A RETURN TO READING: 
BRINGING BOOK CLUBS TO 
HOSPITALITY EDUCATION

A shift from an instruction paradigm to a learning one requires new teaching methods. This paper addresses the use of book clubs, focused on books related to industry topics, to engage students in hospitality and tourism content and to help them think critically about the industry.

Introduction

In our dynamic, fast-paced, technology driven society, tourism and hospitality educators need to address how we can help students become leaders in the industry. To do so, we must help them learn to think critically to make decisions and solve problems that they may encounter in their professional lives. Postsecondary education has been viewed as the “marketplace of ideas” and has focused on “fostering intellectual development” and “cultivating effective thinking” (Stark & Lattuca, 1996). To promote these goals, traditional college teaching methods may need to be re-evaluated and courses may need to be reinvented. If students are to grapple with issues confronting the hospitality and tourism industry, they must be able to identify significant social trends and technological advances occurring over the next decade and beyond. They must also be able to address market opportunities, predict market shifts, face human resources challenges, keep abreast of industry trends and events, and become innovative thinkers and effective practitioners to succeed in business. These are big challenges and tourism and hospitality educators need to work to address them with innovative, thoughtful teaching and learning opportunities. This may mean rethinking how we teach tourism and hospitality content in our courses and re-evaluating how we involve students in their learning. One way to address the issue of updating our educational philosophies and practices is to move from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm.

One of our major challenges, as tourism and hospitality educators, is to teach our students so that they really learn. Teaching is not telling, but we may get caught in that mode because it is simple, traditional, acceptable, and expected. However, we have not taught anything unless students have learned something and to do that students need to get integrally involved with course material; they need to ask questions; they need to think critically; and they need to solve problems (Hamilton, 2003). In college classrooms, we may rely on lecturing to students and use a textbook as the only source of information. Certainly there are ways to teach other than a lecture and there are other sources of information and other types of written materials that may get students more deeply involved in the subject matter. In tourism and hospitality education, we tend to view the instructor and textbooks as the holders of the information in our courses and then we may use Internet sources to supplement the text or we may teach online courses. In fact, when one looks at current innovations in education, technological advances and new applications of
online course content are among the trends in college teaching. We may be able to add a wide variety of other sources of information and other sources of discussion ideas, if we look beyond these sources to what might be viewed as the old-fashioned world of books. Books, used creatively in a college hospitality or tourism classroom, can help educators and students move away from a teaching mode to a learning environment. An entire genre of food writing has evolved and travel writing continues to be popular. These books may add so much to our courses, our students’ interest in the subject matter, and to learning, if we tap into them and allow students to discuss and question what they read. This paper describes the use of additional books in the college tourism and hospitality classroom to go beyond traditional college classroom methods and texts to help us to meet the challenges of educating our students in this new millennium.

**Background on Teaching to Learning**

As college educators, we are often used to a paradigm based on instruction, where we know the information and we present the ideas and information to our students, whereas, a learning paradigm focuses on the students and their involvement and engagement in their own learning. The old teaching paradigm using exclusively lectures and textbooks may have worked quite well in the past, but it may not be effective now. Many of today’s students prefer more real-life examples, more sensory experiences, and a more personalized approach (Schroeder, 1993). In a society where “what you know” is more important than “what you have taken,” educational institutions must pay more attention to learning instead of teaching (Klor de Alva, 1999). A college is a place that produces learning and the old teaching or instruction paradigm focuses on the means rather than the end. While many educators believe in a learning paradigm, it can be difficult to implement (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Additionally, some educators worry that rigor may be lost in the transition from instruction to learning (Schon, 1995). However, numerous alternatives to traditional teaching methods, focusing on rigorous learner-centered hospitality education, exist. Many of these innovations may be based on web based learning activities, but other ideas and activities apply. In teaching to learning, the move is away from traditional lectures and papers towards more authentic learning experiences. Changing from a teaching to a learning paradigm has immediate potential for improving the learning environment of the students and the working environment of the instructors. The use of a variety of books in a variety of assignments may be one effective way to increase the focus on learning in a course.

