Experiential learning and its effectiveness from the perceptions of hospitality students

ABSTRACT

This work aims to review the implementation situation of experiential learning (EL) in China's hospitality education and explore the perceptions of students on the effectiveness of the adopted EL methods. Observations and focus group discussions are con- ducted in three vocational colleges and three universities in China. The study reveals that EL activities are widely utilized in China's hospitality education. Generally, students state that EL is more effective than traditional classroom learning. Nonetheless, they consider some EL activities as being ineffectively implemented. Several suggestions are given in this paper to provide support to hospitality educators for improving the utilization of EL methods and facilitate student learning. Furthermore, unique EL methods that are not documented in literature are adopted in China's hospitality education.

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Hospitality and tourism management (HTM) programs are two of the most rapidly developing subject areas in Chinese higher education (Li & Li, 2013). HTM programs are well established in most vocational colleges, and the number of schools, students, and programs has expanded considerably in the past two decades (Shen, Luo, & Lam, 2015). The hospitality industry has also made significant achievements over the past 30 years because of China's "Open-Door" reform policy. A significant amount of inter- national hotel brands have expanded in China, and these new businesses require a large labor pool. However, the hospitality industry faces significant challenges to recruit qualified employees to provide the required standard of service (Gu, Kavanaough, & Cong, 2007). This situation may be caused by multifaceted reasons that involve all related stakeholders, including educators, graduates, and employers. One important reason is the lagging development of tourism and hospitality studies in China compared with the rapid growth of the hotel or tourism industry (Yan & Cheung, 2012). Although the higher hospitality and tourism education of China has expanded rapidly, some of the programs and educational objectives have been established at

random, and the curriculum design does not meet practical demands (Yan & Cheung, 2012). As a result, the lack of practical skills of hospitality students has become a highly debated issue (Guo & Van der Heijden, 2008). This situation should be urgently addressed to bridge the gap between the deficient hospitality education and the rapidly increasing need for industry talent.

Experiential learning (EL) can play an important role in bridging this gap by providing a significant link between the discipline and the industry (Kiser & Partlow, 1999). EL refers to the process of learning from experience (Dewey, 1938) and emphasizes hands- on activities. Different from traditional learning (TL), which emphasizes the "acquisition, manipulation, and recall of abstractions" (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001, p. 180) and encourages teachers to impose knowledge from the above and from the outside (Dewey, 1938), EL emphasizes personal involvement and requires students to engage firsthand in a proactive manner (Hawtrey, 2007).

Higher hospitality and tourism educators in China have recognized the importance of EL, and many EL methods are widely adopted; field trips, internships, and job shadowing are found to be the most often used methods (Yang & Cheung, 2014). The definitions and influences of EL methods have been examined by a number of researchers (e.g., Armstrong, 2003; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Moore, 2010; Wong & Wong, 2009). However, few researchers have explored the implementation effectiveness of EL methods from the students' perspective, particularly in the context of China's hospitality education. Therefore, the current study is conducted to examine (1) the EL methods adopted in the hospitality education of China, (2) the influences of EL on the learning outcome, and (3) the effectiveness of EL application from the students' perspective.

Literature review

Higher hospitality education in China

Along with the rapid growth of the tourism industry in China since the implementation of economic reform in 1978, the Chinese tourism and hospitality education has experienced significant development in the past three decades. The first institution of higher education in tourism and hospitality, namely, The Shanghai Institute of Tourism, was established in 1979. Currently, hospitality and tourism education in China has expanded considerably in terms of number of schools, students, and

programs (Shen et al., 2015). According to statistics from the Chinese government, 1122 colleges and universities offered HTM programs at the end of 2014, with approximately 435,000 enrolled students (China National Tourism Administration [CNTA], 2015).

Despite the rapid growth of the hospitality education, the current hospitality education system emphasizes the supply of the labor force to meet the needs of the industry, but places less focus on the development of quality management according to the industry (Lam & Xiao, 2000), resulting in an imbalance between the supply and demand for hospitality graduates in China (Wu, 2004). Educators and professionals in this specialty have realized that a large gap exists between academic requirements and industry expectations (Li & Li, 2013). The reason for this issue can be mainly summarized into two aspects.

In one aspect, although the first hospitality program in higher education began in 1979, hospitality education was not developed until the 1990s, and the academic faculty comprised scholars from other disciplines who have no work experience in the hospitality industry (Li & Li, 2013). Currently in China, top-ranked colleges and universities recruit only academic staff with PhD degrees, and few of these PhD holders have received industry training. As a result, many teachers deliver their lectures by reading from textbooks (Zeng & Peng, 2008). In another aspect, the curriculum for hospitality programs is mainly developed by education officials and academia without considering the industry's requirements for human resources. Chinese scholars (i.e., Li & Li, 2013; Lu & Zhou, 2007; Song & Wang, 2008) have raised the issue regarding the imbalance between the outputs of hospitality programs and the needs of the industry. Such imbalance leads to the lack of talents in the industry (Song & Wang, 2008) and negatively effects the development of hospitality programs, especially undergraduate ones (Bao & Zhu, 2008). Thus, hotel schools in China should enhance cooperation with the hospitality industry, shift from the traditional approach of lecturing alone, and integrate this method with innovative EL activities to help students acquire the skills demanded by the industry (Yang & Cheung, 2014).

