

The Immersive Situation Circuit

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Introduction

Today, instructors are facing a number of challenges in the classroom, and getting students involved with a topic or theme is one of these challenges. Case studies are often used to illustrate concepts and issues in an easy to understand manner. Of critical importance is to engage students into an activity that is interesting, and at the same time conveys knowledge and understanding of the topic at hand. This is of particular interest for courses that offer planning and development approaches for recreational and tourism activities. Such courses can cover a variety of issues, from impact analysis, to financial planning, design, distribution and marketing, to name but a few. After having covered important concepts and theories in class there is a good opportunity to employ an exercise that gives students hands-on examples to study and work on. The Immersive Situation Circuit was developed to give students the opportunity to work on such examples, and thus deepen their understanding of the theoretical content of the course.

Description of the Activity

The Immersive Situation Circuit is an activity suitable for small to medium sized classes. The idea is based on a circuit exercise set-up at a gym or an outdoor activity course. The classroom is set up with a number of workstations with different activities. Students are divided into groups and each group is being placed at one workstation. Depending on the design of the activity, the number of workstations, and the duration of class, the groups have a certain amount of time to work on the task at their respective station. After the time has elapsed, they progress to the next table, and start to work on that project. After the same amount of time they again move on to the next workstation, and so on.

The Immersive Situation Circuit was implemented in one of the last classes of an ecotourism course at third year level. The class size was rather small with about 16 students, and thus only four workstations were set up for groups of four students each. The following describes the situations and tasks at each of the stations.

Station 1: This station was set up with a laptop, loaded with a promotional CD Rom of The National Trust for Scotland. The content of the CD Rom included information about the Balmacara Estate in Scotland, about eleven walks in the area, history of farming in the area, and a “crofters game”. Students were asked to explore the

CD Rom, play the crofters game, and got the following instructions: “You are commissioned by The National Trust for Scotland to assess the CD Rom, i.e. to identify strengths and weaknesses as an educational tool for (potential) visitors to Scotland in general, and to Balmacara Estate in particular.”

Station 2: This table displayed the text in Box 1 (taken from a promotional webpage of the North West Territories) and a map of northwest Canada with a more detailed map of the area in question. At this station, students got the following instructions: “The residents of Sachs Harbour would like to secure a stable income from tourism; however, they are very conscious about their environment and their culture. In no way do they want to negatively exploit either. Bringing in tourists is planned to be economically beneficial, but also seen as a chance to educate ‘outsiders’ about the lifestyle and the natural environment. The native people hired you in order to develop a plan for ecotourism on Banks Island. For their first meeting, they would like to see some ideas, and an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for those ideas. Please prepare a brief presentation to introduce your plan to the people of Sachs Harbour”.

Ikahuk, Place where one crosses over

Named after the ship Mary Sachs, of the Canadian arctic expedition of 1913, the tiny community formed around an RCMP post, established in 1953. Banks Island had been inhabited by Pre-Dorset peoples over 3,500 years ago and Thule Inuit 500 years ago, but remained deserted for several centuries, until modern times.

Today, with a population of about 150, the traditional lifestyle of hunting, trapping and fishing is still very much alive and Sachs Harbour is known as the “Muskox Capital of Canada”. Guided tours to view wildlife, birds and flowers are available. Outfitting for big-game hunts for musk ox and polar bears can be arranged with the local Hunters and Trappers Association. Local crafts include the spinning and weaving of qiviut, the silk-like wool of the musk ox into fine scarves and sweaters.

Station 3: The third table was once again equipped with a laptop, this time connected to the Internet. Students were given the following task: “Please go to <http://www.eduweb.com/ecotourism/eco1.html> and play the Amazon Interactive Ecotourism Game”. This game has been designed to show the various difficulties developers encounter when they want to implement ecotourism in a developing country. The task is given on the webpage: “No one in Pangayacu has ever run an ecotourism project before, so everyone is a little nervous about the prospect. An older

man named Mariano suggests looking outside the community for expert help. Others say that the only way to make sure that the project benefits the people of the community is through local control and management". Similar to Station 2, students are expected to plan for ecotourism. However, this time there is a choice of two predetermined options at each step.

