Co-creation as a tool to overcome cross-cultural differences in educational experiences?

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Abstract

The teaching-learning relationship has been subject to discussion within higher education (HE), as has the traditional lecture. Teaching and lectures cannot be understood without including students as part of the setting, particularly so within a cross-cultural classroom where various hermeneutics are involved. International students have different ways of understanding and interpreting data, and may be accustomed to various educational traditions. The aim of this study is to discuss how co-creation can function as a tool for overcoming differences within a cross-cultural context. Qualitative empirical data were collected in four different tourism and marketing student groups. The study findings show that despite requiring increased effort and commitment from all stakeholders, co-creation principles do contribute to bringing about valuable educational experiences. The study contributes to generating a new mindset that can promote valuable learning experiences. It furthermore endorses co-creation as an approach that can enhance value outcomes in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: co-creation, educational experiences, cross-cultural differences, higher education, tourism education

Introduction

Co-creation is a buzzword that seems to have spread within different research areas, such as tourism and marketing (Cabiddu, Lui, & Piccoli, 2013; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013; Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2014; Mathis, Kim, Uysal, Sirgy, & Prebensen, 2016). Thus, for those who aspire to work in tourism and hospitality, there is a need for competences with regard to co-creation. Although tourism education has not fully adapted to such need, co-creation has an increasing interest in HE (Montserrat & Gummesson, 2012; Dollinger, Lodge & Coates, 2018). The contemporary debate about the changing role of HE, and the need for a more comprehensive consideration of students' expectations, goals and ambitions, also calls for more empirical research on co-creation in education (Chalcraft, Hilton & Hughes, 2015; Kim & Jeong, 2018).

Co-creation, as a theoretical construct, acknowledges the consumer as an active participant in value production and consumption (Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013). Attention to value co-creation (learning goals) instead of value delivery (performance goals) is thus essential in HE (Judson & Taylor, 2014). Co-creation can be understood as a construct that emphasizes the joint creation of value, joint problem definition and joint problem solving (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In HE, value co-creation is about the integration of institutional resources along with the students' opinions, responses, personalities and academic abilities, offering mutual value to all parties (Dollinger et al., 2018).

A service-dominant logic of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2008; 2016; 2017) considers the customer perspective within value creation and recognizes the resources customers bring with them, for example in consumption, meaning that the consumer, or in this case the student, is always a co-producer. Without engaging in a linguistic discussion on the appropriate metaphors of the student–university relationship, whether one sees the student as a consumer (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014), a client (Bailey, 2000), a co-producer

(McCulloch, 2009), or a co-creator, one can say that the involvement and collaboration of the individual is essential in value co-creation. Rather than focusing on the educational learning environment as a service arena, and as a response to the call for HE to adopt a longer-term value co-creation focus (Judson & Taylor; 2014), this study places emphasis on the experiences and the joint co-creation processes taking place within the class.

Current research on co-creation has focused on the business sphere and the business–customer relationship (Merz, Merz, Gehrt & Takahashi, 2016). In contrast, the concept of co-creation has not to any great extent been applied in the cross-cultural educational sphere (Fleischman, Raciti & Lawley, 2015). To address this gap, our study aims to draw attention to how the construct of co-creation can function as a tool for overcoming cross-cultural differences within higher tourism education. This study is a rejoinder to research (Kim & Jeong, 2018; Hiasat, 2019) who summons further research into cross-cultural issues in HE. The study analyses data from several university courses in tourism and marketing at a Norwegian university, involving students from a variety of European cultural backgrounds (with an emphasis on an East – West dialectic). The cross-cultural context serves as a backdrop for how co-creation can inspire memorable and valuable educational experiences in tourism and hospitality programmes. The study contributes to literature as it reveals how co-creation strategies can encourage a more interactive and inclusive teaching–learning arena. Furthermore, the study promotes co-creation as a mindset to adopt in cross-cultural tourism education. Students can benefit from their diverse backgrounds in co-creating experiences, something that leads to value growth for all participants.