Differences between university and vocational education
Historically, technical and vocational education and higher education (university) emerged from opposing traditions, with the universities providing academic knowledge and vocational institutions providing skills for employability (Maclean & Pavlova, 2011). Universities serve as disseminators and creators of knowledge (Dredge et al., 2013), and this

setup means universities assume the obligation of providing research-based education. Universities place more emphasis on the cultivation of students' liberal capabilities, which include "the breadth of multidisciplinary knowledge, the ability to absorb and process contested bodies of knowledge, and the ability to think analytically and critically" (Gross & Manoharan, 2016, p. 44). By contrast, vocational colleges emphasize vocational values by focusing on training and practical skills for a specific occupation (Lum, 2009). Given this educational structure, university outputs are assessed by their knowledge and theory contributions to respective scientific disciplines, whereas vocational education outputs are evaluated by the graduates' ability to undertake useful work (Maclean & Pavlova, 2011). The massification of higher education resulted in the increased emphasis on skills development for employability and, consequently, the initiative for the vocationalization of higher education (Maclean & Wilson, 2009). The rising market economy of China since the late 1980s popularized the vocationalization of higher education, and vocational values prevailed over academic values until the end of 2000s (Bo, 2008). A rational view was then highly advocated by academics, who claimed that higher education should integrate liberal values and vocational values to strike a balance between knowledge and skills in the programs (Bo, 2008; Song, 2010; Zhang, 2009).

Higher hospitality education is rooted in vocational origin, and early hospitality education was mainly positioned to deliver trained graduates to the industry (Airey, 2005). The evolution of hospitality education into higher education resulted in the integration of liberal education to the hospitality curriculum (Gross & Manoharan, 2016). Tribe (2002) suggested that educational researchers should not merely consider the attributes of tourism graduates in catering to industry demands in curriculum design, but should also consider needs for wide areas of interests. According to Dredge et al. (2013), the globalization of the hospitality curriculum should include additional liberal elements to improve the preparedness of graduates for global citizenship. Given this requirement, institutions in hospitality higher education should strike a balance between liberal and vocational values according to their educational missions.

Experiential learning

Kolb (1984) formulated a model that represents the cognitive processes involved in EL. In Kolb's model, learning is associated with four steps:

concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This model is also known as the "experiential learning model" (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). According to Kolb (1984, p. 38), "learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." EL initially acknowledges the noninstitutional aspect of learning and offers a pragmatic approach to learning (Fowler, 2008).

The documented values of EL programs are significant and include the following: (a) stimulating students' learning curiosity and improving the ability to absorb knowledge (Eyler, 2009; Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2002; Hawtrey, 2007); (b) blurring the line between theory and practice and increasing practical knowledge and skills (Eyler, 2009; Yang & Cheung, 2014); (c) improving students' confidence and self-concept (Armstrong, 2003); and (d) enhancing employment and career opportunities (Lee, 2008; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). A number of studies discuss different types of EL methods and demonstrate the effects of specific EL methods to enhance students' learning. Examples are given in Table 1.

EL in hospitality education

Throughout academic literature, experience-based hospitality education has primarily centered on the values and necessity of EL in hospitality education, the identification of EL methods, and the benefits of specific EL methods on students' learning outcomes.

A number of scholarly works have discussed various types of EL activities that are utilized in hospitality education. Kiser and Partlow (1999) proposed four types of EL methods applied in hospitality education: internship, food-production laboratories, simulations, and field projects. Wong and Wong (2009) discussed the effective organization of a field trip and stated that field trips can provide students with authentic learning experiences in different tourism settings. Yiu and Law (2012) identified the role and value of internship in hospitality education and suggested that students, employers, and educators should cooperate to make the internship successful. Yan and Cheung (2012) recently explored the types of EL activities that can engage hospitality students in China. They found that 16 EL methods are commonly adopted in hotel schools in China, including cooperative study, exchange program, and field-based learning. Work-based learning is popular and the majority of hospitality programs provide students with working replacement opportunities, such as internships (Li & Li, 2013).

The benefits of EL methods on students' learning outcomes have been advocated by numerous researchers. Internship, which is one of the most common applications of EL in hospitality education, enhances students' learning by integrating practical work experiences and classroom instructions (Welch, 1984). Field projects allow students to analyze and solve real-world problems by working with hospitality businesses outside the classroom (Kiser & Partlow, 1999). Role-playing helps to simulate reality in the classroom (Yan & Cheung, 2012). LeBruto and Murray (1994) identified the concept of the captive hotel or the teaching hotel, which provides facilities for students to study and work at the same time. Video and guest speakers are effective and are the most adopted EL methods (e.g., Hawtrey, 2007; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Yan & Cheung, 2012; Yang & Cheung, 2014). Videos provide students with a "feel" for what actually happens in a real work scenario and can be successfully utilized when they are systematically integrated into the subject material (Siegel, Omer, & Agrawal, 1997). Guest speakers can help students expand their range of disciplines, build networks of contacts, and discover future work possibilities (Domask, 2007). Lee (2008) conducted a comparison study of students' perceptions on learning in the classroom environment and their industry-based EL assignments; he found that the reported learning of students is primarily attributed to their EL assignments in nine areas, for example, practical knowledge related to major, understanding how organizations function, and ability to view career expectations realistically.

