

Training Theory-Builders: Coursework in Visitor Behavior

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Abstract

The successful management of recreation, leisure and tourist facilities requires an understanding of the attitudes, needs, knowledge, and actions of visitors - those users, clients, and customers who come to see and participate at a given site. As markets grow increasingly competitive, skill in understanding and assessing the behavior of visitors is rapidly becoming a highly desirable competency for the recreation, leisure, and tourism professional. While content related to visitor behavior already permeates the recreation, leisure, and tourism curriculum, few courses exist that focus upon visitor behavior as an independent subject. This article explains the importance of coursework in visitor behavior, provides an overview of key content and representative literature, and presents a unifying course approach with sample teaching strategies based on the notion of insight and theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Key words: Visitors, Visitor behavior, Curriculum development, Theory development

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Introduction

Recreation, leisure and tourism industries depend upon and exist to serve *visitors*: those users, clients, and customers who come to see and to participate at sites and facilities. As markets grow ever more competitive, the ability to understand and assess the behavior of visitors is rapidly becoming a highly desirable competency for the recreation, leisure, and tourism professional. Indeed, a wide range of sites and industries have recently noted the critical importance of understanding the motivations, needs, attitudes, and actions of visitors in order to inform recreation and leisure management and practice, including travel and tourism (Fick & Ritchie, 1991); public recreation programs (Crompton & MacKay, 1989); the hospitality industry (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991); parks (Crotts & Van Rekom, 1994); wilderness areas (Moore, 1991); museums (Larson, 1994), and interpretive sites (Mullins, 1991). Research on visitor behavior has been shown to influence numerous aspects of site management and practice, including facility design, advertising and marketing, programming, and resource management (Pearce, 1988).

While a growing body of literature is yielding some theories and general principles of visitor behavior in diverse settings that can help guide practitioners (Patterson & Bitgood, 1988), today's recreation, leisure and tourism professionals must also understand when and how to design, conduct, and interpret systematic and responsible visitor evaluation and research at any given site in order to ascertain the needs, interests, and concerns of actual and potential users. Therefore, methodological and analytical skills for assessing visitor behavior, as well as familiarity with the literature on visitor behavior, are considered two of the most basic competencies required to meet professional standards of practice (Silverman, 1992).

Butts (1992) has noted the proclivity of recreation degree programs to offer more specialization than generalist degrees, as well as "the growing need for a more varied, adaptable leisure service professional" (p. 78). These observations suggest the importance of educating students in subjects that can cut across specialities to prepare a well-rounded, flexible professional. Training in visitor behavior can expose students to a critical set of concepts and skills, useful in a wide variety of recreation, leisure, and tourism settings.

While content related to visitor behavior already permeates the recreation, leisure, and tourism curriculum, and courses on research methods and/or assessment are typically offered at both the undergraduate and graduate level, few courses exist that address visitor behavior as an independent subject. Such a course would enable the in-depth and holistic exploration of visitor experiences. In a semester devoted to the subject, students could examine various aspects of visitor behavior in a range of settings, explore how different aspects of visitor behavior fit together, learn how to conduct visitor behavior research, and apply research findings to practice.

This article presents an introductory overview of the topic of visitor behavior: a description of representative literature and key questions that together form four units of content suitable for a one-semester course. Then, a unifying course approach and sample teaching strategies are presented.

Content Outline for Coursework in Visitor Behavior

Unit One: An Introduction to the Study of Visitor Behavior

To begin, students need an orientation to the who, what, where, when, why, and how of visitor behavior. Three key issues, as described below, provide important context for an in-depth look at visitor behavior: the history and nature of "visiting," the history and development of visitor behavior research, and the visit as an interaction of site and audience. Together, literature in these areas form a useful introductory unit.

History and nature of visiting. The activity of "visiting" is a basic human behavior, with a rich history. A course on the subject could start by posing two basic questions: What is a "visit," and how and when did "visiting" begin? After a look at the history of "touring" and visiting, contemporary perspectives on the significance of visiting (e.g., Graburn, 1989; MacCannell, 1976) can be examined.