Station 4: The last table was equipped with another computer, connected to the Internet. Here, students were supposed to plan for a vacation trip: "You are planning a trip to Belize for yourself and a partner. Since you are a very environmentally conscious person, you want to travel as 'green' as possible. Thus, you are looking for eco-tours and ecolodges in Belize.

Your task is to find

- At least 3 ecolodges
- At least 3 eco tour operators and/or attractions

Have a closer look as to why those companies qualify as eco-operations. Are any of them certified? And if so, by what agency, and as part of what certification scheme or programme?"

Intended Outcomes of Activity

Students are supposed "immerse into a new situation" with each move to a new workstation. Thus the activities should be quite different from each other, and yet build a cohesive overall exercise related to the content of the overall course, or specific section of the course. There are various skills students have the opportunity to employ and/or acquire. These skills may be of two main categories: General skills, and course specific skills. General skills include teamwork, the ability to change from one project to another in an ad hoc manner, the ability to grasp the most important information in a short period of time in order to address the task, an analysis of the information given, and the ability to tackle a problem or task without prior notice. Course specific skills are obviously dependent on the course, and should relate to the theories previously covered in class. These can include activities such as impact analyses, setting up a development or a marketing plan, and similar tasks. The following briefly describes the specific goals of the four aforementioned workstations.

Station 1: The main goal of this exercise was to show students a real life example of how an attraction and the surrounding area promote themselves. In particular, emphasis was placed on education, which is a vital ingredient of ecotourism. Students also evaluated the user-friendliness and design of the CD Rom, as well as its usefulness as a marketing tool.

Station 2: This exercise once again was a real life example. Often, tourism planners are asked to assess and plan for certain tourism activities as a motor for community development. The main goal was to illustrate the difficulties in enhancing the positive impacts on community and local culture (including economic benefits), while trying to avoid the negative cultural and environmental impacts on the community. Access was one of the main problems identified in this case.

Station 3: Similar to the goal of Station 2, students had to juggle various components and make uninformed gut-feeling decisions in order to reach the next step. The main difference here was that they were not as free as they were in the previous case. Here the options were predetermined, and repercussions were visible as soon as the decision was made. This type of learning can be categorized as “instant feedback” learning, which is admittedly not realistic in this case, but helpful in learning to anticipate repercussions of certain developments.

Station 4: The goal of this exercise was to investigate the problem of “true” ecotourism, i.e. to see how ecotourism operators portray themselves, why they are called ecolodges or eco tour operators, if they have any credentials, and similar issues. Ecotourism has been suffering from “eco-sell”, “eco-piratism”, and “green-wash”. Many operators and accommodation providers around the globe termed themselves “eco”, but did not change anything in their actual behaviour. And even if there are good intentions, all too often there is no control mechanism, such as impartial certification programmes. This exercise showed students how difficult it is for the consumer to identify “true” eco operators and lodges and reveal the black sheep – especially if it is in another country far away from home.

Comments and Recommendations

The Immersive Situation Circuit was successfully implemented as a teaching tool in an ecotourism course. It is an interactive ad hoc exercise that can be adapted for classes of various sizes. One of the main advantages is that this exercise can be used in almost any possible course. Workstations can easily be adapted to the course content, and can even include physical exercises, for example, for outdoor recreation or dance therapy classes. There are only few limits to the types of workstations. This teaching tool provides the instructor with the opportunity to cover some of the main themes of the course, and deepen the understanding of concepts and theory by using practical activities. In addition, activities can be designed in a way that they are suitable for classes of various sizes by changing the group sizes and by adjusting the number of workstations. It also provides a change in pace and content, so that the grade of boredom is kept to a minimum. If the exercises at the workstations are carefully chosen and designed, both learning and enjoyment are at a high level. It is imperative that all exercises are designed in a way that they are doable in the time given, and that they are of equal time requirement. Set-up should be in a way that

groups do not see much of what other groups are doing, but concentrate on their own workstation. Also, the change from one activity to another should be as large as possible, i.e. it is important to avoid having two similar activities in a row. Probably one of the most important aspects is that most students very much enjoyed this type of class because it involved group activities without the so often disliked aspects of such exercises. It is often observed that students learn better if learning is fun and teaching methods are diverse.