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# The Steps Towards Responsible Tourism: Innovative Digital Education Model Developed in Co-Creation

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces research about the benefits of co-creation for tourism developers. Taking sustainable development into account, the current situation in the tourism industry and the increasingly rapidly changing work life require flexibility and renewal of education. The competence of tourism professionals is not necessarily being developed and updated at the pace required by the industry. In many cases, tourism employees cannot combine their work schedule with studying. The opposite needs to be done – education needs to be brought closer to work life. In 2019 this was the background for launching a collaborative development of a new education model for responsible tourism as an empirical study. COVID-19 pandemic has increased the value of flexible learning even more. “The steps towards responsible tourism” project is a collaboration between five universities in Finland, co-funded by the European Social Fund. The five partnering organizations formed its formal network with more than 20 tourism-related experts. In the progress of the development work also several less committed actors were involved in the co-creation process. The research question of this study is: What is the value of co-creation for the actors participating in the production of the new digital education model? For this purpose, a case study was conducted. The data collection methods were participative observation by the participating experts, narratives of participants, and project documentation. The research aims at solutions for better support of the co-creation processes. The findings showed three different role perspectives: tourism industry representatives, service providers, and experts participating in the project. Transformative learning was evident in each of the roles. The phenomenon of swarming was also observed, which suggests openness for several views, self-directed periods and a social interaction period between the participants. It appeared that creativity in performance can be enhanced by facilitators encouraging the development of shared vision and understanding.

**Keywords:** responsible tourism, co-creation, online education model, work-integrated tourism education

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we introduce the concept of co-creation, which is the core in our empirical research. Responsible tourism was a context for our research core of co-creation. Furthermore, online and transformative learning were introduced briefly since it appeared being a theoretical evidence reflecting our findings.

### 1.1 Co-creation

Snellman (2008) concluded that the “trend of improvement of collaboration appears to be separate from traditional co-operation geared towards doing together.” This refers to what we call here *co-creation*. Co-creation is a term used in several different contexts. What is it? Co-creation is not just about teamwork, collaboration or group work. The English term *collaborative design* corresponds better to the targeted co-operation described as ‘collaboration’ (Toivanen 2010; see also Kaario and Peltola 2008). To define co-creation, it is not the same for all purposes. The famous Finnish pedagogy professor Yrjö Engeström (2004, 80) defines co-configuration as the provision of a co-created product or service (in education). According to him, it is a matter of having a long life-cycle process during which, however, the product will not be completed. The most important qualities are close commitment and trust between the participants in the co-creation. They must experience strong agency together, and the desire to achieve a goal (see Kvan 2000, 410–411). Austin and Seitanidiki (2012) report that the co-creation process has been helpful in goal achievement, innovations, and that it adds value for all the participants’ organisations and personnel. Kokkonen (2009) has talked about loose and open cooperation, which refers to swarming. It is characterised by participants being changed during the process. Kokkonen uses Zajonc’s model of how people need to create alone for some time – ‘Zen mode’ - and before then, she/he is able to operate in ‘In-between-mode’, where people are in collaboration. In his model, ‘Socializing mode’ is the third circle, which is different from the more structured and hierarchy-based collaboration circle. While in Socializing mode, people operate without any power relations. Power then comes when you are active and share your expertise. This is occasionally different from the research setting of this

paper, in which some participants in the co-creation process are paid for collaboration and some of them are participating on a voluntary basis. The power is present due to the context of the project work.

In many articles, co-creation refers to work that takes into account different stakeholders when using service design. Service design, which has become popular in Finland as well, is also based on the basic idea of co-creation. Koivisto states that “the basic pillars of service design thinking are the produce solutions to the practical problems of the field together with the users, customers, employees and other people involved (Koivisto et al, 2019, 40-41). Participation in co-creation takes place, for example, in workshops and online webinars. It has become increasingly significant due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the language of service design, co-creation is a customer-oriented rather than expert-oriented process. Customers are equal members of the group that implements the development activities (Koivisto et al, 2019; see also Tuulaniemi 2011).