As stated above, most studies focus on examining specific EL activities and the influences on learning (Armstrong, 2003; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Moore, 2010; Wong & Wong, 2009). However, specific research and discussions are lacking on the effectiveness of EL methods within hospitality programs. Few studies have also been conducted on EL activities that are specific to the hospitality education of China. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to fill the gap in literature concerning the effectiveness of EL methods in the delivery of Chinese hospitality courses.

Table 1. Definitions and benefits of experiential learning methods.

	Experiential learning methods	
EL Methods	Definitions	Benefits on learning
Cooperative Education	"A structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 17)	"Integrates school and work learning experiences, fosters self-directed learning and reflective practice" (Ricks, 1996, p. 11)

Service learning	"A form of experiential education that combines academic study with service in the community" (Eyler, 2009, p. 26)	"It is distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by its commitment to certain values as well as its inclusion of continuous, structured reflection." (Eyler, 2009, p. 26)
Internship	"A short-term practical work experience in which students receive training and gain experience in a specific field or career area of their interest" (Zopiatis, 2007)	Creates exposure to management activities, improves self-confidence, enhances employment and professional growth opportunities (Zopiatis, 2007)
Field trips	Educational tours that "provide students with authentic learning experiences in different tourism settings" (Wong & Wong, 2009, p. 242)	Foster creation of knowledge; makes learning more relevant to the individual and therefore more memorable (Weeden, Woolley & Lester, 2011)
Case study	A learning technique "brings students to life, sparking discussion about realistic business scenarios" (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006, p. 201)	Allow the professor to get certain points across – ideas that they wish to emphasize; provide a forum for discussion of controversial on ethical dilemmas (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006)
Roleplay	A learning technique "allows participants to immerse themselves in a learning environment by acting out the role of a character or part in a particular situation" (Feinstein et al., 2002, p. 735).	Increase student motivation, interest and participation in learning activities (Feinstein et al., 2002); leads to better retention of knowledge and skills (Richardson & Kleiner, 1992)
Gaming	"Interactions among players placed in a prescribed setting and constrained by a set of rules and procedures" (Hsu, 1989, p. 409)	Maximize the benefits of players' application and practice of interpersonal and team skills. (Feinstein et al., 2002)
Computer simulation	"Replicate the characteristics of the system through the use of mathematics or simple object representations" (Feinstein et al., 2002, p. 737)	"Provide students with an opportunity to develop business analysis and decision making skills within a classroom environment" (Kiser & Partlow, 1999, p. 71)
Job shadowing	"A work experience option where students learn about a job by walking through the work day as a shadow to a competent worker" (Paris & Mason, 1995, p. 47)	"Increase career awareness, help model student behavior through examples and reinforce in the student the link between classroom learning and work requirements" (Paris & Mason, 1995, p. 47)
Study abroad experiences	Students earn academic credit for coursework that occurs at higher education institutions in another country. (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis [IUPUI], 2006)	The experiential learning component is the cultural immersion, which provides novel challenges for navigating living in a new place. (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis [IUPUI], 2006)

Methodology

This study takes higher education institutions in Guangdong Province as examples to explore the implementation of EL. As a result of China's opening-up policy, Guangdong Province, a coastal province close to Hong Kong and Macau, has been in the leading position in China's economic development. From 1989 to the present, Guangdong has ranked in the top one among other Chinese provinces in terms of Gross Domestic Product contribution (People's Government of Guangdong Province [PGGP], 2014).

Since the launching of the reform and opening-up program, the development of higher education in Guangdong has undergone two strategic stages, from "Rejuvenating the Nation through Science and Education" to "Empowering the Nation with Education" (Chen & Wu, 2014). The higher education development of Guangdong has gained considerable attention from the central government and from a series of policy supports after Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour to south China in 1992 (Liu, 2009). The "New University Movement" and the strategies of "Higher Education Popularization," "Higher Education Modernization," and "Constructing the Highland of Higher Education" were implemented; these consolidated experiences transformed Guangdong into an innovative higher education development model (Chen, 2010).

As an economically leading province, Guangdong received 0.36 billion overnight arrivals in 2015 (Tourism Administration of Guangdong Province [TAGP], 2016a), and the number of nationally certified and starred hotels reached 933 in 2015 (Tourism Administration of Guangdong Province [TAGP], 2016b). According to the statistics published by China's Ministry of Education, by end of 2014, Guangdong had a total of 141 regular higher education institutions, including 62 universities and 79 vocational colleges. Fifty of these institutions offer HTM programs (Zhang, Lu, Hu, & Adler, 2009). Six higher education institutions in Guangdong Province are selected in this study, including three vocational colleges and three universities. These institutions are located in the Pearl River Delta, which is the most developed economic area in the province. The six institutions are selected because they provide hospitality management programs and are all government-certified demonstrative institutions in Guangdong Province.