Literature Review

Cross-Cultural differences

It can be argued that cultures converge because consumers to a high degree embrace similar attitudes and behaviours, thus coming to be more similar (Reisinger & Crotts, 2010). However, there are differences between cultures relating to consumption that are stable over time (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). Culture can be comprehended as “an infinitely overlapping and perceptually redistributable habitat of shared knowledge and meanings” (Holden, 2004, p. 570). This can pertain to the dominant values of national culture (Reisinger & Crotts, 2010; Vespestad, 2010a), which influence educational traditions. As international exchange students have chosen to study abroad, one can assume an interest in cultural exchange and involvement (Fleischman et al., 2015) and an open mind to cross-cultural experiences. Moreover, in universities and business schools, with their increasingly internationalized focus (Cassell, 2018; Kim & Jeong, 2018), a transcultural pedagogy has the potential to transform students’ lives (Smith & Segbers, 2018). Based on both cross-cultural and experiential learning theory, Kubberød & Pettersen (2017, p. 275) found that students were highly reflective when “looking back at their learning journey”. This illustrates that cross-cultural learning in itself can be a value outcome of studying abroad, as one adapts to new cultures and takes on a new mindset to cope with new challenges.

One of the most widely used theories related to cross-cultural differences is that of Hofstede (1980; 1983; 2001; 2011; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), which explains how national cultures differ along the following dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation. Although some research (Minkov, Dutt, Schachner, Jandosova, Khassenbekov, Morales and Blagoev, 2019) call for a revision of Hofstede’s theory, the dimensions can still be useful to shed light on cross-cultural variations and to establish strategies that are culturally appropriate (Walga, 2019). The first three dimensions are deemed the most relevant in this study context.

Eastern European countries (e.g. Russia) are known to have large *power distance* and power is considered to be unevenly distributed in society (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina & Nicholson, 1997; Burnasheva, GuSuh, Villalobos-Moron, 2019). *Uncertainty avoidance* is also strong in Russia and people in general prefer to eliminate uncertainty and risk (Fernandez et al., 1997; Burnasheva et al., 2019). As a western European example, Germans, score lower on both these dimensions (Fernandez et al., 1997; Walga, 2019).The Nordic countries score even lower on uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011). The contrast between *individualism* and *collectivism* is often used in cross-cultural comparisons (Vespestad & Mehmetoglu, 2010). This can be defined as "the degree to which people in society are integrated into groups" Hofstede, 2011, p. 11). In individualist cultures it is expected that you look after your immediate family and yourself, whereas in collectivist cultures people are integrated into unified, strong in-groups (extended families) based on undisputed loyalty (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede, 2011). For example, Russia is considered a collectivist country, where group welfare is valued over individual rewards (Fernandez et al., 1997; An, 2019; Burnasheva et al., 2019). It is, however, important to recognize that individualism and collectivism are not to be regarded complete opposites, but as coexisting in individuals at differing levels (Malhotra, 2001). This would be the case also in the Russian culture (An, 2019) for example in millennials consumer behaviour (Burnasheva et al., 2019). Thus, students from individualist and collectivist cultures will likely differ, but are not necessarily poles apart.

Hofstede's dimensions are widely recognized within the cross-cultural marketing and business literature, although caution is necessary to avoid stereotyping and generalizations (Usunier & Lee, 2013; Usunier, van Herk & Lee, 2017; Burnasheva et al., 2019). Although the aim here is not to gain in-depth knowledge of one culture, such contrasts are relevant in a discussion of co-creation in cross-cultural educational experiences.

Whether a culture is high or low context will also affect peoples' perceptions (Hall & Hall, 1990; De Mooij, 2019). Despite the significance of this contribution in cross-cultural marketing, this distinction has not been as widely applied, perhaps due to being less operational than the theory of Hofstede (Hermeking, 2006). As the context in this study is an international environment in which "communication processes takes place" (Jandt, 2013, p. 69), the relevance of this theory seems evident. In l*ow-context cultures* people perceive analytically, they value verbal abilities and focus attention independent of context (Hall & Hall, 1990; Jandt, 2013; De Mooij, 2019). Whereas in *high-context cultures* one perceives more holistically, value nonverbal messages and emphasizes the context (Hall & Hall, 1990; Jandt, 2013, De Mooij, 2019). This has a consequence for collaborative and co-creative efforts. Independent behaviour would not be desirable or even possible in high-context cultures, whereas independence and free movement between groups and settings without significant changes are normal in low-context cultures (Jandt, 2013). Furthermore, high/low context relates to the degree of individualism/collectivism. In high-context collectivist cultures there is less need for explicit communication (De Mooij, 2019), whereas individualist cultures tend to be more low context and thus more direct in their verbal communication, for instance in students' group-work settings.

