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Employee learning in tourism experiences during Covid-19: a Communities of Practice perspective

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ABSTRACT

The global Covid-19 pandemic means that most tourism organizations face a heightened need to offer a range of innovative tourism experiences in order to survive. The successful delivery of these experiences largely depends on tourism employees, yet limited research currently exists on how these employees engage in learning new tourism practices, particularly in times of radical change. Utilizing an exploratory qualitative case study of Hamlet Live, an immersive tourism experience in Denmark, this article seeks to shed light on how tourism employees engage in learning during Covid-19. To explore this issue in-depth, Communities of Practice, a practice-based approach to understanding learning has been adopted as the key theoretical framework. Through participant observation and qualitative interviews, this study reveals the challenge of using ICT for tourism employee learning and how experienced employees can help offset disruption through peripheral learning. It also exposes the weakness of foreign employees in foundational competence such as native language fluency during a swift change from international to domestic tourists, and the impacts on their engagement in learning. The paper thus also makes a practical contribution in supporting tourism managers in better managing human resources and facilitating employee learning in times of drastic change.

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Introduction

The tourism experience sector is increasingly competitive, and organizations need to offer unique and memorable experiences in order to survive (Tussyadiah, 2013). Yet experience concepts, which are the 'recipe' for producing and delivering the content of an experience, are intangible and not static (Eide et al., 2017). This condition is combined with organizations commonly relying heavily on their employees to deliver the supply-side of the experience to tourists (Phi & Dredge, 2019). The challenge of human involvement in the creation of tourism experiences is heightened by common tourism characteristics such as seasonal work patterns, high turnover in the sector and high levels of non-native workers with relatively low competence levels (especially in native language competency) among the employees (Kusluvan et al., 2010).

While the global business environment was previously viewed as rapidly changing, the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic led to an almost instantaneous change from overtourism to non-tourism (Gössling et al., 2020). Tourism has shown its vulnerability to pandemics with the impact of restrictions on mobility and enforced social distancing being severely felt throughout the tourism and hospitality supply change. Yet, despite the negative impacts on international travel,

tourism in some countries, such as Denmark, has changed and continued in the form of domestic tourism. The potential and rise of 'staycation', defined in Oxford dictionary as 'a holiday spent in one's home country rather than abroad, or one spent at home and involving day trips to local attractions', has been encouraged and recognized by both academic and media commentators alike (Adams et al., 2021; Phi & Waldesten, 2021). At this point, however, it is unknown what impact this dramatic change in the available tourist market has had on the delivery of tourism experience 'products'. Of particular interest to this paper is how the tourism labour force, with its challenging characteristics, has been affected by rapid changes and how tourism employees learn to engage in new work-related practices.

Leta and Chan (2021)'s extensive review of literature on tourism and hospitality crisis management found that 'improving staff training and skill development' was one of the key crisis response strategies by service firms. However, while employee learning during times of crisis is an important topic, an extensive literature research yielded very few results. Panagiotakopoulos, 2013 explored motivations for employee learning after the 2007–2008 financial crisis and highlighted the importance of a 'psychological contract' between the employees and employers. Zhang et al. (2020) similarly focused on managers' ethical obligation in catering to employees' safety concerns and offering psychological motivation for employees to adopt safety behaviours during Covid-19. Other researchers viewed employee adaptive performance after a crisis from an individual perspective, focusing on self-leadership (Park & Park, 2019) and proactiveness (Kim, 2020). Overall, research on tourism employee learning from a collaborative perspective is largely overlooked and subsequently may hinder effective training practices of tourism firms during and after the Covid-19 crisis.

As most tourism experiences take place within the context of a social and co-creation process with the participation of both the tourism employees and tourists, the communities of practice (CoP) concept arguably is well-fitted for exploring how tourism employees engage in learning. In other words, employees learn by constantly interacting with other employees and also with customers in the course of delivering an experience. CoP has only scantily been applied in the tourism context since Hall and Williams (2008) highlighted the relevance and absence of the concept to innovation and knowledge exchange in tourism. This paper thus seeks to utilize CoP within the case study of Hamlet Live, an evolving immersive theatre and tourism experience in Copenhagen, Denmark to critically explore how tourism employees engage in learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Theoretically, the paper contributes to address the clear gap in understanding tourism employee learning from a collaborative perspective, especially when sudden changes are introduced into the context. The practical contribution of this paper, therefore, is to support tourism managers in better managing human resources and employee education during crisis.