Owing to the exploratory nature and the quest for rich information of this study, a qualitative research method is adopted. Two types of qualitative research techniques have been adopted to collect data, namely, observations and focus groups. Observations and focus group are two

commonly used qualitative methods for the collection of firsthand genuine data. Observations enable researchers to observe and understand the real and instant situation of observed objects. Focus group is an effective way to collect people's true perceptions. In this form of group discussion, people are inspired and encouraged to share. The participants and respondents include the hospitality students in the three vocational colleges and three universities selected. The data were collected from September to December 2015.

Observations

In the first phase, participant observations were conducted. The observations were conducted for researchers to personally attend the teaching class with the following research objectives: (a) observe the types of teaching methods adopted by teachers, (b) observe students' reactions to different teaching activities, and (c) observe teachers' roles in EL activities. To minimize the bias of students' perceptions on EL and TL methods that may be caused by the different nature of subjects, the Food and Beverage Management subject was selected. This subject was chosen because it is compulsory in most hospitality curricula in China and is a highly practical subject that requires EL activities. The lecturer and the entire class of students of the selected subject served as the observation object. The average class size was 35 students with approximately one-third male students and two-thirds female students. The researcher attended the class as an outside observer and tried to minimize interruption to the students' learning activities. Note-taking was the primary recording method, and photos were taken to record the teacher's role and the students' activities and facial expressions. Two observations were conducted in each selected vocational college, with each observation lasting approximately 2 h, equivalent to one session of the observed subject.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted in the second phase to explore the in-depth perceptions of students and identify the types of EL methods that contribute the most to learning enhancement. The interview population included students majoring in hospitality management in the selected colleges and universities (students who had at least completed their first semester of study but had not yet graduated), in the hope that the participants could recall their past learning experiences easily and

express their true feelings and perceptions. In China, universities offer 4-year programs while vocational colleges only offer 3-year programs. This explains the low percentage of seniors in the sample. Six focus group interviews were conducted, and each focus group took around one and half hours. Each focus group included 10 students. The profile of the student respondents is presented in Table 2. The students were found to be between 18 and 23 years of age, and the profile covers different learning levels in college.

The population of most hospitality programs is constituted of one-third male and two-thirds female students. Previous research documented that male and female students have different learning preferences across EL activities (Hawtrey, 2007); based on the observations and experiences of the authors as teachers in hospitality

Table 2. Demographic profile of interviewed students.

Variables	Levels	Percent (%)
Age	Under 20	35.0
	20–22	60.0
	Over 22	5.0
Gender	Male	50.0
	Female	50.0
Year in college	Freshman	25.0
	Sophomore	36.7
	Junior	33.3
	Senior	5.0
Learning Major	Hotel Management	86.7
	Conventions and Event Management	13.3
GPA	Under 2.0	14
	2.0–3.0	62
	Above 3.0	24
Institution	Vocational college	50.0
	University	50.0

GPA: grade point average.

programs, male students are less active than female students in expressing themselves. Given that the purpose of a focus group is to obtain rich and in-depth information and with generalizability not a major concern, the authors decided to recruit an equal number of male and female students to generate additional information from different perspectives. Except for gender, the study performance of students was also expected to be a differentiating factor of learning preference. To ensure the representativeness of the selected participants, stratified sampling and simple random sampling were adopted to select the participants. The stratified sampling criteria were gender and grade point average (GPA). With the assistance of the teaching secretary of each researched school,

all targeted students were divided into two male and female groups. The number of students in each group was then divided by five, and five subcategories with an equal number of students were generated with the GPA in sequence from the top to the bottom. The researcher randomly selected one student from each subcategory and contacted the students by phone to invite them to attend the interview. The researcher duplicated the random drawing procedure if the contacted student was not available to join the focus group as requested. A total of 68 students were contacted, and 60 students attended the interview, for a total acceptance rate of 88%. The interviews were designed as semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questions were asked by the researchers who acted as moderators of the interviews in accordance with the interview guide (shown in Table 3). Notes and audio records were taken as source materials for interview transcripts.

Table 3. Interview guide.

Interview questions
Q1 What kinds of EL methods are used in your hospitality classes?
Q2 How do you think of EL comparing with TL on your learning experience and outcome?
Q3 How do you think of the implementation effectiveness of EL activities?
Q4 What suggestions do you have in terms of the implementation of EL activities?

Data treatment

The researchers were responsible for analyzing sets of data, including textual notes, audio records, and photos collected from observations and focus group interviews. Field notes were taken in Chinese initially and then transcribed into observation memos and interview transcriptions in English. The observation memos contained the researchers' own reflective thoughts and initial analysis. The data coding followed the three stages of coding process suggested by Morse and Field (1995). First, the data were read word by word to derive code by highlighting the exact words from the text that appear to capture key concepts. Thereafter, the codes were sorted into categories on the basis of how different codes were related and linked. These emergent categories were used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters. Last, depending on the relationships between subcategories, researchers combined this larger number of subcategories into a small number of categories to categorize the data into themes. In addition, visual data were analyzed and the corresponding themes were extracted. The themes were sorted and combined with the main themes extracted from the text data.