Studies depict cultural differences between students from North America, Australia and Asia (Economides, 2008). Others (ElSaid & Fuentes Fuentes, 2019), have confirmed differences amongst Spanish and Egyptian students' entrepreneurial attitudes and creative thinking. However, there seem to be few studies including empirical data from European students and particularly involving both Western and Eastern European students, with Mittelmeier, Rienties, Tempelaar and Whitelock (2018) as a notable exception. Cultural dissimilarities would reflect multiple cultural perspectives, as well as contrasting learning and teaching styles (Economides, 2008; Kim & Jeong, 2018; Mills, 2018). The challenge then is which

style to adopt in a cross-cultural class: that of the teacher or that of the students? Both the students' and teacher's cultural backgrounds affect their conditions for entering into an educational experience and cultural differences may affect attitudes towards learning, communication, participation, academic achievement, knowledge transfer, sharing and collaborative learning (Economides, 2008; Mittelmeier et al., 2018). Moreover, educational traditions, expectations and language skills are essential aspects in educational experiences.

Educational experiences and co-creation

How one understands the concept of an educational experience will vary depending on which perspectives one espouses. Students and lecturers play principal roles as participants in an interactional process within HE (Montserrat & Gummeson, 2012), but given a situation with a cross-cultural class, there are many aspects to be considered. An experience is first a personal occurrence, related to people's interaction with the surroundings (Jantzen, 2013). The value and quality of an experience "relies on how physical and social aspects of the situation influence the acts and perceptions of the experiencing person" (Jantzen, 2013, p. 146). Experience thus evolves with how one adjusts to the environment, how one responds to it and what one does in order to adjust to the situation. Cross-cultural educational experiences thus depend on the involvement and participation of both the teacher and the students (Smørvik & Vespestad, 2017). As part of a co-creation view, all points of interaction between the student and the lecturer enables value formation and extraction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Giving room for dialogue and possibilities to co-construct experiences will consequently be important parts of a co-creation view, not least in a cross-cultural context.

A paradigm shift within research on services has reoriented our understanding of how value creation occurs (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Namely that value cannot be provided to someone by a firm or a service provider, or a university for that matter, but is the result of a co-creation process in which the individuals themselves actively participate. Vargo and Lusch (2016;

2017) maintain that each individual, whether lecturer or student, has resources that affect the outcome of an experience and the value-creation that takes place. These resources can be understood as competences that can emerge as part of an interplay between different participants, for example within a classroom. Holbrook (1999) points out that the value of an experience can only be seen in connection with other values. How students value experiences within an educational learning environment is thus influenced by several interrelated aspects. For example the interaction between teacher and student or between student and student, the context of the lecture and the participatory involvement of the student. The more effort and time an individual invests in the co-creation process, the more likely it is that she or he will gain a positive experience (Prebensen, Woo, Chen & Uysal, 2013). The co-creation of an experience can be seen as "always ongoing, adaptable, personalized, and unique" (Prebensen, Woo et al., 2013, p. 72). Bearing that in mind, those who partake in educational experiences should all be aware of the important role each individual can play in a value co-creation process.