Literature review

Tourism experiences: definitions and characteristics

Tourism experiences are services that are differentiated by unique features from those with a more functional orientation. This makes prior knowledge of tourism experiences' nature and value important for their design and production (Eide et al., 2017). Jernsand et al. (2015) propose that tourism experiences often revolve around feelings and fantasies integrated through the co-creation and presence of customers, which makes them a 'personal, interactive and complex phenomenon' (p. 98). The unique characteristics of tourism experiences include that they often occur in experiential escapes, use storytelling and dramaturgy (Eide et al., 2017), as well as the role of surprise, social belonging and interaction of customers with other customers (Jernsand et al., 2015). Additionally, the performative nature of many tourism experiences, combined with their simultaneous co-production and consumption (Phi & Dredge, 2019), mean that tourist involvement and their reactions may have high impacts on tourism employees (Bærenholdt & Jensen, 2009).

The defining elements of structured experiences are proposed to be ‘both the objective, interactive encounters between participants and provider manipulated frameworks ... and the resulting subjective participant outcomes’ (Duerden et al., 2015, p. 603). Of importance to this study was the understanding that provider-manipulated frameworks are largely represented by employees in many cases, as well as the vital role customers play in co-creating the tourism experience.

Communities of practice and tourism employee learning

The concept of CoP has been developed, expanded and re-developed over the last few decades (see Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002). Although the focus has changed, the core element often relates to the existence of informal or formal groups who attend to common or collective activities within which members participate, learn and contribute to. Bertella and Rinaldi (2020) state that ‘learning occurs within and across CoPs, which are groups of people, often emerging spontaneously, who share a so-called domain of interest/concern for something they do and who intend to learn together how to do it better’ (p. 4). The early examples provided for peripheral learning in CoPs included the process by which new midwives learnt how to competently perform their tasks by observing and participating with midwives who were already experienced and competent (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This practice-based approach to understanding learning and knowledge allows for them to be understood in a social context rather than determined purely by the actions or abilities of the individual. This approach also sees knowledge and action as inseparable and so engaging in a practice with other ‘practitioners’ is considered an emergent and continuous learning process.

Wenger (1998) positions CoP as part of social learning theory and proposes four key components to a CoP framework. These include:

- (1) Learning as doing (practice-derived) relates to the necessary resources and contexts that communities are historically and socially embedded in. This type of learning in tourism and hospitality is exemplified by the process by which new housekeeping staff observe and participate with senior housekeepers in the cleaning and arranging of hotel rooms.

This process of learning as doing correlates with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) proposal that learning in many situations occurs through the participation of would-be practitioners at the edges of a practice, in what are commonly recognized as apprenticeships. From the perspective of this ‘peripheral learning’, it is the supported participation of new community members in approximated and full practice that allows them to learn to be competent.

- (1) Learning as belonging (to a community) relates to the process of community building and maintaining, or in other words community coherence. This can happen via mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998).
- (2) Learning as becoming (the shaping of identity) refers to the changes that members go through by being part of a CoP. These changes relate to members’ engagement, alignment and imagination; the different modes of belonging to a community. An example of the elements of engagement and alignment within learning is that when guides deliver a tour, they continually adapt and align the official information for a tour with the knowledge that they constantly gather themselves, as well as that shared by colleagues. Similarly, Eide et al. (2017) emphasise how tourism practices are dynamically renewed and adapted into a community’s normal practice through active employee engagement.
- (3) Learning as experience (the construction of meaning) relates to how members experience their engagement as meaningful. One aspect of the disruptive negotiation of meaning process integral to tourism employee learning is the interaction across community boundaries (Eide et al., 2017). This is in relation to the ‘continuities and discontinuities in the social landscape

defined by the boundaries of various practices' (Wenger, 1998, pp. 104–105). It is over these boundaries that there are important opportunities for tourism communities of practice to learn through knowledge transfer with external environments and to prevent insularism (Reinl & Kelliher, 2014; Shaw & Williams, 2009). For instance, the customizing of the script, sequencing of events or choice of behaviour can all be changed by a theme park employee in order to have the most appeal to the guests present. This appeal conversely provides the employee with recognition for their performance.

In their seminal book on tourism innovation, Hall and Williams (2008) identified the relevance of CoP for understanding tourism knowledge management. Yet, there is still very limited empirical research exploring employee learning via a CoP framework (a notable exception is Eide et al., 2017) and it has never been used to study tourism employee learning within the context of a global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper, therefore, seeks to add to our knowledge on tourism employee learning during times of drastic change, as well as to deepen our understanding of the relationship between employee mobility and knowledge transfer as called for by Shaw and Williams (2009).