**Background on Books**

Book clubs are common among adults, and children may be involved in literature circles or even book clubs in elementary school, but they do not seem to appear often in college courses, especially in the tourism and hospitality classroom. Students may have to read an additional book in a course to supplement the text, but are not often given a choice about which book to read, nor are they asked to lead discussions on the book or interact in literature groups with other students. The resurging popularity of book clubs has been likened to the new “going to the gym” type of phenomenon, and as a way for retailers to increase the market for books (Conley, 2001). However, their use may also increase students’ interest in reading and learning. Book clubs clearly model and confirm the value and power of shared reading experiences and allow for reflection and collaboration (Koooy, 2003). Setting up book clubs in a class, having students write book reports and give presentations, and involving students in discussions about what they read can add much to the tourism and hospitality curriculum. After students are through college, the
only reading that they may engage in will be voluntary, and these kinds of course activities serve to kindle an interest in reading in their chosen field of study. In addition, these activities may help students critically analyze what they read to determine if the materials ring true, are fictional, or are a combination of both. Overall, the use of literature about tourism, food, or hospitality related topics may get students involved in the content and get them to really think about the challenges of being a manager in the hospitality and tourism industry. The use of supplemental books can also simply be fun, provide a bit of lightness to the college classroom, and add to the enjoyment of learning. Ways to incorporate books into the hospitality and tourism curriculum include integrating book clubs, literary circles, and book reviews into courses.

Books to read in hospitality classes obviously depend on the topics included in the course. International hospitality classes may find books about international policies useful. A fine example might be *The Lexus and the Olive Branch* by Thomas Friedman (2000). Students in food related courses can draw on the growing, popular genre of food writing. If one walks into a bookstore today it is common to find a whole shelf devoted to works by authors who are chefs or food editors or simply by people interested in food. For example, Chef Anthony Bourdain has written a couple of interesting books about food. His book called *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (2000) offers a very real, personal account of his journey in life as a chef. It can seem rather crude to students who have not been involved in restaurants, but those who have toiled in kitchens seem to relate to this book and offer up their own accounts of what they see as the real challenges of foodservice operations in today’s society. *Tender at the Bone* by the editor of *Gourmet* magazine, Ruth Reichl (1998), offers students a funny, very personal memoir of how one woman gained her interest in food; it is interesting for students to see how someone finds herself involved in the world of food. *Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child*, by Noel Riley Fitch (1997), offers a very detailed look at one of America’s most famous foodies and is an in-depth account of a life and a career. *The Tummy Trilogy*, a food classic by Calvin Trillin (1994), provides a funny look at food in the United States and makes students really think about the origin and preparation of food. *Waiting* by Debra Ginsburg (2000) gives readers an autobiographical account of a lifelong waitress, and may make managers consider their employees more thoughtfully. *The Soul of a Chef*, by Michael Ruhlman (2001), is a fascinating look at the culinary arts profession and provides management students with an in-depth look at a part of the industry that they may not think about even though they may be in kitchens daily. On a different note, *Fast Food Nation: the Dark Side of the All American Meal* (Schlosser, 2001) provides readers with a very informed look at the American food industry and offers lots of food for thought. In the world of travel, Paul Theroux has written numerous travelogues, such as *The Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* (1995), and Bill Bryson has entertained us with great tales about places from the Appalachian Trail (1997) to Australia (2000.) All of these works may be used to tie literary works to the exciting, dynamic, challenging, world of hospitality and tourism. These are certainly not textbooks and many are clearly not objective accounts of food, travel experiences, or the hospitality industry, but having students read them and sift through what they believe are realities and what they believe are strong author biases, and having them discuss the books in small groups can be very useful for the managers of tomorrow.

**Book Reports**

Many of us probably remember writing book reports in elementary, middle, or high school, but they can be included in the college classroom too. In one example of the use of book reports, students, in a hospitality course dealing with food trends, were allowed to choose a book from a list of choices or a book of their own selection with instructor approval. Students read the
book, wrote a book review, including an analysis of the hospitality topics in the book, and shared their reviews with the class. Students were given tips for reading their books that included:

Read carefully, but with enjoyment;
Keep notes in a reading log; In the log you might write down references to passages that strike you as important, noting page numbers. Note specific areas related to the hospitality industry that intrigue you, that are interesting, that you agree or disagree with, etc. You might also write down your reactions to certain parts of the book as you read them, and
Mark specific parts of the book itself by using sticky notes or marking lightly in pencil.

As the students read the book they addressed the following questions:

What are the author’s main points?
What are the author’s viewpoint and purpose?
What kinds of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points?
Is the evidence convincing?
How does this book relate to the course?
What hospitality topics are discussed?
How do the author’s views of the industry compare to the views of others?
Does the author have the necessary expertise and credibility to write this book?
What are the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the book?
(Writing Book Reviews, 2004).

