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Learning with companies (LeWiCo) through the use of Facebook in the context of vocational hospitality education & digital spa marketing

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Abstract

There is still lack of information on how to best implement social media in project collaboration and tourism marketing education despite the fact that social media offer interesting intercultural learning opportunities and enriching learning environments. This article aims to describe an example of an international, collaborative learning project conducted on Facebook in the context of vocational hospitality education/spa marketing. The aim of the Facebook project was to enhance work-based pedagogy, and to construct flow in learning.

The article adopts a case study approach to describe in detail how Facebook was used to foster self-directed and co-constructive learning in a social environment.

The findings presented in the article are based on the postings of participating students in Facebook, and on teachers and project team reflections. Overall, the project was a success and led to the construction of a useful, current and engaging knowledge base in the context of spa marketing.

Moreover, the students appreciated the informal learning environment, and the teachers learned how to enhance learning without suffocating the learning process with too many guidelines or information. The students learned how to collaborate independently, and in pairs, and to take responsibility of their own learning.

Keywords: Facebook, work-based learning, vocational hospitality education, digital spa marketing

Background

Purpose-Emerging technologies offer an ever-expanding variety of means to support and enrich learning environments. However, there is currently a lack of information on how to best implement new media in tourism and hospitality education. The objective of this article is to shed light on how Facebook (FB) was used in the context of a vocational Nordic project, and more specifically related to self-directed and collaborative learning.

The Nordplus funded 'Learning with companies' (LeWiCo, 2012–2015) project aimed at critically evaluating and sharing work-integrated learning practices in three countries, in the context of vocational hospitality education. The purpose was to learn from each other, and to enhance work-based pedagogy by among other things producing a joint hospitality educational module involving students, teachers, project team and companies.

The project partners represented both higher vocational education (Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Porvoo campus), vocational education (Voru County Training Centre and Etterstad Videregående skole), and vocational teacher education (Tartu University, Høgskolen i Oslo og Akershus, and Haaga-Helia School of Vocational Teacher Education), in three countries.

At one of our first LeWiCo project meetings it became apparent that tourism, and more specifically digital spa marketing, was a common interest that the vocational institutions and companies shared and wished to produce a joint educational module within.

Spa tourism is important in all Nordic countries, especially in Estonia and Iceland (that we also visited as part of the project), and has been studied little, at least from a digital aspect among Nordic vocational hospitality students. Hence, relevant questions to study seemed to be: what digital means, sites, and tools do companies use in order to attract clients, how are digital possibilities managed, and last but not least: how can Facebook be used to enhance collaboration and self-directed learning among Nordic groups?

Within the project frame we visited many spas (Hotel Haikko Manor & Spa, Color Line, Kubija Hotel and Nature Spa, Dorpat Spa, and Blue Lagoon). We learned from them about their practices and collaboration with vocational schools.

The project team decided that the LeWiCo joint module/study would be produced in the context of digital spa marketing, and more specifically on how spa companies use websites, videos and social media in their digital marketing, and for a deeper understanding of customer behaviour and needs.

As the project partners and involved teachers represented three countries, it was decided that the target countries and content for analysis were digital spa marketing specifically in Norway, Finland, and Estonia, and the virtual site for content sharing and analysis was Facebook.

In practice, the teachers integrated three classes during autumn 2014, and a total amount of sixty students and six teachers in the joint LeWiCo module and implementation.

We decided to use Facebook for the joint module due to geographical distance, and because of the following FB features:

- a) access and familiarity,
- b) easy tool for sharing pictures, sites, links and videos, and
- c) collaborativity and interactivity

Facebook, as a learning tool builds on previous studies executed within Finland and the US (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011; [Gretzel, Isacsson, Matarrita, & Wainio, 2011](#)).

A school cannot impose its students' to create a FB profile. Opposition towards Facebook, however, was not a factor here. One teacher though was quite concerned that his private profile would be accessible to his students. There are three kinds of group options on FB; public, closed, and secret. A secret study group site on FB for the joint study was founded with access and visibility only for members. We decided furthermore that not all students would be active on FB as that could cause chaos.