Tourism communities of practice and online learning

Before the advent of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), CoP memberships were often bounded by geography and heavily depended on spatial proximity. The rise of ICT in the last few decades has enabled many CoPs to be formed without the need for in-person meetings, also known as 'relational proximity'. In the tourism context, many online review platforms can serve as CoPs to help tourists and service providers to communicate across countries (de la O Hernández-López, 2019).

Arguably, Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the use of ICT for forming virtual CoPs. A recent study by Cullinane et al. (2022) in the higher education context found that leading international education organizations were able to reconstruct effective learning interactions between mentors and doctoral students online. Reflections from doctoral students across five continents after one week of virtual summer school showed that they were still able to achieve academic outcomes while minimizing the cost of international travel.

Online learning, however, may not be as effective in the context of tourism employee learning. Polanyi (1966) differentiates between explicit knowledge, that which can be articulated, and tacit knowledge – knowledge that can be possessed but not explained purely with words. Tacit knowledge is harder to codify and communicate, which is problematic for tourism employees, where it is the predominant form of knowledge (Phi et al., 2017).

The importance of tacit knowledge has implications for what approaches tourism managers apply to achieve the desired outcomes of employee learning, which are reviewed in the next section.

Outcomes of CoP learning: experience and improved competence

The direct outcomes of learning in the context of CoP are related to experience and competence by Wenger (1998, p. 4) for 'knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises'. 'Competence' is described as what the communities determine is required to successfully engage in a practice and be recognizable as a competent member, while 'experience' is the ongoing participation of members within a community and the broader environment (Wenger, 2000). These components of knowledge can converge in CoP with the experience of community members supporting the existing competences used in the practice and vice-versa. It is a divergence between experience and competence, however, where individual and collective learning occurs. Learning, from this perspective, is created by the change in alignment of either experience or competence where one has to realign with the other (Wenger, 1998, 2000).

In tourism research, competence is seen as relating to the particular context of a job or role in an organization and can be linked to superior performance (Watson et al., 2004). In tourism education research, competences have been identified as generic/transversal, meaning subject-independent and relevant in any context, or subject-specific, meaning they relate to a particular context and task performance (López-Bonilla & López-Bonilla, 2014). Alternatively, language teaching competencies have been described as either foundational, those required to engage in a practice, or advanced, those that are hoped to develop from continuous experience and learning (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Adapting the above definitions and features, the terms '*foundational competence*' and '*practice-specific competence*' are used in this paper to explore the roles of competence and experience on tourism employee practice-based learning:

- Foundational competence relates to the competences that are necessary for successfully engaging in a practice.
- Practice-specific competence relates to those competences that enable a superior quality performance in a practice, which are gained from experience in a particular context.

Wenger (1998) proposes that the CoP concept is versatile, with certain features being more or less relevant according to the context they are applied to. The focus of this paper is not to explore the nature of a tourism employee CoP but rather to use the framework to explore how employee learning is affected by the radical changes introduced in response to Covid-19.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative case study of Hamlet Live, Denmark

The focus of this study on how tourism employees engage in learning during the Covid-19 pandemic offered the opportunity for a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative approaches are founded on assumptions and interpretive or theoretical frameworks that guide the study of meaning ascribed to social or human problems by individuals or groups. This study is also grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, which was applied in the form of a single case study. Yin (2009, p. 18) proposes that a case study is, in scope: 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. The near absence of empirical research using the CoP framework in studying tourism employee learning, as well as the paucity of studies on tourism employee learning during crises, indicates that an exploratory research approach is appropriate for this case study.

The case chosen for this study is the successful immersive theatre and tourism experience of Hamlet Live at Kronborg Castle, a famous tourist attraction in Helsingør, Denmark. Thanks to its initial success, this tourism experience was in its fifth season in the Summer of 2020 with characters rotated between the eighteen actors employed. The gradually evolving experience has always been based loosely on Shakespeare's Hamlet but also merged with the history of the Danish royalty who lived in the castle. A key element in this innovative tourism experience (Leask et al., 2020) is that tourists do not only spectate and talk to actors between scenes but are actually encouraged to be part of the scenes and activities (Raassina, 2018). In practice, this means that the scenes and activities happen in different rooms in the castle and sites on the grounds with normally no stage separating the tourists from the actors (Figure 1).

In previous years, visitors to the castle stayed at over 300,000 arrivals annually, with international tourists accounting for 75% of the total (Reinwald, 2020). In 2020, however, due to Covid-19 and the closure of most international borders, the castle management refocused on the domestic market in accordance with recommendations by the official representatives of the Danish tourism industry



Figure 1. Tourists become embroiled in the conflict between Hamlet & Polonius (Photo taken by author).