### **1.2 Work-integrated, transformative and online education**

Increasingly rapidly changing working life and the Sustainable Development Goals challenge all levels of workers in the tourism industry to acquire new skills and knowledge to support a better future. It has been observed that work-integrated educational models facilitate more effectively to the development of professional knowledge. In addition, there are many studies which show that the practical application of theoretical knowledge significantly increases learning. For example, Virtanen, Tynjälä and Collin (2009) have shown that in integrative pedagogy, the learner is supported in different ways in reflection, in the connection of theory and practice, and in the development of professional agency. In this case, a learning experience has been created applying work-based pedagogy. The student first learns about the theory and background, after which he or she applies achieved knowledge to practical work, then he or she reflects on and tests his/her own competence. In general, Integrative pedagogy aims to apply theory and conceptualised practice (Virtanen et al, 2009).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the concept of transformative learning (e.g., Boström et al, 2018) has emerged in the area of sustainable development education. On the other hand, education aims to promote sustainable development (e.g., Balsiger et al, 2017; Sterling et al, 2018). The transformative learning concept was introduced in 1978 by Mezirow, and it means that education is an opportunity to fix attitudes and expectations, as well as relevance and mindset. This kind of change is made available through reflection, openness, inclusivity and emotions. The background to this developed educational model is to promote responsible tourism through learning and the application of knowledge to learners’ own activities, organisations, stakeholders and decision-making.

Online education as a form of digital learning is associated with versatile benefits that support lifelong learning. It is flexible with regard to time and place, low-cost compared to conventional institution-based studying, accessible to the masses, and it facilitates new pedagogical methods. Therefore, online forms of education blend with the everyday and work life situations of the learner, who could apply the new knowledge and skills immediately (Dhawan, 2020). Online learning can be available in synchronous or asynchronous environments, accessible through different devices (computers, mobile phones, etc.) that are connected to the Internet. The synchronous environments with their real-time lectures and interactions provide the opportunity for instant feedback from educators and peers, while the resources provided by the asynchronous environments are outside of time constraints (Singh and Thurman, 2019). Online courses can be divided depending on the type of education they are providing – formal, part of the established curriculum of the educational institutions, or massive open fully online courses (MOOC), open to all interested individuals. MOOCs and asynchronous learning courses have their advantages of which, e.g., non-dependent on the resources of the organisers and the opportunity for the learners coming from heterogenous background to build their own learning path.

### **1.3 Responsible tourism in the context of co-creation**

The concept of sustainable development was built in 1992 based on the UN Rio Summit, which primarily facilitated the discussion of environmental problems. Today's sustainable development is based on the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2020), which was adopted in 2015, to which the World Tourism Organization UNWTO is also committed (UNWTO, 2020).

Responsible tourism is based on the Declaration on Responsible Tourism signed in Cape Town in 2002 (Cape Town Declaration, 2002), according to which the aim is to develop better destinations and areas for people to live and visit (WTM, 2020). The terms 'sustainable tourism' and 'responsible tourism' are often used interchangeably - but incorrectly. They have the same goal, namely, sustainable development. And responsible tourism uses the pillars of sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 2020), which are environmental integrity (the ecological dimension), social justice and maximising local opportunities (the socio-cultural dimension, often separately - social and cultural), economic benefits and profitability of operations (economic dimension).

The main difference between the two concepts is that in responsible tourism, individuals, organisations, and businesses take responsibility for their own actions and their impact (Goodwin 2016). In other words, it can be argued that responsibility (actions) in tourism go towards sustainability (the goal). While there are isolated examples of sustainable tourism - businesses and destinations, and sustainability has not been achieved at an even higher, national or global level, there is much more talk of sustainable tourism than responsible tourism.

The difference described defines the way to influence sustainable development on an individual level, namely by developing the understanding of responsible actions in tourism. The multidimensional structure of responsibility in tourism, defined by the pillars of sustainable development and the distinct roles of the actors in tourism, requires a co-creation approach towards building the competence of responsible tourism, in which each participant is specialized in a narrowly defined field but all aim at a common goal.

## **2. Research methods**

The case study is qualitative in terms of research approach (e.g., Travers, 2001). In this case study, the demarcation as the case (Stake, 1994; 1995) is the collaborative development process of an innovative education model for responsible tourism. The research focuses on finding out in what kind of logic this unique and special case works. The data is collected by using different research methods, such as participative observation, benchmarking, content analysis and narrative written stories of experience. For example, one of the written documents is in the Appendix, and it is a synthesis of the outcome of the co-creation process. It shows the stages and activities during the co-creation process in their entirety.