Studies in tourism education have addressed the use of active learning (La Lopa, Elsayed & Wray, 2018). Studies also place importance on experiential learning by exploring the activities that promote active learning in specific cultures (Yang & Cheung, 2012), as well as the significance of work-based learning as a pedagogical method (Gruman, Barrows & Reavley, 2009). Nevertheless, the literature does not look into the co-creation taking place in experiential learning within cross-cultural groups. Acknowledging the importance of experiential learning, this study address this shortcoming by embracing a broader scope in investigating co- creation in cross-cultural educational experiences.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data, collected through focus group interviews, observations and midterm and final evaluations, from four different groups of international tourism and marketing students. The data collection took place over a period of five years, in three different courses at the Bachelor level at one Norwegian University. The sample comprised a convenience sample and 42 students participated. All informants, including teachers, were Europeans and non-native English speakers. All students were on a one-year or one-semester exchange programme. The age-range of the informants were 18-40 years old. The sample was reasonably gender balanced and consisted of 22 female and 20 male informants. 25 informants were from Easteren Europe and 17 were from Western Europe (see table 1).

Table 1 Informant profile

Nationality	Female	Male	Total per nationality
Bulgarian		1	1
French	3	5	8
German		1	1
Latvian	1		1
Lithuanian	3	1	4
Norwegian	2	5	7
Poland	1		1
Russian	12	6	18
Spain		1	1
Total	**22**	**20**	**42**

Qualitative research requires responsiveness to the context (Greene, Benjamin & Goodyear, 2001). This is particularly the case in cross-cultural studies in which the context is coloured by the participants' different cultural backgrounds, traditions and expectations. The context here was international teaching–learning arena for tourism and marketing students, which included classrooms, business visits, and excursions, etc. In a cross-cultural study, it is key not to assume that all people sort their experiences within predetermined categories (Aase & Fossåskaret, 2007). Thus, by taking both an emic and etic perspective, we do not intend to generalize the findings or creating a model that fits within all cultures. However, the study

does shed light on students' individual experiences as well as group dynamics taking place within a cross-cultural learning environment. Emic and etic concepts can be seen as complementary approaches in the study of culture and consumer behaviour (Luna & Gupta, 2001). Both the etic concepts of culture used by Hofstede (2001), as well as the emic concepts used by the students are embraced in the data collection and analysis.

Focus group conversations were carried out. The conversations invited the students to talk freely about how they had experienced the course, particularly with an eye to the design of the course and the teaching methods involved. Evaluative group conversations were also held mid-term and at the end of the courses. Furthermore, the students were invited to evaluate the course and express their opinions in a written evaluation, which ensured anonymity. The written evaluation contained questions regarding the students own engagement in the course, evaluation of the value outcome to the individual students, as well as questions referring to the efforts of the teacher and the course design. Informants were invited to express any opinions about the course, teaching methods etc. As part of the cross-cultural context, it was deemed important to open up for both oral and written evaluations, as students response, expression of opinions and evaluations can vary (e.g. tendencies to extreme response style) depending on their cultural background and educational tradition (Clarke III, 2000; Roster, Albaum & Rogers, 2006).

As part of the data collection, observations were used as a supportive method. Observation has a vital role to play, either informally or formally, in quite a number of research strategies (Veal, 2017). Observation is well suited as a supportive technique (Adler & Adler, 1994). It can give a broader understanding of and insight into a phenomenon and it can also capture the importance of certain activities and experiences (Patton, 2002). The researchers (also being lecturers) observed the students' collaborative efforts and co-creation throughout the lectures, group-work assignments, business visits and excursions. This included noting the co-creation

taking place between students, between the students and the teacher and between the students and business representatives. As the data collection took place over several years, the reflections from observations provide valuable insights into the further development of co-creative activities.

Similar to Jarvis, Halvorson, Sadeque, and Johnston (2014), who emphasized a workshop approach, this study draws practices engaging students in learning. Contrary to Jarvis et al. (2014), our study is based on qualitative data from cross-cultural groups of tourism students. Thus, it provides in-depth knowledge of how the students themselves perceive a co-creative approach from a cross-cultural perspective. The courses and the teaching plan placed emphasis on a variety of learning activities involving interaction, among others involving combinations of shorter lectures and discussion groups, the use of business cases, brainstorming and the think–pair–share strategy (e.g. Hermann & Bager-Elsborg, 2014). Group activities and presentations were also used, for example in midterm assessments. In some cases, the students were directly involved in solving real-life challenges for the businesses and subsequently had to present their results to the businesses and their classmates. We emphasized continued effort to encourage dialogue and collaboration throughout all educational activities, with the aim of allowing co-creation of value to occur.