(Visit Denmark, 2020). This sudden change of target market required a sudden change from an English-language-only experience to one that was to be approximately half in the Danish language. It also led to a further shift away from being a primarily adult-orientated, partially scripted drama. Instead, the experience was pushed to be more family-friendly and historically informative with more improvised interaction.

Significantly, these changes had to be introduced in the context of having already hired and re-hired professional actors in February, many of them non-native, to play the various theatrical characters that this tourism experience was provided through. This case thus has potential to offer rich insight into employee learning during times of drastic change such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection period began in June 2020 – the immediate aftermath of the re-opening of the tourist attractions and museums in Denmark. Several modes of qualitative data suited to case studies were collected to address the research question, including historical and document analysis, interviews, and participant observation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The first of these was the gathering of relevant documents such as recordings of scenes from previous years, media, promotional and personal correspondence documents, which provided a broad contextual understanding of the case. Next, nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, both in person, by phone and via computer-mediated communication. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants that could provide the most insight into tourism employee learning, which included both managers and front-line and back-office staff. Interviewees with different levels of responsibility were chosen to both provide a comprehensive overview of the context for the employee learning process and to allow statements and observations to be challenged when developing the findings.

In qualitative research, the concept of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is often used as the key guiding principle to determine sample size. In other words, data collection will continue until the respondents can no longer introduce new perspectives on the topic (i.e. saturation/exhaustion of viewpoints) (Mason, 2010). The number of respondents needed to reach saturation varies. Guest et al. (2006) believed that saturation typically occurred by the twelfth interview, while Creswell (1998, p. 64) suggested saturation occurred with 'long interviews with up to 10 people' for phenomenological studies. The sample size of nine semi-structured interviews, six of whom were actors and three having back-office/managerial roles, was deemed sufficient for two reasons. Firstly, the six actors made up one-third of the eighteen actors in the group. Secondly, the responses during interviews, which were on average sixty-seven minutes in length, began to be repeated near the end of the process, indicating the saturation point.

Table 1 provides a brief profile of the participants and interview length:

A number of ethical considerations were raised during the data collection. As the topic examined the learning process and the meanings that participants placed on different features, the findings of this study may create tension in the personal working environment of the team at the castle. This was also something that many of the interviewees enquired about. This potential for harm can be considered under the teleological philosophical approach of research ethics, where the researcher must consider and avoid negatively affecting participants. As recommended by the authors, an important aspect of this is preserving the participants' anonymity. For this reason, the name of each respondent interviewed was changed and, where applicable, the name of their working characters concealed to ensure anonymity and protect their privacy. Additionally, the term back-office was applied to interviewees who worked predominantly in areas other than engaging directly with guests so as to avoid identifying their specific positions.

To obtain the insights needed to answer the research question, the interviewees were asked a number of open-ended questions. In addition, the managers, back-office and front-office staff were also asked tailored questions related to their position, as shown in Table 2.

Furthermore, field research was conducted in the form of participant observation on four non-consecutive days in late-August 2020. Participant observation often requires the researcher to stay in the natural setting for an extended period of time which, depending on the nature of the inquiry, can range between a few days and a couple of months or years (Guest et al., 2013). Applying an informal approach as suggested by Turner (2010), participant observation was applied both in a context resembling that of a guest observing employees working and of direct engagement with them during and between 'scenes'. Employees were profiled before this fieldwork and the majority of them were observed doing different scenes and activities, with some observed using different languages for the same section. In this way, a comprehensive overview of many of the observed

Table 1. Interviewee profile.

Role of interviewees	Questions asked
General	What is your understanding of the experience Hamlet Live aims to create for tourists? How has the experience changed this year from other years? (for recurring employee) How did Zoom impact the learning and development process?
Managers	Has the same group of actors and management been involved or has it changed over the years? What difficulties did the crisis create in introducing more improvised interaction into the experience? How have the Covid-19 restrictions affected the actors in being able to develop their understanding of how to create the experience?
Back-office	Is the experience this year developing in the strategic direction planned? Were the reasons for making the changes to the experience this year related to Covid regulations, attracting different guest types or something else?
Front-office	How do you try and provide that experience with your character? How did you adapt to speaking Danish this year? How did you learn to play your role / this year compared to other years?

Table 2. Semi-structured interview guides.