Each school hence involved six students as active members on FB. Those students formed pairs, who became part of a mixed group representing six students with two students from each country. Each group had their own target country to study.

Hence eighteen students, three mixed groups, and six pairs from three counties in addition to six teachers were active on FB. The rest of the class functioned as silent members. The 'silent' members participated, searched for information and supported the study and class project through participatory background work.

We decided to use English as the common language for the module. As 80 % of the students in Etterstad Videregående skole are immigrants the project teacher also involved an English and ICT teacher in the process, to guide and counsel the Norwegian students also language- and ICT-wise. Moreover, as the students from Haaga-Helia and Voru were around 18-20 years of age, the Norwegian students were 16-17 years.

In order for the students to get acquainted with each other it was also decided that all pairs in the study would produce a video to present themselves to the other members on FB.

In this article we decided to apply case-study as methodology in order to provide detailed description and information of the order of events.

Theoretically, the general impression is that social media is here to stay as the digital in general and social media in particular have given people a social forum and media to express themselves. Social media provides an excellent me-

dia for learning, debate, co-construction, collaboration and social presence. Many customers as well as students are interested in web-based content, and expect company/educational presence and interaction.

In this project we tried to engage the world-of-work in our project. The teachers representing the project partner institutions responded very well and were easily engaged. The companies on the other hand willingly gave interviews, they presented their educational collaboration upon visits, related to among other things internships, joint projects, and strategies related to spa marketing. However, when we tried to engage them in the Facebook project, they did not actively participate or engage themselves. They were interested in the findings, but did not wish to be present on Facebook, as we interpreted it, due to lack of confidence, time, and experience on how to interact in social media.

As we were not successful in engaging companies actively in the experiment, the students instead analysed how different companies interact and present themselves on the web, thus involving the spa companies.

In psychology, flow experiences have repeatedly been linked to a host of positive outcomes for adolescents, including commitment and achievement, higher self-esteem, and less anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Sometimes, an activity captures our attention so completely that the rest of the world seems to disappear. We become so totally engaged in what we're doing that time becomes distorted, somehow it seems to both slow down and to fly by unnoticed. In such a state, we perform better, forget ourselves, and become one with what we're doing. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as 'the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Others have described flow as 'the ultimate in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning' (Goleman, 1995, p. 90). Flow and self-directed learning was strived at in the project, and for some part that was accomplished. In this experiment as in all learning, the state-of-flow was a desired state of learning, and it was assumed that Facebook could provide such an engaging environment.

Practical implications

Each group thus had a target country (Estonia, Norway, Finland) in which they identified/analyzed spa digital marketing communication from points of view of storyline, drama, humor, target group, innovation, ambience (audio, visual, taste, olfactory, touch), emotional experience, services/treatments, facilities...

Guidelines for students and teachers were presented on Facebook as follows:
teachers facilitate, monitor, guide, encourage and involve language and marketing,
ict-teachers if needed/available.

Preparation: Johanna and Annica form LeWiCo/Facebook group and post guidelines (and videos on spa marketing using social media). All partners involve companies to participate.

Week 1: students form groups, choose target country and prepare introductory videos on themselves that are shared within group (week 43).

During weeks 2-3, the pairs within groups post two (2) times a week a web-link, article, video, web-page or similar with argument on why they think the spa marketing communication in their post is good, poor... Each pair comment on other pairs' postings within group four (4) times a week with arguments other than thumbs up.

Week 4 - students go through all postings and reflect on learning, postings, quality on postings, problems, assignment, Facebook as an area for learning, own activity, others' activity, collaboration, self-, pair-, and group-reflection, guidance, process, innovativeness...

Within the project group it was furthermore decided that a prize for best student pairs in each country would win a study trip to Tartu. Best in this case was measured through insight, activity, and engagement on Facebook within the frame of the project. Teachers involved in the experiment were allowed fit in theory, visits and information as they found fit, in order to meet the school curriculum, learning objectives, and standards.

Comments were popping up on Facebook prior to start.