The data collected were content analysed. Content analysis examines data in order to understand what it means to people (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis as a research technique allows valid and replicable interpretation of the data based on the prevailing context (Wolcott, 2001; Krippendorff, 2018). The abstraction of data is a process in which the researchers conceptualize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), moving from the specific to the more general (Mehmetoglu, 2004). The data are organized into content areas, then into meaning units and subsequently condensed meaning units. Within each content area, codes and abstracted codes are identified (Vespestad, 2010a). The categories used are theoretically

inspired (Flick, 2009) by cross-cultural theories (Hall & Hall 1990; Hofstede, 1994; 2011), as well as theories concerning value creation and co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2017).

In a cross-cultural study, one must remain aware of the potential researcher bias that could be influential in data collection and interpretation. Both researchers in this study are Norwegian, thus drawing on a common national and cultural background. Nevertheless, both researchers have for years been working in a cross-cultural context, mostly teaching international students in English. Therefore, several years of experience in working closely with students from different cultural backgrounds have raised awareness of the issue of not becoming culturally biased. The mix of data collection methods also aimed at giving a more nuanced appreciation of the international dimension of the study (Vespestad, 2010b). Complementarity of methods and that the study triangulates data and data collection methods (and partly researcher triangulation), increases the validity of the study (Greene, Caracelli and Graham, 1989; Mehmetoglu, 2004).

Findings and discussion

As expected, fewer students completed the written evaluations than the total number who participated in the focus group conversations. In what follows, content areas and abstracted codes within each area are presented, along with a discussion of how co-creation can play a part in overcoming cross-cultural differences.

Course design (uncertainty avoidance, high/low context)

As lecturers, we place importance on providing *thorough and accurate information* about the course at the beginning of a semester. This is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to access the course based on similar premises. Uncertainty avoidance is generally higher

among people from a Russian or Eastern European background (Fernandez et al., 1997; Burnasheva et al., 2019) and thus the teacher aimed to limit perceived uncertainty at the very beginning of the semester by providing clear information and explicit structures for the course:

> It was strictly organization of the lectures. All of the material is clear and good, it helps me to understand. In addition, examples are very good and help me to remember the main points of the lecture. (Informant 9)

> (I enjoyed) the fact that it was clear, interesting, and more importantly useful. (Informant 12)

> Yes, no doubt. Receiving information is one of the best parts in this course. (Informant 30)

As part of the courses, special attention was paid to *explaining the teaching methods*, the *expectation*s of the students and how we would together *co-create* the experiences. This proves valuable as the students do not share the same tourism and marketing education background. Although this way of teaching and working was unfamiliar to students from strong uncertainty avoidance societies in which the teacher should have all the answers (Hofstede, 2011; Burnasheva et al., 2019), students clearly valued it:

> The method of teaching, for me, was very interesting. In Russia, the majority of lectures is only about theory, no practice to show. The ratio of teachers to students is unusual for me. (Informant 20)

A student from a weak uncertainty avoidance culture reported that the best aspect of the course was a rather open task during her first class, in which she was invited to give her own expression of what *an experience* is. This shows her appreciation of a broader and rather

vague objective, typical of weak uncertainty avoidance cultures (Hofstede, 2011; Walga, 2019).

Taking into account that the students might rely on various degrees of high- or low-context communication (Jandt, 2013; De Mooij, 2019), it proved valuable to be verbally clear on the expectations and plans for the semester. In addition, we invited students to bring forth their thoughts and expectations in this regard, as this allowed adjustments to be made and further clarification to be provided if needed.

All informants were non-native English speakers and thus *language barriers* did arise for some, particularly at the beginning of the semester. As an example, Eastern European students appeared to be more reserved at the beginning of the semester and seemed more reluctant to participate actively in discussions or answer questions in English. This could be related to uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011; Jandt, 2013) and due to insecurity concerning their own language proficiency. Northern Europeans, however, had a more "give it a go" mentality, coming from weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, even when their language skills were not flawless.