Names (All changed to random to ensure anonymity)	Position in organization	Frequency of acting in Hamlet Live	Mode of interviewing	Length of Interviews
Harald	Actor	New	Phone	105:08
Aron	Back-office	Not applicable	In person	70:22
Oliver	Actor	Recurrent	In person	40:44
Karl	Back-office	Not applicable	CMC	48:09
Kasper	Actor	Recurrent	Phone	41:24
Sylvester	Actor	Recurrent	Phone	90:29
Kristoffer	Actor	Recurrent	In person	78:57
Peter	Actor	New	In person	81:38
Niels	Back-office	Not applicable	Phone	51:44

actors' performance was gained, enabling comparison. Field notes were taken relating to what was said but also other observations such as employee competence and guest reaction.

Thematic analysis, a process widely used for data analysis in qualitative research (see e.g. Bernard, 2006), was applied to analyze collected data. Thematic analysis involves the identification and reporting of key patterns and themes that 'capture something important about the data in relation to the research question' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Thematic analysis thus enabled the researcher to reduce the general dataset into rich stories and thick descriptions that were important features of the case study research design (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Saldaña (2011) describes themes as long sentences or phrases that synopsise the apparent and underlying data meaning. This paper used the recommendation of Saldaña (2011) to categorize, cluster and create labels for themes. An abductive approach was utilized, where the key themes were identified based on the CoP's key components proposed by Wenger (1998). These themes were further supplemented with other elements of CoP that have often been neglected but are relevant in this case, for example, peripheral learning.

Findings and discussions

Impacts of Covid-19 on Hamlet Live tourism employee learning context

As mentioned in the previous section, there have been sudden changes regarding the Covid-19 restrictions resulting in an immediate shift in the demographics and nationality of visitors to Kronborg Castle. This led to a sudden restructuring in the tourism experience, which had an observable impact on the employee learning context. The most radical changes to employee learning were the modes of training (i.e. onsite versus online) and language used for the experience (i.e. from English to both English and Danish).

The first month of employee training, also called rehearsals, did not take place on-site as previously done but through meetings on Zoom, a computer-mediated communication platform. This involved semi-regular meetings for the whole management and acting group together, combined with daily meetings between small groups and pairings of actors and occasionally directors. These were combined with additional online training in different forms, for instance:

I arranged, together with X, some of the (history) experts where the actors could have sessions asking to how it was back then and how was the archery back then, how was the warfare back then and so on ... So they had some tools to use when they met the audience (Aron)

The primary disruption to training rehearsals caused by Covid-19 was that it prevented physical engagement. The rehearsals were an approximation of practice that Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) identified as an important part of peripheral learning. As mentioned above, the response of the Hamlet Live management was, as with many organizations responding to the crisis, to shift learning activities online until restrictions were relaxed.

At the beginning of June, restrictions on museums and cultural institutions in Denmark were lifted. The castle management quickly changed the learning process back to on-site rehearsals, and the actors were given an extra week of training. This involved dry-run and dress rehearsals in the actual locations and in front of tourists visiting the castle before *Hamlet Live* was relaunched. The first few quiet weeks after the relaunch also continued to be utilized as unofficial rehearsal.

The impact of Covid-19 was not confined only to the learning during the rehearsals but also to the engagement in practice-based learning that Wenger (1998) proposes as integral to CoP. Based on the industry predictions that there were to be only domestic tourists, the experience management felt compelled to target Danish families with the experience. This led to a decision that was described by one employee as:

They wanted all the workshops, these twenty-minute sections in Danish with people who didn't speak Danish ... And they wanted more conversation in the piece, for example, someone who doesn't speak the language suddenly improvising on the top five hardest language in the world (Kasper)

All interviewees indicated similar shock at this post-recruitment decision to change the language for all interactive activities, from English to Danish, *'despite approximately half of the actors being non-native'* (Karl).

Both the changes to rehearsals and the changes to how *Hamlet Live* was practised in response to Covid-19 can be seen as affecting the employee learning context. The online rehearsals created a more formal learning context that was detached from approximations of practice, while the language change influenced the nature of engagement in the practice. The impact of these changes on employee learning will be presented in the following sections.

