

# Conference report

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## The future of tourism education and transformational learning

### Introduction

The phenomenal growth in tourism, both domestic and international, that is showing no sign of slowing down makes this sector an economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental force that drives societal change. At the same time it is buffeted by these forces but has shown remarkable resilience. The speed of societal change is also ever increasing, largely driven by technology and its concomitant compression of time and space, increased connectedness, and mobility. As a result, the education provided by post-secondary institutions must help graduates understand, respond to, and manage this change and allow them to cope with the increasingly complex operating environment within which they will live and work. Indeed, due to the pace of change, we have not even contemplated just what these jobs of the future might actually be, and so the best we can hope is that we can produce graduates that are sufficiently agile, nimble, and creative forward thinkers (Dredge *et al.*, 2014a). Universities in particular have come under increasing criticism for not educating students to fulfill a leadership role in assuring a sustainable future (Wallis and Steptoe, 2006), and business education specifically is critiqued for not addressing the ethical and moral questions in modern capitalism (Wilson and Thomas, 2012).

This concern for the future of tourism education has given rise to the Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) in 2007 (Dredge *et al.*, 2014b). Convinced of the necessity to fundamentally retool and redesign of our programs, the nature of what is taught, and the manner in which it is taught (Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI), 2010), a thoughtful and committed group of educators from many parts of the world focused on defining the core values of tourism education and on activating their implementation in curricula. The TEFI (2010) White Paper outlines the six challenges facing educators in undertaking this important task: overcoming the innate tendency to reproduce our current form and substance of education; providing students with the skills and knowledge to address pressing issues of the future, not just execute tasks in the immediate; exposing students to appropriate corporate and broader societal values, not just narrow neoliberal doctrine; recognizing that some issues, like climate change, must be addressed now even though we will not feel their full impact until far into the future; balancing the social, cultural, and environmental consequences of tourism development with dominant economic values; and understanding that the extent and pace of change requires a commitment to lifelong learning.

Given these challenges and the multitude of uncertainties of the future, TEFI participants concluded that certain values would equip students with the foundation to tackle most situations. Five value-based principles were identified as imperative in tourism education programs if students are to become responsible leaders and stewards for the destinations where they work or live. These are: ethics, stewardship, knowledge, professionalism, and mutuality. For a full discussion on each of these, please refer to the TEFI (2010) White Paper. Within this context, and recognizing the different learning styles of the next generation, it can be argued that how we teach is just as important as what we teach (Black, 2010). This, then, is what gave rise to the eighth gathering of TEFI educators and others interested in the concept of transformational learning as applied to tourism.

### Transformational learning

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning concerns itself with construing meaning from experience as a guide to action. The theory addresses three types of transformation that must occur: psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle). Tourism as a multidisciplinary field of study and travel, which underpins it, is uniquely positioned to facilitate such a transformation in our

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students. Indeed, TEFI has had a long-held commitment to enhancing the worldmaking capability of students, educators, practitioners, and the industry. To do this effectively, we must, however, also consider the positive and negative impacts exerted by tourism in its development. In addition, we must ask ourselves how we can help students envisage a future that is often beyond our own power of understanding as instructors, and how our scholarship can contribute to this in a meaningful way, not just measured by the quantity of publications and citations.

These, then, were some of the themes addressed by TEFI8, held in Guelph, Ontario, Canada from June 4 to 7, 2014 under the heading “Transformational Learning: Activism, Empowerment and Political Agency in Tourism Education.” Four perspectives – focusing on educators, institutions, students, and the industry as well as the broader community – were explored through a variety of keynote addresses, panel discussions, paper presentations, and workshops.

As educators, we bring our own values, politics, and professionalism to the task, and for students, who are just learning to exercise criticality, what we say is their reality. We therefore have the power to change the emphasis: not “business as usual” and “tourism as a panacea” for many ills, but rather taking responsibility for change and educating students by creating awareness of important global issues from poverty to gender issues and diversity, climate change, war and conflict, to the ethics of slum and dark tourism. This requires that we, ourselves, must live lives of consequence and be supported in our efforts by institutions that are themselves value-centered and supportive of social entrepreneurship in the curriculum. Only then can we hope to help shape our students into moral citizens, who will actively engage in changing the world both as students and as graduates. However, as Johnny Edmonds, Secretariat Coordinator at the World Indigenous Tourism Alliance pointed out, the tourism education we provide rarely acknowledges indigenous people and their deep roots in the land they occupy. Unless there is “the *talk* (formal corporate commitment), the *walk* (comparison of programs against six fundamental activities), and the *legacy* (consequential actions and outcomes)” (Edmonds, 2014), we cannot claim transformational engagement with indigenous communities.