Data analysis was conducted by the first and second authors independently; the results were then compared and a consensus was achieved. The third author acted as a peer debriefed by reviewing the code to enhance the accuracy of the results. The final product was sent to two student representatives who participated in the interviews for member checking. Given that all three authors are experienced teachers in HTM and can triangulate the analysis results, the constant comparison, multiple rounds of coding, peer debriefing, and member checking are believed to ensure the validity of the result.

Results

Application of EL methods

A total of 20 EL methods are used in China's hospitality education. Table 4 shows the EL methods and frequencies that were calculated by the number of advocates among 60 interviewees by focus group interviews. Roleplays, field trips, professional practice, and internships were the most often used by hospitality students. However, different from the findings of Yang and Cheung (2014), who stated that job shadowing is one of the most commonly used EL activities in China's hospitality education, few students mentioned job shadowing and most of them had never attended a job-shadowing program. According to the interview, several unique EL

methods were adopted in China's hospitality education. According to Yan and Cheung (2012), certificate-required learning is found to be a unique EL activity used in China's hospitality education. This research finding is also supported by the present study. Certificate-required learning refers to programs that award certificates after completion, such as "Hotel Practical Skills Learning," which is awarded provincially by the local labor bureau in recognition of students' outstanding performance in hospitality skills (Yan & Cheung, 2012). Two other EL methods that are not documented in literature include peer teaching and mentoring program. In peer teaching, the teachers allocate certain contents to a group of students, who will then teach the same contents in class in front of their peers in their own way. To teach others, the students must make thorough preparations by self-learning. Mentoring programs arise from the cooperation of hotel schools and the industry. For example, in one researched college, a "Starwood Class" exists, wherein each student is allocated a mentor who is working as a supervisor at the least in a Starwood hotel. The mentors act as professional skill trainers and career guides for the students. The "Starwood Class" is usually established at the first year of college; hence, the training and guidance from industry mentors start at the beginning and last until graduation.

Table 4. EL methods generated from the focus group interviews.

No.	EL methods	Frequency	No.	EL methods	Frequency
1.	Roleplays	58	11.	Guest speaker	30
2.	Field trips	52	12.	Food and wine laboratory	28
3.	Professional practice	50	13.	Summer-hire experience	25
4.	Internships	48	14.	Professional skills competition	21
5.	Project-based learning	45	15.	Certificate-required learning	19
6.	On-the-job training	43	16.	Peer teaching	18
7.	Video	40	17.	Mentoring program	16
8.	Games	38	18.	Teaching restaurant	15
9.	Sandwich degree	35	19.	Computer simulation	6
10.	Case study	32	20.	Job shadowing	2

The ranking is in descending order according to the application frequency of the EL methods perceived by hospitality students.

Perceptions of students on EL versus TL

Currently, traditional classroom-based course design and delivery is still considered a common method of learning in higher education and in

hospitality education programs throughout the world (Maier & Thomas, 2013). However, students today are rarely satisfied with a one-size-fits-all classroom experience, particularly if it consists solely of droning lectures (Hawtrey, 2007). The present study investigated the reactions and perceptions of hospitality students by observations and interviews. The results showed that EL activities are more favored by students than TL. Students stated that EL played a better role in enhancing learning. EL is also considered more effective than TL in the following three aspects.

First, through observation, researchers found that students' interests are often stimulated by something new and fresh, such as new faces, new topics, and new interactive activities. EL methods provide students with opportunities to be exposed to new things. For example, a guest speaker, in addition to being a new face, usually brings new topics to share with students. Videos can also infuse fresh air to students' minds while they listen to lectures. A student stated the following:

> I am more likely to become absent-minded in class if the teacher keeps talking for a long while without interacting with us. It helps to catch our attention if the teacher shows us interesting videos or delivers the teaching contents in a more interactive way, like game- playing. (Female, junior, 22 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)

Second, EL activities lead to a better understanding and retention of knowledge. Students can easily recall the activities or competitions in which they have participated in rather than the knowledge shared by lecturers. In EL activities, students take the responsibility of learning from instructors and are encouraged to develop lifelong learning habits. One student said the following:

> It is hard to remember the whole knowledge that the professor shared in the lectures. Most teachers are very boring and make me want to sleep. It is much more interesting if the teacher transmits the knowledge using an innovative way, such as a competition . . . and I think I can understand it better and remember it for longer time. (Male, junior, 22 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)

Third, some EL methods, such as guest speakers and internships, provide good opportunities for students to become familiar with the latest news and events in the industry, as well as be equipped with knowledge and skills that are up to industry standards. Hospitality students, especially those studying in vocational colleges, are quite employment-oriented, and they care much about whether what they learned in college will enable

them to fit easily into an organization after graduation. As one student noted:

> *Since we are studying in a vocational college and most of us will not pursue a higher degree, the most important thing is to find a good job after graduation. [. . .] we hope that what we learned is really what is needed by the industry. By the way, an internship is quite useful, and I heard that some senior fellows in our school got promoted to supervisors right after the completion of their internship. (Male, sophomore, 20 years old, Hotel Management major, college student)*