The roles of online peripheral learning in developing employee competency during Covid-19

The active engagement in meaning production is vital for understanding how employees sustain or adapt practices in tourism experience (Eide et al., 2017). Peripheral learning is the engagement of new community members in a practice, supported by competent members, to the point where they are considered fully competent members engaged in the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In the case of *Hamlet Live*, a unique competence relates to how the actors (i.e. tourism employees) can engage with the audience (i.e. tourists) while staying in character. This competence is rather challenging to develop, given that most of the interviewees had only acting training and none pre-possessed site or era-specific knowledge. As one new employee, who was bilingual, explained:

I haven't done immersive theatre in this way before. I have learned so much, different things. You learn to read people, who is interested, who is not? ... there are children who stare at me from behind their parent's legs. They are interested but scared, so I will wave, smile, even sit down on the ground to make myself smaller ... I will complement their clothes or toys ... You learn the right way to engage with them. It's a bit the same with the adults (Harald)

Engagement in the practice can be seen to be an important part of how new employees learn these unique competences. While the nature of that engagement had been changed through the inclusion of Danish language activities in response to Covid-19, this was not a problem for new employees who were fluent in Danish. Engagement in practice was identified as not the only element necessary for learning the competences unique to the practice. One recurring interviewee described:

I think that there is a dynamic. I think that if you are new to it and you haven't done it before, you do learn from the old lags, the old rats as we say ... to instil in them that 'this is what you do' and 'when I am confronted with this situation, I do so and so'. They are all encouraged to develop that ability. Of course, as I already said, some of this can only come with experience. Maybe they are at a disadvantage at the start of the season, but by the time they reach July, they are into it. They are able to, somewhat, do what the older ones do (Sylvester)

These two statements suggest an interplay between learning from engagement in the practice and learning from more experienced employees. This interplay is both the individual process of engagement in the collective practice, learning as becoming through a mode of belonging (Wenger, 1998), and that individual and collective interaction is in the context of both approximated and full engagement, learning as doing through peripheral learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As revealed in the previous section, rehearsals were impeded by Covid-19 restrictions on social gatherings, leading to online meetings for the majority of the rehearsal period. The power of peripheral learning to partially redress the challenge of online learning was made clear by how various new employees described the assistance they got in learning their roles. Harald explained that in the absence of physical rehearsals, experienced employees were able to reduce the negative impact of not being able to rehearse together or in the actual castle, for instance:

At the Zoom meetings, being told about a scene in some particular room, it was very hard to imagine it. It was a bit abstract this year. It was very helpful getting information from the older actors (Harald)

Another new employee placed the same emphasis on the support provided by experienced employees in the context of online learning:

Being on Zoom, everybody can confess to this, is not as effective as sitting there in person ... When Y and I zoomed, we went off into mostly our different characters, or when we did a workshop with Z, Z's would be in on it as well. I felt it was better, more than with twenty-five people on Zoom ... When we broke it down, it was a bit more concentrated ... I had a great working relationship with Y ... he was a great help (Peter)

The support provided by experienced employees in 2020 was made clear by new interviewees. It was suggested, however, by a number of new and recurrent interviewees that it took several weeks of unofficial training after the launch of the experience for them to feel competent with the post-Covid design in 2020. This was suggested to be at least partially because of having online rather than physical rehearsals. As Peter proposed:

I think you need to be in the room together with the others ... (Meeting on Zoom) was so much different to sitting there in person ... To sum it up, there was a disconnect. It is all the little things. It is just being there, picking up all the little things. When we are doing theatre and it's the body language

Clearly much of the knowledge was not explicit when it came to creating a tourism experience. In this way, the findings here concur with Cooper (2015), who suggests that much of the knowledge in the tourism sector is tacit and hard to communicate.

The next section will consider the continuous engagement of employees in practice-based learning, linked to CoP by Wenger (1998), in the context of Covid-19's impact on boundary interactions.

The roles of foundational language competence in employee learning during times of drastic change

While the engagement in the peripheral learning of a practice can be argued to have a more internal focus within a CoP, engaging in learning and practice through cross-boundary interactions is considered more externally orientated (see Shaw & Williams, 2009). In the context of Hamlet Live, from the participant observation, cross-boundary interactions between tourism employees and tourists were found to be an important part of what makes the experience unique and innovative. The role of these observed tourists in the experience can be seen as that of co-creators as they must also engage with the experience framework for an experience to be created (Duerden et al., 2015). Engagement is, however, unequal, with the employees required to be competent enough to motivate the engagement of the tourists. Yet, the effect of Covid-19 on the tourism market segment (i.e. changes to nationality, from international to domestic tourists, as well as age, primarily adult to primarily families) meant that these cross-boundary interactions became a challenge for many employees, both recurrent and new, given that many came from overseas and did not possess sufficient Danish language competence.