Estonian teacher on FB prior to study: You know what? We will start the project by visiting Kubija Spa. The Sales and Marketing Manager will give us the first intro and then we will get the customer experience. After the visit: we got several ideas how to learn and how to contribute into Kubija Spa marketing.

Comment by Finnish student on FB prior to study: We are visiting the Finnish Holiday Club Saimaa on Monday. What do you think about their summer marketing video?

Comment from Norwegian teacher on FB: My students are currently working on the videos - two by two in English - the results we can hopefully introduce on Wednesday 23 and Thursday 24.

Comment from Finnish teacher on FB: My students have already chosen the countries they wish to study and analyze. We will start tomorrow. Maybe you could inform us which countries your students have chosen.

It took a little while to get started due among other things to the lengthy production of the introductory videos, and for timetables, classes, and schedules to fit in. The plan to involve students and teachers was hence prolonged in the process from two to three weeks in order to get everyone and everything on place.

Postings on Facebook

Example one - boring website

Posting by a Norwegian student: The modern XX Spa Hotel offers a luxurious spa area with indoor and outdoor pools. At the Spa, you take advantage of different types of saunas, whirlpool, children's pool and an outdoor pool that is open all year. The room at the the XX Spa & Conference Hotel feature air conditioning, satellite TV, minibar, and free Wi-Fi is available throughout the hotel. Comment 1 (by Norwegian student): I was at this hotel two years ago and it's amazing! the service was good and the cigar bar was really nice :) Respond by Norwegian student (who posted): I agree!! :D

Comment 2 (by another Norwegian student): Nice hotel with interesting facilities.

Comment 3 (by Estonian student): Yes, the hotel is very amazing and wonderful, but the website is boring. I would like to get the same feeling (wow effect, pleasant feeling etc) from the website what I get from the hotell. It's my opinion but What do you think guys??

Respond by Norwegian student (who posted): I agree with you Kaili!

Comment 4 (by another Estonian student): When Tallink is mainly known as Cruise ships, then I think they want to keep this uniform design on their web pages. But I agree with you Kaili, I would also like to get some emotions when arriving on their website, because when I saw pictures of their hotel rooms first time, I had to admit that they have very nice and original interior.

Comment 5 (by Finnish student) I have actually never been to this hotel/ spa but if you guys say it's amazing it probably is. Your positive comments about the place makes me wanna go there but not the web page itself. It's like you say, the web site maybe doesn't reflect the "amazingness" of the place? Seems to be huge and have everything a spa enthusiast needs though. Good finding!

The posting received seven likes, and the students seem to be in agreement that the actual experience is (was) better than the site. Apparently the fact that some students had visited the place engaged them to partake in the discussion. Furthermore, the Norwegian student who posted engaged herself in the conversation, which kept it going, and the Estonian student who had a question and comment about the website lacking the wow effect element and emotions also raised interest.

Example two - humour added

Posting by a Finnish student shows a video from a famous spa hotel.

What do you think about the different marketing video of XX Congress Wellness Hotel? The use of the famous Finnish TV crew Dudeson's to attract attention in a funny and different way. Comment by a Norwegian student: This is so incredibly awesome. What's even more awesome is The Dudesons actually did it! Respond by the Finnish student (who posted): Well if you give permission to them to fool around of course do it. I'm surprised that they didn't destroy everything there :D (three likes) Comment by an Estonian student: This is awesome :) I like it - it is short, funny, catchy :) Respond by the Finnish student (who posted): yes it's. The

marketing that they have comedy in it and by that way you remember it better.
The posting received 10 likes.

The Finnish student who posted had an argument that humour and differentiation matters. The student cleverly engaged the co-students by raising a question which is crucial in order to attract engagement on FB. The argument here was that digital marketing videos should be short, different, funny and hilarious in order to catch – at least – childrens´ and youth´ attention.