Maier and Thomas (2013) compared the learning outcome between students enrolled in the traditional classroom course and those enrolled in the blended-EL course. They found that the former group showed better knowledge or skill acquisition, whereas the latter expressed interest in higher learning and developed better analytical skills and critical thinking. The blended-EL courses were related to real-world business contexts. Classroom lecturing is indispensable in higher education for students to acquire knowledge, but it has to be integrated with experience-based learning methods to stimulate the learning interest of students and improve their ability to apply knowledge into real work. Through observation, the researchers found that students' attention for lecturing is easily interrupted. Approximately one-third of the students in one class began to check their mobile phones or sleep if the teacher gave monotonous lectures continuously without interaction with students for more than 20 min. Most students agreed that classroom lectures are indispensable, especially lectures on theoretical knowledge dissemination. However, despite this positive perception, most students prefer that lectures be integrated with EL activities.

Effectiveness of EL activities

In colleges and universities, teaching serves as an important vehicle for achieving institutional goals of increased effectiveness and the enhancement of student learning (Hsu, 1999). Educators should always seek ways to make their teaching initiatives more effective. EL is increasingly recognized in China's higher education field as an important ingredient to enhance students' learning outcomes. However, Yardley, Teunissen, and Dornan (2012) indicated that, although the importance of EL in-curriculum development is debatable, the concept

only becomes effective if it is applied in an appropriate manner. Among all EL methods, roleplays, professional practice, food and wine laboratory, on-the-job training, and internship are widely considered effective by hospitality students. Roleplays are frequently used in the subjects of Front Office Management and Hospitality Professional English courses. One student stated:

By playing the roles of hotel receptionist and guest, I experienced the actual job duties of a receptionist and it helps me to improve my ability of communication and problem solving. (Female, sophomore, 20 years old, Hotel Management major, college student)

Professional practice is normally involved in practical subjects, such as front office management, bartending, and culinary courses. One student indicated the following:

The practice of making beds, setting-up tables, and cooking is very useful and I believe these hands-on skills will enable me to be better suited to hotel work in the future. The

school provides us training laboratories equipped with sufficient food and drink materials. (Male, junior, 21 years old, Hotel Management major, college student)

On-the-job training and internship are also perceived to be very effective. According to the students' feedback, all the six institutions have implemented cooperative education programs with the hospitality industry. For example, the Starwood Hotel Group established a "Starwood Class" in one of our researched colleges. All the classes are delivered in hotels for enrolled students. The lecturers are the hotel managers. The class includes both knowledge-sharing lectures and on-the-job training. Internship is viewed as the best way to apply theory and knowledge into practice. One student stated the following:

The internship is tough but very rewarding. It provides me with opportunities to apply what I have learned in classroom. It really opened my eyes even more and helped me see what types of careers to have. (Female, senior, 22 years old, Hotel Management major, college student)

The teaching restaurant was given high recognition by students. For example, one researched university has a teaching restaurant called the "Hollywood Restaurant." It is operated by hospitality students and is only open to the public on weekends. Each group of students takes charge of

its operation for 2 months and the students take roles in turn and experience different positions during this on-board period. All the inter-viewed students considered working in the teaching restaurant as interesting and rewarding, as it provided them opportunities to apply what they have learned in the classroom to practice through running a real business. As one student said:

> We are running a real restaurant. We take all the roles of operating a restaurant, including purchasing food materials, cooking, serving, and even food delivery. We also developed an O2O food ordering platform via social media – WeChat – and receive lots of orders from students. Working in this restaurant not only sharpens our professional skills, but more importantly provides us chances to work as a team. You've got to learn how to be a good leader and a good team player. (Junior, 21 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)

Although the students gave positive comments for most of the EL methods, they criticized some EL methods that they deemed were not utilized properly. First, although video is perceived as a good teaching instrument to stimulate students' learning interests, many students raised the problem that some videos played in class were outdated and some even had low resolutions. The inappropriate adoption of EL methods degrades the effectiveness of EL outcomes. As one student asserted:

> Some videos which are shown in the class seem to be taken in the 1990s. [.] The hospitality

> industry grows so rapidly and what we learn should be in line with the latest development of the industry. (Male, freshman, 18 years old, Hotel Management major, college student)

Second, the students claimed that the teachers often invite guest speakers from academia and hospitality industry to provide lectures. Some invited guests are other professors in the same school, and they come to share one topic in which they are interested. However, the topics are sometimes unrelated to the subject and unsystematic with other subject contents. Some students also stated that guest speakers are invited too frequently. One student stated the following:

> For some subjects, half of the classes are given by guest speakers. You know, we are also required to attend some college-wide lectures two times per month, on average. Most of the lectures are just like the solo shows and cannot arouse our learning interests. (Female, junior, 20 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)

Another student complained of the following:

> *The guest lectures are too many and sometimes make us confused about what we are learning. (Male, sophomore, 20 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)*

Some students also have negative feedback on the shared contents by the guest speakers and argued that some guest speakers' lectures were tedious because the speakers mainly focused on promoting their hotel or their own company's products rather than sharing useful knowledge. Students are interested in the personal career experience of the speakers and their insights on the development of the hospitality industry. They likewise commented that some guest speakers may be very experienced in hotel operations but are not good at public speaking.