A collective solution that the Hamlet Live CoP developed to solving this problem can be understood as related to the acting background of the group:

How do we solve this issue where they want us to improvise in a language we hardly can, you know, speak? ... people were talking about 'we just need to be more improvised' but we took the decision that 'we just have to write this down. We have to write a solid foundation in the language, translated to Danish, that we know works and then maybe, along the session we can improvise more' (Kasper)

The writing out of dialogues, also referred to by interviewees as a 'script', is just one of the many acting terms that constitute the shared repertoire of the employee CoP, which helps to build community coherence. As suggested by Kasper, the use of scripted lines in Danish was a substitute for improvised interaction in Danish, which allowed employees to act out activities rather than engage interactively while doing them. However, this temporary solution did not sufficiently resolve the issue of employees lacking foundational language competency. This was illustrated by one employee who explained:

I learned it, a script, so you know like, I have less of an ability to improvise in Danish. I mean almost non-existent so I kind of learned the Danish things and then sometimes I improvise in English ... I wish I was able to respond to questions in Danish. Sometimes I could, with kids in particular, because I understood, because they speak slow enough, but when you become a full grown adult Dane you speak too fast (Oliver)

The limitations of the Danish language were observed by the authors during an informal encounter between Oliver and Danish guests, when he tried to entice them to participate in a workshop that was about to commence. Oliver used the props he had available but was relatively silent, resorting to singular Danish words or sentences in English when necessary (participant observation).

Similarly, another foreign employee said:

I had the most ridiculous, amazing conversations (in English) with audiences (previously) ... Sometimes, people engage with it. They'll take it all over the place. I don't have that feeling with Danish, so I have a sort of set script that I'll go through in Danish, but I find myself ending that interaction a lot earlier than I would have (Kristoffer)

The same interviewee referred further to how language affected group performance. They compared a scene they and another non-native did with that done by their Danish-speaking doubles, doing the same roles in the same scene:

because X and W are both fluent in Danish, they were able to improvise the scene a lot more, whereas Y and I, especially early on, (when) we were always doing it in Danish, we really had to keep to the structure, because we would get completely lost if we didn't (Kristoffer)

This suggests that by being unable to interact well with Danish tourists, the employees who could not speak Danish fluently experienced negative impacts on both their work performance and their emotions. The participant observation notes also showed a similar correlation. For instance, in cases where the employees were able to interact in English, they were humorous in their verbal interaction in a way that seemed natural, and they used the humour as a way to ease tourists into engaging with the activity. When the same employee had to use Danish for the same scene, the verbal interaction was not humorous and seemed more rigid. The result was less engagement and in the case of several Danish tourists, complete disengagement (Participant Observation).

Hence, in the case of Hamlet Live, possessing the required language is not just an extra asset but is crucial for engaging in improvised boundary interactions that are an important part of the tourism experience. In this context, the Danish employees were able to engage and learn new tourism practices via cross-boundary interactions much easier than foreign employees during the Covid-19 crisis. Due to the impact of Covid-19 to international travel, local language knowledge can be interpreted as a foundational competence for tourism employees. This is because it is necessary for the required engagement in learning, as well as contributing to learning, in the employee CoP. The absence of a shared foundational competence creates a knowledge distance that reduces or even prevents learning in the case of this tourism experience. This finding correlates with Wenger (2000), who suggests

that a divergence between the competences and experience of the different CoP is important for significant cross-boundary learning to take place but too great a distance hinders learning.

Furthermore, these findings can be interpreted as supporting the interrelationship of practice-specific (e.g. improvised interaction) and foundational (e.g. Danish language) competences within the Hamlet Live employee CoP. As defined in the literature review, practice-specific competence refers to a competence that enables a superior quality performance in a practice, which is gained from experience in a particular context. Foundational competence on the other hand, refers to a competence that is necessary for successfully engaging in a practice. In this case, while practice-specific competences such as improvised interaction are beneficial for those engaging in the practice, they are dependent on the employees first having the necessary foundational competence, such as fluency in the language they must engage in. In the context of Covid-19 and other crises, our findings thus emphasise the need for a deeper understanding of how these different competences develop, in order to better facilitate tourism employee learning.

Managerial implications for tourism employee learning during times of drastic change

The findings above indicate that practice-based learning in tourism organizations undergoing radical change both contributes to and is impacted by the possession of distinct employee competences. Yet, these competences are different in how they are learnt and how important they are to the practice and each other. Based on the findings, three key managerial implications for tourism organizations are proposed.

First, when changes such as Covid-19 disrupt normal learning conditions, this research highlighted the important roles of experienced employees in aiding the peripheral learning of new employees. While management can use their available human resources, especially experienced employees, to partially counteract the disruption, they should bear in mind that experienced employees may be better at facilitating the learning of existing practices than new practices being applied to the same context. Hence, good communication, along with some training, should be provided to ensure the employees understand the new requirements. This is particularly important in the context of practice-specific competences such as improvised interaction of performative tourism service.