Example three – healing products

Posting by an Estonian student: What do you think about these kind of spas, which are using THANN products? Comment by Estonian student (who posted). THANN-Oryza promotes environmentally-friendly products, supports human rights, and is against the use of child labour and animal testing. Comment by Estonian student (who posted). A link with more information about THANN. Comment by Finnish student: Wow, I haven't heard about THANN before. Seems really great, they could have more information about THANN in their website so people know what THANN really is. I think it is a miss because there is not much information about it.. - I, now know much better after i read the article about THANN that you posted! Four likes. Respond by Estonian student (who posted): Exactly. I was thinking the same. I had to search more about these products. But point is good. They should emphasize the meaning and producing of THANN on their website - why is it good and why people should prefer these products over the others :) Comment by Finnish student (another). I think it's great that they are using products like Thann because it shows that they are taking some responsibility for the products that they use and it is a good marketing strategy also. Five likes. Comment by Finnish student (same as previously). We did a study visit to Holiday Club XX yesterday and they have Thann products for sale in the Spa. So they also try to sell products, not only use them on treatments! This is one of the products. Respond by Estonian student (who posted): I would like to try these products at home as well:) Comment by Estonian student (another): XX. Exactly my idea. Comment by Norwegian student: I have never heard about it before, but it seems like a great idea for a product. I would also like to try these product at home:) Three likes Seven likes in total.

This spa has a product innovation that they use both in their marketing and on site. Apparently powerful, at least from the consumers´ perspective who consider sustainability and eco-friendly aspects. The eco-aspect seemed to be important also for the students and clearly raised the engaging factor.

Example four – emotions missing

Post by Norwegian student. XX SPA is around 30 min. from Tallinn. The spa is where they have relaxing and refreshing spa service, modern water palace, wide range health and beauty packages, long bill of fare and wide range like restaurant and wine shop and they have various activities for active holidaymakers like tennis and golf. Comment by Finnish student. It's nice that they include nature and especially the sea in their treatments and services. The mud that consists of seaweed and other stuff which cleanses the skin is pretty interesting, it's nice that the ingredients are also available closeby. Five likes. Comment by Estonian student. While watching videos and pictures, it seems this hotel is very spacious and with really pretty views, being on the webpage though, it doesn't bring up any emotions and attractiveness. The design should be in joyful and lighter colours.

What do you think about this web page? Do you think web page design plays big role in marketing?

Comment by Estonian student (another). Yes, I think web page design plays big role in marketing. In website you get information of hotel, spa, prices etc. People get their first emotions on hotel website. Through the text you can impart facts, with the help of picture, it is better to sell products.

Comment by Norwegian student. I think if they provide relevant and attractive pictures with each Spa treatment, it would attract more tourists. Secondly they do not have any life-guards there, which gives an uncertain impression to visit there.

Nine likes. The comments are very professional and beneficial for any company wishing to partake in the results of our study. Maybe as a result of active teacher engagement. However, it seems that many companies do not put enough effort or thought into digital marketing, even though clearly this is the number one marketing channel of today.

Example five – nature rocks

Posting by a Finnish student.

This hotel is located near the sea, we thought that the view is very relaxing.

Do you think about the surroundings when you visit a spa? This company values honesty and wants to create an atmosphere of relaxation while remembering the ethical standards. How important is it that the company's values match your own values? Comment by Norwegian teacher: Another good choice in the south west. The conference facilities are great. Comment by Estonian student: Only one look to those pictures brought the sound of waves to my mind. Pictures are truly gorgeous and give a three-dimensional feel. Love the interactive homepage and the opportunity to see a 360 degree view from different rooms. To answer your question, yes, surroundings are important for me. Though there is a saying that do not judge a book by its cover but first impression is often the key point when you choose where to go. I deeply value nature and authenticity so I will always choose spas which appreciate the same things. Respond by Finnish student: The view of the fjord and mountains is amazing! I agree that the first impression is important when choosing a hotel. (Seven likes.)

It is interesting to see how the Nordic students value nature, although one would assume that it is often taken for granted and not valued as much by ourselves as by international tourists. Clearly, this example manifests the power of nature and first impression.

Example six – different content in different languages

Post by Estonian student. While visiting their website I am getting a really warm feeling inside and the website design just invites to visit their Spa. But, I found content different while comparing their site languages.