Slack and Rowley (2001, 38) mentions that the benefit of participant observation is that "the researcher can experience the process, including the integration of a number of components in the experience, and the emotions associated with the experience". In this paper, the data based on participative observation is illustrated shortly as one part of findings. Following the option of non-structured observation (Slack & Rowley 2001), there were some questions used for data collection purposes in mind. The content of the documentation is about digitalisation in education.

The purpose of narrative research is to understand the perspectives of the people involved in the process by collecting written narrative stories (e.g., Keats, 2009, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, 8). In a narrative study, respondents seek to describe their experiences and understand their actions and related beliefs and wishes. However, as in this study, and according to Polkinghorne (1995), any narrative material that is not necessarily required to produce intact, plotted narratives can be considered narrative material. Informants were asked to share their experiences, benefits, limitations, role, etc. in the development process of an innovative education model for responsible tourism and to write a narrative story (e.g., Keats, 2009). In this study, there were eight (8) informants writing a narrative which consisted of roughly 20 sentences apiece. The results were categorised by their representative role in the project, and the content analysis was carried out first by using sentence-by-sentence and secondly word-by-word technique. Krippendorff (2018, 39) says that 'content analysts who start with a research question read texts for a purpose, not for what an author may lead them to think-. This was the main principal followed in this study.

This study used abductive logic in which we could go one step ahead, go back to literature, and return with the data analysis process. We could take a new direction in the findings if we found evidence reflecting some other theory.

### **2.1 Findings**

The results of the participative observation revealed that some disadvantages and threats of interaction could be battled already in the phase of co-creation designing the online education content. Some issues came up within amount of discussions and when searching for a shared vision. In co-creation process compromises

were done since it was impossible include all the wishes of the participants. Technical difficulties were mentioned quite many times during the co-creation sessions. In the Appendix, one can see the whole co-creation process, which is documented title by title.

It appeared that with the exception of one creator, all of the others learnt something either for their work or for individual recognition. It was most often characterised with such words as

*"new ideas for my work"*

*"Co-operation has been fruitful and I have learnt a lot from others"*

But what is it actually that has been transformed? What have participants gained from the co-creation? Some of them were referring to a sense of meaningfulness, which demonstrates a more holistic experience of the project.

*"Co-creation is a much better solution than creating an education in one University."*

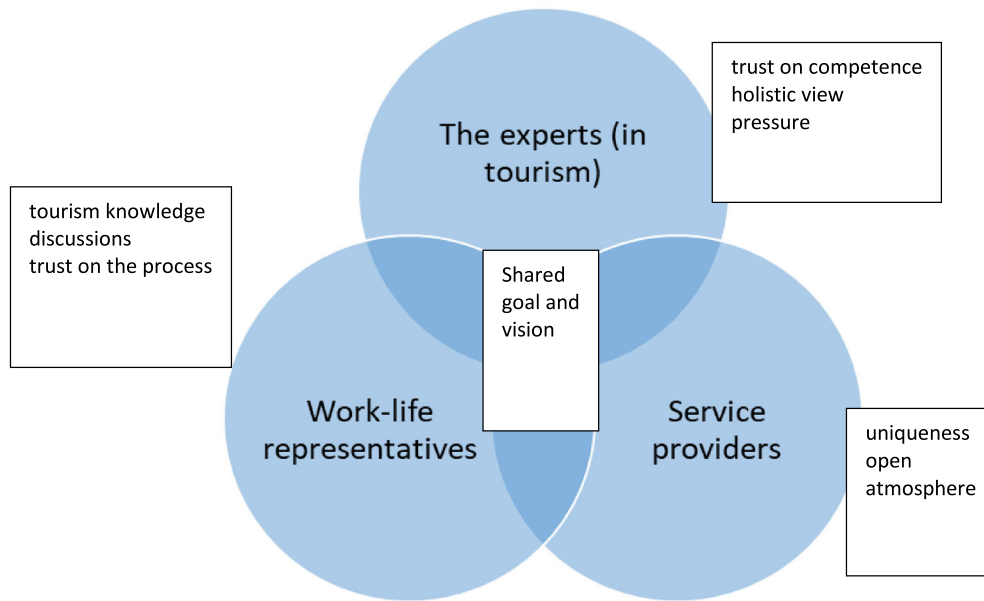
The content was categorised according to the value of the co-creation of the three perspectives. Project planning, work and management was one of the gains of the project participants named as experts in the Figure. They also referred to self-management skills, such as time priority and allowing others behaving differently from own style. Enrichment-task and co-working experience were the gains of the self-employed service providers.