Third, some EL activities are organized ineffectively, such as field trips and internships. Field trips can provide students with authentic learning experiences in different tourism settings, and the teacher's role should be well played in the pre-trip, on-trip, and post- trip phases (Wong & Wong, 2009). Nevertheless, through observation and interview, researchers found that the field trips were not well planned and organized. The teacher merely provided students a general learning objective before the trip and passed the students to the trip guide. The students were asked to present what they saw and learned from the field trip. However, the presentation was superficial without deep reflection. The teacher's role to help students recall and reflect on what they have learned was played insufficiently. One student claimed the following:

> *In some cases, the teacher asked us to visit the hotel or tourism scenic spot in a group by ourselves, but it totally depends on the students' learning motivation. As I know, most students just went there and took several pictures; the majority of the data were collected from online sources. Our learning outcome is closely reliant on the teachers' engagement for supervision and facilitation of our learning process. (Male, sophomore, 20 years old, Hotel Management major, university student)*

Finally, yet importantly, internship for hospitality students is compulsory for almost all hospitality management programs, and the period varies from 2 months to 1 year. Students were satisfied with the internship and thought it very rewarding. Few students reflected that their learning outcome largely depends on the attitude of the hotel tutors. If the tutor is willing to share and teach, students will benefit more and grow faster. However, the qualification for hotel tutors varies considerably. In some hotels, all super- visors are eligible to be a hotel tutor. However, some

supervisors are not good trainers. Furthermore, during the internship, the students are asked to write weekly reflection journals. However, in some colleges, the journals are not submitted until the end of the internship, and the students do not receive feedback from the teachers in time.

Comparison of the utilization of EL methods between vocational colleges and universities

On the basis of focus group interviews among hospitality students, we find that vocational colleges and universities focus on the utilization of EL methods during teaching. Nevertheless, differences exist in the implementation of EL activities, which are explained as follows: First, in terms of the utilization of EL methods, the EL activities are found to be more widely and frequently adopted in vocational colleges than in universities. The curriculum design in vocational colleges is skill-oriented, and the skills training and practice guided by teachers takes almost half of the whole class time. By contrast, in universities, lecturing is the dominant teaching method. For some classes, lectures comprise approximately 90% of the class time. Second, various types of EL activities are used by the school or government regularly for vocational students, such as the professional skills competition held by both the school and the local education bureau. Vocational hospitality students are required to obtain a professional certificate, which is a prerequisite for graduation. Hospitality students in universities have low exposure to these skill-oriented activities. Third, in terms of the effectiveness of EL activities, compared with vocational students, university students claim to have limited opportunities to connect with the industry and expect more guest speakers from the industry rather than from academia. University students also usually have a short intern- ship time, approximately 2–5 months, whereas vocational students usually experience 6- to 12-month internships. For university students, they need to seek an internship opportunity by themselves, and the quality of internship varies considerably according to the management level of the hotels. For vocational students, the internship is arranged by the school, and all students are required to work in the designated hotels, which are usually five-star international hotels.

Discussion and conclusion

The study explored the types of EL methods adopted in Chinese hospitality education, the influences of EL on students' learning outcomes, and the effectiveness of the EL methods from students' perspectives. The

study answered the above questions through the use of qualitative research methods, namely observations and focus group inter- views with hospitality students. Previous research mainly focuses on the identification and influences on learning of one or two specific EL methods. This study comprehensively filled the gap in literature pertaining to the effectiveness of EL methods in Chinese hospitality course delivery.

As presented in the previous sections, 20 EL methods are adopted in Chinese hospitality teaching classes, with roleplays, field trips, professional practice, and intern- ships as the most used methods. Certificate-required learning is found to be a unique EL activity in China's hospitality education, a finding that supported the research finding of Yan and Cheung (2012). Two other EL methods not documented in the literature are also widely utilized in Chinese hospitality education, namely peer teaching and mentoring program. The previously reported benefits of EL include stimulating students' learning interests, better understanding and retention of knowledge, and practical experience for career development. Among all the EL methods, roleplays, professional practice, food and wine laboratory, on-the-job training, and internship are widely considered effective by hospitality students. Comments and suggestions were given by students in terms of the adoption of some EL methods, such as internships, videos, and guest speakers.

The utilization of EL methods has a significant and positive effect on students' learning satisfaction. Students are dissatisfied with a teacher who merely uses traditional lecturing modes without involving the students. Yardley et al. (2012) stated that the core condition of learning is participation. Learning is not likely to take place without first engaging the learner's desire to learn (Hawtrey, 2007). The inherent weakness of TL lies in the passive, teacher-centered learning style, which hinders the learning interests of students. Despite the downside of this learning style, a number of students stated that lectures are necessary and sometimes effective for disseminating new knowledge if the lecturer is attractive and well prepared. Hospitality educators must exert additional effort on the course design to integrate TL and EL, as well as enhance teachers' training to ensure the high quality of course delivery, particularly for university educators.