Comment by Finnish student: It should definitely be available to everyone and I'm wondering why it isn't? What a weird mistake. It kind of signals "we don't care about our foreign customers as much as the locals" or something. Also next time I check and analyze an Estonian spa web page, I'm gonna switch the language to Es-

tonian as well just to make sure I'm not missing anything haha ;) Comment by Norwegian student: Good offers and reasonable prices. Comment by Estonian student: I don't know if it is a mistake or they don't think it is necessary. That is why I would like to know if it changes anything in you Spa choice, M.? Would you stop visiting this spa if this option is missing? Or does the web page design compensate spa packets and this option?

Of course there is opportunity to propose them to show this option on other languages.

Respond by Estonian student: XXgood if you think the price is reasonable for you. But turning attention to the difference of web pages, does it play big role in your choice and if so, why?

Comment by Finnish student: If I'm really determined to visit this spa I would go, virtual tour or not... Me visiting a spa isn't only dependent on this feature. But this is nonetheless a really annoying marketing mistake and it should be corrected.

In this case, the students noticed the spa because of its wonderful digital features that communicated warmth. However, the students noticed that content was different when turning from Estonian to English. Is the spa aiming at only attracting Estonian clients?

Example seven - age limit

Post by Finnish student: This concept is something we haven't heard of before and we think it is very interesting. In a discussion within our group we find it a little demeaning towards the customers. Have you heard of it before? Do you think this is necessary? Do you think it is appropriate to have an age limit of 16 years? What do you think is proper spa behaviour?

Comment by a Finnish student: <http://www.grand.no/en/SPA/Spa-etikette/> Even Grand hotel in Oslo has a set of rules on their website. Is this common in Norway or is this something that just exclusive hotels ask of their customers?

Comment by a Norwegian student: This is another hotel where I have worked, great staff, lovely spa with view toward the main street in Oslo. Many famous people have enjoyed their stay here.

Comment by an Estonian student: You have chosen a very interesting spa to analyse. When I looked this „etiquette“ section on their homepage, it gave me somehow an aggressive feeling. I had the impression that this institution is profit-oriented and doesn't care much about its visitors. I cannot feel the warmth and hospitality. This age restriction seems a little foolish to me too because they overlook families whose little ones would like to join their parents or enjoy some water fun by themselves. I think spas need rules but not so strict ones. Respecting other privacy and peace, following safety instructions and the basic rules of procedure would be totally fine by me.

Comment by Norwegian student (another): J. I think the reason that it is age limits in many Norwegian spas is that many people in Norway wants to have a weekend free for stress and many in Norway think that children is stressful, and many need to just have a break for their everyday life. (4 likes.)

This is a contradictory post and of type of marketing that some feel uncomfortable with, and raises arguments for and against. The different types of feelings

among students may be constructions of cultural, political and social factors, and involve issues and sensitive topics on what is right, fair, correct, equal?

Reflections

The spa study outcomes revealed that universal, transferable values such as sustainability, honesty, and human rights matter also in spa marketing and service/product consumption. It also revealed that certain interesting features such as warmth, nature, and humour raised interest and enhanced interaction. Moreover, lack of translation, difficult navigation, virtual tours and visualization seemed important. The students interacted well among peers from other Nordic countries and as stated by the teachers 'quite independently'. The students showed self-directedness, and navigated quickly on the Internet, and were able to identify interesting web sites and arguments to share. Students did not show signs of shyness. Collaboration did not have to be pushed. It was there. They did not use an academic language, but rather one quite appropriate for teenagers on Facebook. The students overall seemed quite comfortable with the exercise.

Customers, represented here by students, have values that are important to consider both in vocational education and in the production of digital and authentic spa services. Honesty, ethics, authenticity, environment friendliness, human rights, in addition to animal testing, and child labour, matters, and were mentioned. Needless to say; price and value for money matters too.

From a marketing perspective students also commented on ambience, innovativeness, interactivity, wow-effect, emotions that the presentations arouse, and on humour, visual (light, joyfulness, boredom), audio (language), technicality, first impression, and attractiveness.

The companies should hence invest on value-based presentations that affect multiple senses in order to be effective and attractive ([Isacsson, Alakoski, & Bäck, 2009](#)).