What is taken as an advantage of this co-creation experience? Work-life representatives gained information about responsible tourism. It shows that also theoretical knowledge can be useful in gathering subject information into one picture. Work-life representatives emphasised the discussions being fruitful activity, and this gain was taken at their own work. Since they were somehow outsiders from the co-creation physical or online events, but they were informed about the activities done by the experts. They believed in the power of cooperation and trusted on process. The work-life representatives received the plans, and they could comment on the work already done.

Uniqueness was the clear gain what the service providers' experienced. The discussions during the co-creation seemed having an effect on them. The atmosphere was exceptional open, even for conflicts and critics. However, they had used to hear creative output elsewhere but this group of people had quite light level of creativity. The size of the group was exceptional large, and seemed not being shared goal or vision by that time of co-creation process.

The experts in the project learnt more to work under pressure. They recognised the meaning of trust amongst different expertise of the responsible tourism subject. It was mentioned that the holistic picture of the tourism field in sustainability was a gain to be applied to own work as a teacher.

*"I now understand the meaning of a good project plan."*



**Figure 1:** Three-perspective model of co-creation experiences

The value of co-creation is summarised in the Figure. Shared goal and vision is the prerequisite for creativeness in the process. This has to be planned in co-creation process.

### 3. Discussion

The digital work-integrated education model with its content of responsible tourism was created as an outcome of the co-creation process. The focal point of the model is its digital character with both its opportunities and limitations. The education model itself can be applied to various fields of tourism representatives since the content is a rich picture around responsible tourism. The subject is global but less offered as holistic as it appeared to be after the co-creation processes. The model is now being piloted in the field with 200 test users. The COVID-19 crisis further highlighted the need for digital implementations in education – an aspect that was not initially in the study design but has become a crucial part of it. However, co-creation as a process was also rich, and it is demonstrated here as a relevant learning process of the participants. Learning, as mentioned in this paper, refers to the nature of the interaction between tourism actors. It was only possible in co-creation process.

As was theorised previously by Mezirow, this innovative education model is also an opportunity to fix attitudes and expectations of the learners interested in responsible tourism. According to work-based representatives, relevance of the co-created model is shown. The mindset of the project workers, experts, was more about co-creation process than the subject of tourism. On the other hand, the experts, such as lecturers and teachers experienced transformative learning. This is shown in the Figure in which three perspectives are presented with several overlapping areas of co-creation characteristics. This could be further investigated.

To understand the perspectives following the narrative method principal, the outcomes are analysed from three main perspectives by the different co-creation representatives. In this matter the results revealed a complexity of people involved in the co-creation process. Some of the informants were involved voluntarily only in some point of time, and some of them were more connected to budget matter with mandatory work role commitment. Similarly, what Kokkonen (2009) describes co-creation being such as swarming where different people can come and go. However, according to some negative influence of the co-creation, it was said that it was not appropriate when people left the organisation, and then also out of the project work and co-creation. Instead, like Kokkonen reflects Zajonc's model of how people need to create alone for some time (Zen mode), and until then she/he is able to shift into so-called 'In-between mode', where people collaborate. This should be examined in greater depth in the following studies, and by using the swarming model as a theoretical approach for both co-creation and the development of tourism expertise.

With regard to the matter of credibility, more usable narratives could have been to catch up the more perspectives, as is required in this method. Furthermore, the data did not reveal any specific facts about responsible tourism. It comes up with a question whether it was appropriate way to do data collection using narratives in the first hand. However, the data revealed the importance of the cooperation skills and planning in co-creation.

The education model was developed through the implementation of several stages, which can be generalised as planning, content creation, testing and correction. This is shown in the Appendix. Many of these stages were overlapping or even simultaneous. This research was focused on the content creation stage, which produced the pilot contents, but as a part of it also very important decisions were made about the education model and its principles.

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