
Maximiliano Korstanje

Professor, Department of Economics, University of Palermo, Argentina

Teaching Philosophy to Tourism and Hospitality Students in Argentina

Unfortunately, philosophy and tourism are seen as distinct disciplines in Argentina that have nothing to share. In fact, one of the problems with philosophy in Argentina is that it remains under the paternalism of sociology instead of being recognized for its important contributions as a stand-alone discipline. The question as to why philosophy has gained little attention in this country in comparison to other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology or psychology is complex and a difficult matter to grasp. Most likely, it is due to a traditional belief that philosophy is purely theoretical and that theoretical speculations cannot contribute anything to applied, real world problems. In contrast, I would like to argue that philosophy can contribute substantially to tourism research and practice from many perspectives and should be taught to tourism and hospitality students. Whatever the case may be, the following lines illustrate my personal experience of teaching a philosophy course to tourism and hospitality students in 2008.

The topics that this course covered ranged from ethics and professional deontology concerning modern tourism to the contributions of the peripatetic school of philosophy in stoic ethics. A wide range of classical exponents such as Aristotle, Seneca, and Lucretius were discussed in combination with the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Hegel and Heidegger and the nihilism of Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. One of the most exciting points of discussion in this course was the examination as to how the term hospitality (derived from the Latin hospitium) has been manipulated by scholastic philosophy in Spain to legitimate the conquest of America. To cut the long story short, the tribes in America did not know European concepts like hospitality and free transit. As a result of this, Spaniard explorers encountered problems at the time of going through lands of this new continent. This custom in aborigines was considered a consequence of their cultural backwardness. The fact was that the Salamanca School of Philosophy determined that if these aborigines refused to accept the universal and natural right of Free-Transit, they should be punished and expropriated from their possessions. Under this perspective, the inhabitants of America began to be deemed sub-humans. In few words, the manipulation of the meaning of hospitality paved the way towards

the conquest and hegemony of the new world. This and other ethical issues were part of the syllabus covered in this course.

The first challenge was that students in tourism and hospitality have no idea as to what philosophy can contribute to the development of their future career. Secondly, they deem philosophy to be of a certain complexity and unable to tackle practical issues. Third, technologies and other innovations play an important role in disseminating information world-wide as well as in preparing papers to present at the end of semester. Teaching philosophy in a traditional lecture way was seen as antiquated by them.

As far as their expectations were concerned, I asked these news students what they thought ethics meant and how philosophy could contribute to their career goals. Students replied not to have any clue as to what philosophy was and how it could contribute to tourism research and practice. Some of them thought ethics was related to social norms. Other more sophisticated responses of students were aimed at emphasizing that businesses are part of unmoral practices; following this, ethics and deontology should lead practitioners towards the pathways of doing correct things in business fields.

During the course of the semester, students were taught in the classical streams of ethics such as Epicurean, Stoic and Post-modern ones. My students travelled a long way through the world of philosophy. Importantly, they developed very interesting concepts in classroom discussions. However, whether they pursued tourism as a minor or major degree, almost all participants experienced panic at the time of oral assessments. There seems to be a disconnect between what and how students want to learn and the expectations of formal education.

I also think that tourism and hospitality students in Argentina do not understand the importance of studying other disciplines in the context of tourism. They converged to study tourism looking for knowledge of other landscapes, people, customs and languages. In the same line of reasoning, they dream to have their own travel agency when finished. However, disciplines such as history or geography are not part of the interests of these students. Argentinean students enter into university education following the prestige given by a certificate or graduation but are not willing to expand their horizons and work hard on their understanding on theoretical frameworks.

In Buenos Aires (the capital of Argentina) tourism has no impact in public universities. Only two universities offer this career in public education. In the last years, however, tourism has gained wide-spread acknowledgement throughout the country and is seen as a degree in high demand and offering job security. Under this assumption, students have started to study tourism with the expectation that it will lead to a job fast. Typically, candidates obtain an intermediate degree as a tourism guide within the first or second year of their studies and then pursue their race towards the final bachelor degree in tourism in less than 5 years. As a result of this, many of students are involved in courses that are beyond their concerns. Philosophy is seen as an add-on that distracts them from reaching their career goals rather than being acknowledged for the important insights it can provide for tourism researcher and industry professionals.