After reading the book, students wrote a book report that included:

All of the bibliographic information about the book;
An introduction;
A description of the book to include:
The setting in some detail,
The time period,
The main character (if applicable),
The plot, the conflict, the problem, in other words-- the story’s focus,
The subject—especially if it is non-fiction;
A summary of what the author has to say about the subject;
An evaluation and analysis of the book, including:
How well the book achieved its goal,
The possibilities that are suggested in the book,
What the book has left out,
How the book compares with others on the subject,
What specific points are convincing,
What specific points are not convincing,
How the author’s writing about hospitality compares with those of other authors and sources of evidence, and
What personal experiences you have had related to the subject

Finally, students added a conclusion to the paper. In this section, the student told whether he or she recommended the book to others and why, and what he or she believed were the strengths and weaknesses of the book, using specific examples from the text (Writing a Book Report, 2004). The student also provided the reader with why he or she enjoyed the book, or reasons that it was not a good choice to read.
After the student completed the book review, everyone’s learning was enhanced when the reviews were shared. Student gave presentations to the class summarizing their reviews and provided each class member with a written summary of the book review and all of the descriptive, bibliographic information about the book.

**Literature Circles, Book Discussion Groups, and Book Clubs**

While book reviews involve individual learning, literature circles, book discussion groups, or book clubs involve interactive learning and working together. Paralleling the growth of adult book clubs, perhaps energized by Oprah Winfrey and the fact that there are some 10,000 book clubs in the USA alone, instructors can build book clubs or literature circles in their own tourism and hospitality classrooms (Literature Circles Reading, 2004). According to the International Reading Association, literature circles are among the best practices for study of the English language (Standards for English, 2004). However, faculty members at Seattle University (Literature Circles Resource, 2004) noted that, “literature circles have no recipe”, but instead vary from course to course and day to day. Literature circles or book discussion groups, or book clubs, do all, however, allow students to share their reading experiences. They provide students with a means to critically think about their reading and read, reflect, and respond to books in a collaborative manner (Literature Circles Resource, 2004). Literature circles are student driven rather than teacher or textbook centered, and allow for students to probe deeper into the meaning of subject matter using books as a vehicle. In tourism and hospitality, the use of literature circles or book clubs can help students become engaged with the subject and more involved in the topics of the course. Reading real books and discussing them can make hospitality more real to students.

Students must still read the book themselves and may write a book review as well, but cooperative activities such as book discussions may be added to increase learning opportunities and enjoyment of the books. Book clubs have become very popular, and literature circles are a common academic word used for book discussion groups, but calling them book clubs may be a fun, current way to treat these discussions. To get book clubs going in classes, consider providing a list of books to students that offers a variety of authors, topics, and writing styles related to the subject matter of the hospitality or tourism class. A short list of books is included in Appendix A. More books can be found by browsing the shelves of a bookstore, going online, or asking for help from a librarian or bookstore employee.

At the most basic level, a literature circle is simply a forum for discussing a reading selection. Literature circles may be formed by the teacher or students may select their reading groups. Nonfiction, fiction, or periodicals may be used as the source of reading, however, in hospitality, tourism, and culinary education, biographies, and personal accounts of experiences seem to work best. Four to eight students is seen as the appropriate number range for the group (Brabham and Villaume, 2000), but smaller groups of two or three or larger groups of eight to ten also work. It is easier to implement book groups in a small class; however, large classes can become involved in book groups as well, with careful planning. To facilitate groups in large classes, the instructor may want to divide students into groups of eight to ten. With groups of this size, the instructor can circulate between the groups to ensure that the discussions are about the books rather than other issues, even in courses of 100 students or more. In all classes, it may be helpful to define roles for group members. For example, one student might be designated the
facilitator whose task is to lead the discussion, while another student might become the
coordinator in charge of working with the instructor to complete administrative tasks such as
scheduling meetings; yet another student might assume the important role of the group’s
historian, assigned to making a log of the book group’s discussion. Additional students can be
assigned the roles of reporters with the task of providing questions or supporting evidence for the
discussion. In a college setting, these groups help to build a sense of community in a class and
can help students learn to discuss content areas effectively with each other. According to Indiana
University (Literature Circles, 2004), “students’ insights and reflections, rather than ready-to-use
questions from the teacher, drive the learning in literature circles.” Guidelines for forming book
groups in college classrooms can be drawn from guidelines for other adult book groups. These
guidelines may include:

  Asking yourself tough questions about the book;
  Recognizing that while you may not enjoy the book, you can still learn from it;
  Analyzing the hospitality themes of the book;
  Finding personal meaning in the book that you can link to your own professional or
career goals;
  Making comparisons with other books and authors;
  Making comparisons with other information that you know about the topic from your
own experiences and from reading about the particular hospitality or tourism topic
(Book Club, 2004).