History and development of visitor behavior research. The practice of researching and assessing visitor behavior is relatively young, but growing steadily. Addressing several basic questions about the history and development of the subfield can help students grasp its evolution and character. For example, what are the objectives of visitor research? When did it begin? What kinds of questions are asked, what methods are used? In addition to exploring literature on these issues (e.g., Patterson & Bitgood, 1988; Loomis, 1988), students can also gain an appreciation for the benefits derived by sites from conducting visitor studies (e.g., Machlis & Harvey, 1993; O'Toole, 1984).

The visit as an interaction of site and audience. Underlying much visitor behavior research is the belief that the nature of any given visit is a product of a site and its audience influencing each other. Audience theory from the field of communications (e.g., Dervin, 1981) can be utilized to teach this perspective, and to help students explore both "sides of the coin": namely, how professional personnel influence visitors and their experiences, and how visitors and their experiences affect sites and professional personnel.

Unit Two: Pre-Visit Behavior

After exposure to the introductory issues in Unit One, students are ready to examine pre-visit behavior. Three aspects of pre-visit behavior are particularly well-researched and useful for those training to become recreation, leisure, or tourism professionals: visitor motivations, visitor expectations and images, and destination decision-making.

Visitor motivations. A familiar topic in leisure research, scholarship on visitor motivations can help inform site and facility design, advertising, and programming. Many questions are relevant. For example, why do people come to certain types of facilities and sites? What types of experiences do they seek? Why do people come to or avoid particular facilities or sites? Theoretical approaches, such as Graburn's analysis of visitors' experiences in museums (1977), and the application of Maslow's hierarchy of motives to theme park visitors (Pearce & Moscardo, 1985), and to wilderness users (Young & Crandall, 1984), can help students become aware of, and sensitive to, the ways in which site personnel and visitor interests and goals may vary.

Expectations and images. Closely related to motivation is the issue of visitors' expectations for a visit and/or a facility, and the mental pictures or images they form. Potential areas to address include: How do people think about a given site or location? What do they expect will happen for them? How are expectations and images of particular sites formed? How do such expectations and images affect a visit? Examples of literature on this issue range from studies of the link between expectations and values (Feather, 1982), which can help students to understand the relationship between expectations and satisfaction, to studies of the formation of mental images of tourist destinations (e.g., Morello, 1983), which can be extremely helpful in the development and evaluation of site advertising and marketing.

Destination decision-making. The subject of how visitors choose destinations is widely researched, yielding useful information for practitioners. Examining theory of

motivation and expectation, scholars have proposed models of the decision-making process (e.g., van Raaij & Francken, 1984; Mansfeld, 1992). Other intriguing dimensions of this issue include the role of social influence on decision-making (e.g., Cheek & Burch, 1976), particularly word-of-mouth (Nolan, 1976; Adams, 1988); and preference attributes which explain visit choices (e.g., Hood, 1983). Such topics can greatly inform students' skills in site programming, advertising, and marketing.

Unit Three: On-Site Behavior

Having explored key aspects of pre-visit behavior, students are ready to consider visitors' on-site behavior. Five content areas are crucial here: audience composition, visitor needs, visitor-resource interaction, visitor-visitor interaction, and visitor-provider interaction.

Audience composition. Studies of audience composition and demographics can inform a variety of policy issues, ranging from identifying target markets to gearing interpretive material appropriately (DiMaggio, Useem & Brown, 1978). Relevant questions for student exploration include: who does and who does not visit certain types of sites? Who does and does not visit a particular site? Studies of audience composition and participation can also help new recreation, leisure, and tourism professionals understand the role of certain types of sites and facilities in society at large (e.g., Schuster, 1991).

Visitor needs. Given the importance of providing quality service to visitors, the subject of visitor needs is particularly critical to the training of future professionals. What do visitors need at various recreation, leisure, and tourist facilities? What happens when visitors' needs are not met? Here, students can explore topics such as site orientation (Loomis, 1987, Bitgood, 1992); physical accessibility (Steiner, 1993); and visitor use of information (e.g., Korn, 1988).