Second, the appropriateness of ICT in employee learning needs to be carefully considered in the context of the knowledge that is to be shared. While ICT has been used extensively for learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, certain services such as Hamlet Live performative tourism experiences are composed of considerable tacit knowledge, making it very difficult to codify and explicitly communicate. Consequently, online learning is not fully conducive to tourism employee learning but can be used as part of an overall strategy, provided it is integrated into the physical engagement of tourism employees in practice-based learning. Tourism organizations providing such services should consider ICT-based learning processes only within the context of blended learning (Phi & Waldesten, 2021), where online learning is heavily supported by physical and practice-based learning environments.

Third, given the prolonged border lockdown and other strict mobility requirements introduced by governments around the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to the new trend of 'staycation' in many countries around the world. This trend was also clearly observed in the case of Denmark with their strong focus on domestic tourist market throughout the pandemic. The findings thus suggest that the ability to communicate fluently in native language has become a key foundational competence for tourism employees during the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the native language competence which is required for employee-tourist improvised interaction is not something that can be readily learnt through seasonal work but requires subject immersion, most likely across several communities such as circles of friends, educational classes and work groups. In times of rapid change, it is recommended that the alignment of tourism experience employees with tasks should be based firstly on the level of their foundational competences, with the secondary

alignment of employee practice-specific competence done according to the difficulty or prominence of the task.

Conclusion

This study seeks to add to our knowledge of how tourism experience employees engage in learning when faced with sudden changes, such as during a global pandemic like Covid-19. The key findings are twofold. Firstly, online learning alone is inadequate to transfer all the necessary knowledge but can be used as part of a blended learning approach in certain contexts. The effectiveness of ICT in blended learning, can be increased when it incorporates experienced employees who can significantly help new employees to become familiar with existing tourism practices. Secondly, the extent to which tourism employees can engage in practice-based learning is dependent on the competences they possess, with the indication being that the potential for engagement correlates to greater possession of foundational competences.

The case of Hamlet Live has demonstrated that there are reinforcing dynamics between *engagement* in the practice; a mode relating to learning as becoming, and *boundary interactions* between employees and tourists; a way of learning as experience. These, however, can be interpreted as being obstructed by the absence of *alignment* between tasks and foundational competence such as native language fluency (see Wenger, 1998). This paper thus contributes to our understanding of the dynamic process of employee learning in tourism services. In doing so, this paper partially addresses a gap in the tourism experience literature on the nature of employee practice-based learning. It also illustrates the supportive role that CoP can play in tourism employee learning, while at the same time pointing to the limitations that CoP have in the context of seasonal tourism employment, in transferring certain bodies of knowledge, for example language fluency.

Recommendations to tourism managers are primarily in relation to introducing changes as a response to a crisis. One important conclusion concerns the need to identify between foundational and practice-specific competences during crises and times of radical change. While practice-specific competences are important, they can be weakened or even made redundant by a change in the foundational competence they require to be applied with. This suggests that the alignment of employees with tasks should be primarily based on their foundational competence in such contexts.

Further research

This paper has explored organizational change in response to crisis to propose how practice-based learning can help us understand fundamental differences between competences. This distinction centres on two new terms, practice-specific competence and foundational competence, being proposed as potential categories for classifying and prioritizing competence in tourism experience research, and potentially in the tourism industry.

The use of a single-site case study and an interpretivist-orientated research methodology mean that the findings cannot be detached from the context of a developed-country tourism experience sector at a time of radical change. To increase generalisability, we recommend a longitudinal study testing practice-specific and foundational competences in isolation from other factors, for example, the pre-existing competence of new employees or changes to experience design to fit new markets. In addition, as tourists play an important role in co-creating tourism experience, interviews with tourists may help to shed new insights into the (in)effectiveness of tourism employee learning. Further research can also look at multi-site case studies of both experiential and more-functional tourism services to examine the consistency of the above findings and the possibility of convergence or divergence between these different tourism service types. Finally, the findings also showed that by being unable to interact well with Danish tourists, the employees who could not speak Danish fluently experienced negative impacts on both their work performance and their emotions. Future research hence can also explore job satisfaction and turnover intentions of non-native

tourism employees as a result of swift changes in the sector due to Covid-19 situation. These avenues of research could help to further inform researchers and managers of people-provided services in change management.

Disclosure statement

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