The leader of the discussion needs to come to class prepared to facilitate the discussion.
He or she may develop 10-15 open-ended questions about the book to stimulate the discussion.
Alternatively, as mentioned previously, each member of the group can come to the class with one
or two questions for discussion. Questions are meant to guide the discussion, but it is not meant
to be a rigid activity, instead the questions should help the conversation flow. Participants also
need to not be afraid to criticize the book, but the leader should try to help balance personal
revelations with actual responses to the reading itself (Book Club, 2004). If a student needs help
coming up with questions to ask about a book, the following may act as examples:

  1. How does the title relate to the content of the book?
  2. How believable are the characters?
  3. How believable is the author’s story?
  4. What is interesting about the book?
  5. How does the book relate to the hospitality or tourism topic of study in the class?
  6. What is the greatest strength of the book?
  7. What is the most noticeable weakness of the book?
  8. What is the author’s view of the world of hospitality? Tourism? Culinary arts?--etc.
  9. What broader social, economic, or political issues does the book address, if any?
 10. What is most memorable about the book and why?
    (Book Club, 2004).

Discussion is the key to using book groups, yet college students may not truly know how to
lead their discussion groups. Often college courses revolve around teacher led discussions.
While students may have led groups when they were younger, when they get to college tourism
and hospitality courses or other business courses, they tend to sit passively and listen to a
professor lecture; if there is a discussion it is often generated and dominated by the teacher.
Therefore, students may need additional help in preparation for discussions. Some simple
guidelines include:

  Brainstorming about what a good discussion entails; and
  Discussing etiquette for book groups including listening to each other, not interrupting,
and disagreeing constructively (Book Club, 2004).
Another idea for book groups is an online book discussion group (St. Bede’s Book Club, 2004). Students can post questions to each other online and then answer them and react to each other’s comments thoughtfully. Online discussions often are rich and can be in-depth due to the time allowed for the development of answers. Also, online discussions can be structured to allow all students to participate so that no particular student dominates the discussion, as can happen in a traditional classroom experience. In an online discussion, the author required every student to post two questions and to respond to two other students’ questions. Online book clubs can also accommodate busy schedules and allow for great flexibility (Chelton, 2001).

As far as evaluating the book clubs, some educators may choose not to grade the activities, but assign students to write individual reaction papers or book reviews that are graded. Other instructors give students participation grades, and others grade the discussion logs according to a rubric or other criteria. After discussing a book, the book club or literature circle may extend its learning activities further by completing a group writing project that leads to a group book review, which can be graded. A lead writer may be chosen and then project writers may submit their ideas and answers to questions about the book in writing to the lead writer. Next, the lead writer can synthesize the group’s work into one collective book review or analysis for the group. Once the lead writer has put the report together, he or she can submit it to a student editor who proofreads the document and gets further writing assistance if necessary. Finally, the presentation manager can organize a group presentation on the book to be given to the class (The University of Memphis, 2004). Through these book-related activities, students learn from: reading individually, discussing with each other, writing individually and collectively, and presenting ideas and information to the class.

Conclusion

Moving from a teaching to a learning paradigm is not easy and certainly requires more than the implementation of book clubs, literature circles, and book reviews; however, these can be recipes for added learning for today’s students. Students who are concrete active learners may not often engage in reading to learn (Schroeder, 1993). Reading textbooks may seem like a rather boring endeavor, but reading books that are alive with the world of tourism and hospitality may provide students with relevant or interesting information, and the need to probe their textbooks and other sources for answers to questions they generate. Using books in this manner may make learning mundane things like vocabulary words, hospitality terms, or academic concepts more meaningful, interesting, and relevant. Thoughtful use of literature and other sources such as films related to tourism and food, in the tourism and hospitality curriculum, can help students learn. Their use can also actively involve students in the content area and the issues and challenges facing the industry in the new millennium. As educators, we need to keep abreast of current trends in the industry ourselves and continually design and deliver educational programs that focus on student learning in dynamic, relevant, rigorous ways.

Appendix A: A Short List of Suggested Books


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