Yet, in recent decades, there has been a considerable shift away from the perception of universities as institutions providing orientation to society and toward one that takes a more economically oriented view, turning universities into corporate organizations producing a skilled workforce ready to enter the marketplace (Woelert, 2014). Concerned with the implications of this shift, leading academic institutions laid the foundation for a global platform for Principles of Responsible Management Education under the coordination of the UN Global Compact (PRME, 2014a). As a signatory to the PRME, the University of Guelph aims to educate “leaders for a sustainable world” by incorporating and adhering to its six principles regarding the purpose, values, methods, research, partnership, and dialogue of and about management education (PRME, 2014b).

The student perspective was also examined in detail, first by Chris Castro, Founder & Executive Director of IDEAS for Us (Intellectual Decisions on Environmental Awareness Solutions), who clearly demonstrated that by engaging students in action learning and doing outside the classroom, they not only come away with a change in their frames of reference but also a deeper understanding that society is about working together, not just freedom and individualism. This was followed by a number of papers and discussions on very popular types of student travel such as voluntourism. Unfortunately, the ethics behind such study trips and the learning that supposedly takes place were both highly questioned as students do not arrive value neutral, and normally have neither the deep contact with the indigenous population that would allow them to gain an appreciation of a different world view nor do they have the maturity to act as bridges between cultures.

Yet it is clear that the world needs a new style of tourism education, one that indeed creates such bridges and that imbues business with a conscience beyond its fundamental profit motivation. We must allow students to critically examine the assumptions and beliefs underpinning either courses of action or notions of success (Pollock, 2014). The notion that tourism is a business where people take every aspect of nature to make money for those who came there first, sell it as cheaply as possible, and force local populations to provide for tourists when they do not have enough for their own needs is neither sustainable nor ethical. Specifically, indigenous populations must be empowered to express their own voice and be given the ability to control the pace of development to their own ability to adapt to changes.

However, much of this learning can only take place outside the classroom in real life situations which requires us as educators to get out of our habits of mind and practices and transform how we teach: we must allow for the co-creation with students of an education fit for our times, and one that paints a picture of a compelling future for them so that they will want to be engaged with the communities in which they live, learn, and work. The vast majority of businesses in tourism are micro or small enterprises, firmly embedded in their local communities. Their willingness to protect and cherish the resources that make their destination unique and to welcome and share with strangers their knowledge, then indeed both host and guest can learn to see the world from a different perspective, one that will enrich, challenge, and provide meaning to both (Pollock, 2012). This is the vision for tourism that as educators we should be advocating for in and outside the classroom, because these are the true transformational encounters with communities.

### The way forward

As Anna Pollock (2014) so eloquently put forward in her invited address at TEFI8, we must prepare and support our students to become leaders and changemakers within their community and in their professional lives. To achieve this, our pedagogy must be action oriented, and must imbue them with new literacies about issues of global concern such as climate change, diversity, poverty, and ecosystems bringing together transdisciplinary knowledge through collective, collaborative, and self-directed learning. Only then will students “wake up, grow up and step up.”

TEFI has set itself five areas of activity to fulfill its mission of being the leading, forward-looking network that inspires, informs, and supports tourism educators and students to passionately and courageously transform the world for the better:

- teaching and learning;
- tourism scholarship;
- advocacy of tourism as a field of study and research;
- tourism education futures; and
- tourism and social entrepreneurship.

Work in all of these areas was advanced through workshops at the conference with agreed upon projects undertaken by each of the workgroups. Anyone interested in any of these topics is welcome to join!

The full details of the conference, its proceedings, and future actions by TEFI are available at: [www.tourismeducationfutures.org/](http://www.tourismeducationfutures.org/) >

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