The quality of EL activities should be under better supervision and management. To ensure the effectiveness of EL activities, several areas need to be improved. First, although EL is learner-centered, students still need guidance from teachers in the learning process. How can students' intellectual curiosity be stimulated, fully involving them? Teachers' role

in EL should not be neglected. As Wong and Wong (2009) suggested, during a field trip, the teacher needs to play the role of coordinator and steward and provide opportunities for students to recap, reflect on, and integrate theory to practice. This opinion is echoed by Zopiatis (2007), who stated that the key to hospitality internship is a type of guided reflection, which punctuates Kolb's EL cycle. Domask (2007) argued that instructors should use guest speakers to help convey the knowledge of other subject areas and disciplines; instructors should organize follow-up sessions and guide students to improve their understanding of the contents discussed by the guest speaker. In addition, teachers should apply the EL methods in an innovative way. For example, videos are not perceived as an effective method by some students, but, inherently, it is a good approach for providing students access to online sources around the world and gaining an improved understanding for real working scenarios. Teachers should ensure the quality of the video and its contents. As an EL method, a video is not necessarily downloaded from online websites and shown to students. Videos can be applied innovatively. For example, videos can be taken by students themselves as an assignment to simulate work scenarios. The teacher may ask students to share the self-made video in class to encourage them to practice spontaneously and reflect on their performance. Through this approach, the teacher's roles in the supervision and innovative application of EL should be enhanced.

Second, educators should not simply emphasize the format of experiential teaching but should place more effort on the teaching contents. The teaching contents need to be updated regularly, a task that requires teachers to strive for continuous professional development. Leslie (1991) argued that the continuous and increased contact and cooperation between hospitality educators and the industry can enrich the industry's input in course development and assist educators to keep abreast of hospitality trends and future development. We suggest that teachers should take on-the-job training in hotels or attend industry conferences to keep up-to-date with the industry.

Third, the cooperation between the academia and industry normally remains at the surface. Hospitality schools and companies should increase their collaboration to design curriculum and initiate cooperative education programs. Schoolteachers and hotel mentors should work together to better supervise and facilitate students' learning. Hotel professionals should take the responsibility for nurturing talents for the industry, rather than simply regarding the interns as cheap labor. Internship will only succeed if hospitality professionals are willing to

provide interns with meaningful work opportunities, assign them to qualified supervisors/mentors, and provide them with a positive organizational environment in which they may develop themselves (Zopiatis, 2007).

The research findings show that in comparison with vocational colleges, universities tend to adopt traditional teaching methods and exert fewer efforts on EL activities. The primary reason for this difference may be that universities lean toward education for knowledge, whereas vocational colleges focus on skills. Universities should develop a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of EL and integrate EL with traditional teaching activities. On the one hand, students reflect that the traditional one-way instruction fails to stimulate the learning interests of students, and thus the difficulty of helping students achieve satisfying learning outcomes. On the other hand, the task of higher education is not only to deliver qualified graduates who will cater to the immediate demands of the industry. It must also create innovators of tomorrow, independent thinkers, and citizens who will be able to challenge the way things and processes are performed at present and create the future of the industry. Instead of focusing on vocational values, the hospitality curriculum should include liberal values to provide students with a philosophical and sociological foundation for decision-making strategies, corporate social responsibilities, and sustainable development of the industry. The innovation of the industry may even need students to have cross-disciplinary perspectives, such as combining arts or IT into marketing.

EL is an important tool that aids educators in delivering liberal education and achieving sustainable education missions. According to Eyler (2009), experiential education has value far beyond building the types of social skills, work ethic, and practical expertise, all of which are essential in professionally oriented programs; experiential education can also "lead to more powerful academic learning and help students achieve intellectual goals commonly associated with liberal education" (p. 26), including a deep understanding of subject matter, capacity for critical thinking and application of knowledge, and ability to engage in lifelong learning. For example, as a form of EL, service learning integrates academic study with community service, increases student involvement in public service, and promotes active learning, critical thinking, and sense of civic responsibility (Eyler, 2009; Stanton, 1987). Universities and colleges should create public service centers that provide students with opportunities to act as volunteers to provide community service and develop student's awareness of public needs, leadership skills, and

lifelong commitment to social responsibility. Hence, higher hospitality education should provide students with increased liberal capabilities with the aid of EL tools.

Several limitations exist in this study. First, gender is considered an influencing factor of students' preferences of learning methods in the literature. However, because of a small sample size, an insignificant difference is found on the learning method preference of female and male students. Second, the sampling method needs to be reconsidered because students with lower GPA were found not willing to share. Third, the interview population is the students in three vocational colleges and three universities, which are all located in Guangdong Province. Therefore, the results of the study may not be applicable to other areas in China. For further studies, quantitative research should be undertaken to verify the application and effectiveness of EL methods. More focus group interviews need to be conducted in other colleges and universities in other districts. The differences in two types of educational institutes can be further examined. Moreover, hospitality educators should be interviewed in future research to explore whether any gap exists between teachers' expectations and students' perceptions.

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