Visitor-resource interaction. Visitors relate to and interact with the unique resources available at a given site. For example, people relate in particular ways to history at an historic site (Silverman, 1988), to everyday artifacts at a museum (Silverman, 1990), and to nature at a park or in the wilderness (Schroeder, 1993; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). By examining literature in this area, students can learn how visitor-resource interaction can inform collections and resource management decisions, as well as how such research can elucidate visitors' attitudes.

Visitor-visitor interaction. For many people, visitor experiences are highly social, occurring in the contexts of friendships (Draper, 1984), and families (Hilke, 1989). The topic raises interesting questions: how do groups of visitors behave and interact? How do companions impact each others' experiences? Answers have come from studies such as those on visitor conversations (Birney, 1982; Silverman, 1990) and the influence of family interaction on learning (Diamond, 1986; Hilke, 1989). Through examination of this literature, students can learn how research on the social nature of visit experiences can be used to inform site programming and marketing.

Visitor-provider interaction. Contact with site personnel, such as tour guides, greeters, and attendants, is often a critical component of the visitor experience. Students can become more sensitive and effective professionals by understanding how visiting groups respond to site personnel and service providers, as well as the impacts of such interactions on visit experiences. Relevant research in this area ranges from the study of service recovery situations (e.g., Colenutt & McCarville, 1994), to the interaction of tourists and guides (Pearce, 1984).

Unit Four: Post-Visit Behavior

Post-visit behavior includes the outcomes and results of a visit, some of which may occur well before the visit itself is over. Study of three particular content areas can help prepare more informed practitioners: visitor assessments and satisfaction, integration, and benefits and life enhancement.

Visitor assessments and satisfaction. While a satisfied visitor is likely to return to a site, a dissatisfied visitor may not. Since visitor assessment is a key factor in subsequent visiting behavior, numerous questions on this topic have been posed and researched. For example, can recreation, leisure, and tourism professionals accurately measure visitor satisfaction, and if so, how? What is the relationship between expectations and satisfaction? Relevant and useful issues to explore with students include the formation of visitors' attitudes and attributions (e.g., Valle & Wallendorf, 1977); the phenomenon of complaint behavior (e.g., Bearden & Oliver, 1985), and strategies for service recovery (e.g., Colenutt & McCarville, 1994). Service providers clearly need to understand the mechanisms of these behaviors.

Integration. The experience of a visit does not end when one leaves a particular site or facility. Visitors integrate their visit experiences into their everyday lives and on-going relationships through a number of vehicles, such as visitor photography (e.g., Chalfen, 1979), souvenirs (Gordon, 1986), and visit recollections and memories (Falk, 1988). A relatively new area of research, this aspect of post-visit behavior can help professionals to better understand visitors' needs. In exploring the subject, students can begin to grasp the connections between visiting and the larger social world.

Benefits and life enhancement. An understanding of visit benefits can greatly influence site and facility programming, advertising, marketing, and policy-making. Several key questions follow: what benefits do visitors derive from their visits to various sites and facilities? How are benefits related to motivations, future expectations and images? How do benefits vary for different types of people? Another familiar topic in leisure research, documented visit benefits range from the social (e.g., Draper, 1984) to the restorative (e.g., Kaplan, Bardwell, & Slakter, 1993). Exploring research in this area can help students to become more effective recreation managers.

Course Philosophy and Teaching Techniques

The four units and fourteen topic areas outlined above represent a comprehensive yet cogent basis for a semester-long course in visitor behavior. What guiding philosophy

and teaching techniques are most appropriate for introducing recreation, leisure and tourism students to the subject and advancing their research skills?

