthen the hotel's competitive advantages in a highly competitive market. The Hotel ICON case should have been published in this Special Issue but was erroneously published in issue 25(5) of the Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research. That case can be accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2020.1746367>.

All of these cases have been carefully crafted to ensure that a dilemma has been presented that challenges students to think deeply about the decision-making process and about the impact of their proposed decisions. In each case, clear learning objectives are provided along with some key questions to guide class discussions. These can be used to develop specific tasks for students that place them in an active learning mode. Additionally, links to theory have been provided to allow students to reflect upon the practical application of this theory. In this way, students can be assessed on their ability to develop the higher order critical thinking required to conceptualise and analyze industry issues. While, in most cases, there are no right or wrong answers, the knowledge skills and attitudes that accrue through case learning using these cases can be applied to future problems (Bahr, 2010). The key take-away, therefore, is that students can build a set of competencies to carry with them into the hospitality industry on graduation.

We are pleased to present these field-based teaching cases to our colleagues, and we hope that your experience in using these cases is fruitful and beneficial to your students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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