Virtual tours are popular and could be used more often to communicate ambience, atmosphere and value statements. Virtual tours are not so dependent on language, and are easy to link. Pictures are also important as are videos. Using humour to differentiate is a strategy that can work, at least for certain group of customers. All in all this study reveals that spa companies and hotels do not exploit the possibilities that digital spa marketing offers and entails.

While analysing students' behaviour on Facebook it became apparent that this assignment arouse involvement, engagement, collaboration, flow as well as self-directed learning. One student commented that the guidelines were not clear enough, and that the flow of comments was overwhelming at times. This same student ended up doing his final thesis together with his pair on digital marketing inspired by the LeWiCo project. In projects as such, it is a strategy

not to monitor, guide, control or kill creativity by giving too many guidelines. Hence, we felt the guidelines were sufficient. The students' were rather self-responsible, but would not have managed the project without the endless support, know/how, and guidance from their respective teachers.

The teachers involved did a fantastic job supporting the project by coaching the students in doing videos, in supporting the identification and analysis of web based digital spa material, in organising spa visits, in offering theoretical background, in making distinctions between different categories of spa (resort/hotel, destination, mineral springs /thermal, medical) etc. All teachers were active and resourceful. They worked more as coaches than teachers in this module.

The six most successful students met in Tartu in February 2014. They were shy, and did not really start communicating before a visit to the Tartu Science Park was organized where the interaction began and another video was produced. It is interesting to see how videos have become the way to communicate and interact in youth everyday life.

Reflection by a Norwegian teacher who integrated a three-year educational class with higher educational ambition in the module. He also integrated an ICT- and an English teacher in the process (Etterstad VGS is a multicultural vocational institute):

Etterstad VGS integrated the LeWiCo project for in-depth-tourism-studies. Most students participated with great enthusiasm, only a few were not actively involved. The inactive students blamed it on poor English. The students did not form the group themselves, instead the professional and contact teacher formed the students groups, considering among other things the participants characters and professional experience. Two students were most effective, engaged and active, measured on all levels. They were hence chosen to participate in the award trip to Tartu. The two first days they were shy and silent, but found their voices at the trip, and participated among other things in a science park video that is available on YouTube. The experiences of all students and teachers, except the ones with language difficulties, were very positive, and all wish to participate in similar projects in the future. As a professional and contact teacher for students with three years of tourism as specialty the project was found to be a great way of handling tourism marketing competence development, including theory and learning. The students worked fairly independently and showed great interest for their specialty. The learning objectives were gained and it supported other subjects too. The students gained professional insight and understanding of the spa markets in Norway, Finland and Estonia.

For Etterstad VGS this project has given my students new possibilities, to use work-related English. Furthermore, they have had the opportunity to interact and meet with students in their home countries. I have personally enjoyed to interact with vocational teachers in different countries, and continued to keep in touch with a few. It has been rewarding to discuss common problems with teachers.

Flow was accomplished by most students, but not all. Sometimes the amount of discussions was overwhelming. One can argue that the knowledge that was constructed was superficial, but the teachers reflected a lot with the students about the different spa companies' strategies, uniqueness, ecological choices

and preferences, in class. The shy students got their voices through, on FB. The students were engaged and even a small competitiveness could be detected. The competitiveness was set on a healthy level, and Facebook really succeeded in this case to create a relaxed, socially viable and easily accessible learning experiment. The students produced the content, the teachers facilitated and supported the learning processes with the help of theory and excursions, discussions, and reflections. The experiment certainly would have looked different if the companies would have actively responded and engaged themselves in the environment. Work-based pedagogy is enhanced by this article, as it serves as an example on how to apply social media in intercultural collaboration within a specific area of teaching. The findings can easily be adapted to different contexts.

Notes on contributor

Annica Isacson is a research manager at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, School of Vocational Teacher Education in Finland. Her research interest within vocational education lies in new learning environments and solutions, such as game and entrepreneurial pedagogy. Previously Annica has worked as a Principal lecturer within tourism at Laurea University of Applied Sciences and did research on e.g. multimodality in learning. She has been involved in numerous European projects and recently led a learning project in Tunisia financed by the African Development Bank.

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