The field of visitor behavior, still young and growing, is concerned with the development and building of theory (Loomis, 1988). Therefore, training students in the field may be viewed as training theory-builders, i.e., individuals who can generate useful prediction and explanation and become potential contributors to the evolving body of knowledge of visitor behavior. In their discussion of insight and theory development, Glaser and Strauss (1967) provide an excellent foundation for this perspective. Emphasizing the importance of the individual in theory generation, Glaser and Strauss (1967) assert that "the root sources of all significant theorizing are the sensitive insights of the observer himself" (p. 251).

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) discussion offers a suggestive framework for teaching techniques relevant to training "theory-builders." In several "methodological corollaries," they specify that one can cultivate crucial insights a) from personal experience; b) from existing theory; and c) from the experiences of others (including those of interviewees or informants). These three "sources" indeed suggest important and appropriate teaching strategies for coursework in visitor behavior, each briefly discussed in the following sections.

Personal Reflection

Reflections on personal experience can be a rich source of insight and theory-building (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the classroom, the subject of visitor behavior lends itself particularly well to exercises which encourage such reflection. Most students are likely to have had a range of personal experiences upon which to reflect, having been site and facility visitors themselves. Guiding students to write about, share, consider, and analyze their own visit experiences can also help them to recall and empathize with visitor perspectives. For example, during the introductory unit of the course, students could be asked to write a detailed description of a site or facility visit that was particularly memorable to them, and to analyze why it was so. Students could also discuss and compare their visiting behavior at various life stages (e.g., early childhood, family trips, adolescence, adulthood). While personal reflection would provide an extremely useful teaching strategy throughout the course, it seems particularly helpful for "ice-breaking" purposes early in the semester.

Existing Theory

Existing theory, usually accessible through literature in the field, is a traditional source of insight for theorizing. Students can easily be exposed to this source of insight through many of the staple teaching techniques of the college class, such as reading, lecture, discussion, and literature reviewing. For example, students can be provided with a sampler of literature to read and critique over the course of the semester, such as that outlined in this article. Students might also be required to complete brief literature reviews on specific topics of interest to them, and to report the findings, and new ideas and research insights they gain from such reviews to the class.

Data Gathering and Analysis

A researcher essentially “converts borrowed experiences into his (sic) own insights” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 252) whenever he or she observes or interviews people. Visitor behavior students must learn how to gather and analyze data that typically consists of the experiences of others. To this end, students can practice different research methods through field exercises in data collection and analysis at a variety of sites and facilities throughout the semester.

For example, to further explore pre-visit behavior for themselves, students could be assigned to interview local site visitors about their motivations, expectations, and decision-making processes. During the unit on on-site behavior, students could be trained in questionnaire development in order to produce demographic profiles of sites, and taught to conduct observations of visitor interaction. An exercise in developing and administering rating scales would be particularly appropriate when exploring the issues of post-visit behavior. Seven methods, commonly used to study visitors in recreation, leisure and tourism settings, should be addressed: demographic profiles, focus groups, observations, conversation analysis, interviews, questionnaires, and assessment/rating scales (Bitgood, 1988). In gathering and analyzing data, students will learn how to gain insights from the “experiences of others.”

Case Study

To generate insights in visitor behavior is not enough; students must also learn to use such insights to inform practice by applying the findings and implications of theory and research. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) assert, one of the jobs of theory is “to be usable in practical applications - prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations” (p. 3). This thought suggests the appropriateness of the case study approach as a fourth teaching method. Throughout all course units, students can be presented with real or imagined data and findings and asked to apply them to particular management situations and decisions. For example, what programmatic changes might a manager recommend based on the findings of a specific audience profile? How could a particular marketing strategy be redesigned using the results of a focus group on visitor expectations and needs? Such case study exercises would train students to utilize the insights they generate.

Conclusion

Visitor behavior is a critical competency for the development of sensitive and effective recreation, leisure, and tourism professionals. Understanding visitor behavior is also an emerging, developing field of research in need of more “theory-builders.” Teaching methods that include personal reflection, existing theory, data gathering and analysis, and case study can empower students to advance both practice and theory through visitor behavior coursework in recreation, leisure, and tourism curricula.

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