Despite the different approaches at the beginning of semesters, language difficulties did not emerge as a major limitation for co-creation. Students reported that their language skills had improved significantly after the course ended and that they gained more confidence in speaking English as the semester progressed. As such, language proficiency did influence the value outcome of the educational experience (Smith & Segbers, 2018). Evidently, the improved language skills are a result of co-creation, and can be considered particularly important in tourism education, where students likely will benefit from this in future employment in tourism.

Peer-to-peer discussions (individualism/collectivism)

The appreciation of *group work and discussions* with fellow students in the cross-cultural educational environment is clearly articulated. The combination of different cultures seems to have a positive influence on attitudes to these kinds of activities and students from more collectivist cultures seems to embrace working in groups. The focus of collectivist cultures is towards learning *how to do* things while you are young, whereas more individualist cultures emphasize enduring education and learning the ability to learn (Hofstede, 2011). Nevertheless, all students valued the invitation to participate and be equal partners in the co-creative learning processes:

> I really enjoy the group work and discussions. It is nice when all the students are engaged in the course and when we can express our opinions. (Informant 27)

> The group work allowed me to learn and understand better what tourism planning is. It is a good way to learn. (Informant 6)

Taking into account the emphasis a co-creation perspective places on the resources each individual brings with him or her, such as knowledge and skills (see Vargo & Lusch, 2008; 2016), it is highly valuable to prioritize interactivity and connectivity. In collectivist cultures, students will view fellow students as members of their group, whereas in individualist cultures, other students are thought of as potential resources who can contribute to one's own education (Hofstede, 2011). When students meet in a cross-cultural setting, it seems vital to acknowledge the contribution of their personal and previous educational background in an effort to create a thriving co-creative community. Inviting students to share their thoughts and collaborate, for example through short discussions, is therefore important, as it gives everybody a chance to participate and join in:

> The exercises in the beginning, looking at my own experience and then seeing it in relation to theory was important to me. (Informant 1)

> The lecturer was participating very actively by giving cases, and after reading, everyone had to take part and participate in the discussions. Also, very important is the practical aspect, not only sitting in the classroom and learning theory but we also had guest lecturers from the industry and trips to some destinations. (Informant 15)

Teacher–student dialogue (power distance/connectedness)

Dialogue is central to co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Thus, an effort was made to meet the students in an open and accommodating manner. This is in line with the perspectives of a low power distance society (such as Norway), in which student initiative is encouraged and there is a withdrawal from viewing the teacher as a guru (Fernandez et al., 1997; Hofstede, 2011):

> I enjoy the way of teaching here at "university x". Presentations and examples were really good. I also think that excursions are really important (…). (Informant 13)

> I enjoyed this subject a lot and I am looking forward to contribute and work with the same lecturer/teacher. Great teaching skills, personality and professional look at things. (Informant 15)

As some students came from countries with a high power distance, for instance Russia (Fernandez et al., 1997; Burnasheva et al., 2019), the impact of how the educational learning environment functions must not be neglected. In a typical auditorium, the distance between the students and the teacher can itself be a barrier to communication, not only between the lecturer and student, but also between fellow students. In terms of the physical surroundings as an experiential environment (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), smaller classrooms in which everything is on one level and there are possibilities for different stimuli, such as films, games, exercises or discussions, can work as an experiential environment inviting the creation and co-creation of educational experiences. Students used to a high power distance

can thus experience a more inviting physical space (reduced barriers), which encourages participation that is different from what they are used to:

> The education system here is very different for me, and that is nice. (Informant 27)

> I think it's a great idea of teaching, when the topics we discussed in class were shown in real situations and cases, and it helped to understand the subject better. (Informant 17)

In recognizing that interaction is a vital part of a lecture, students will gain confidence in expressing and sharing their points of view. Creating connectedness is a valuable part of eliminating unnecessary distance between teacher and students and can be understood as an appreciation of each individual's contribution within an experiential environment.

Collaboration with businesses (high-quality interaction)

The students gave feedback on how they valued the close contact with businesses, allowing for a *good combination of theory and practice*. Guest lecturers from businesses were invited into the classroom, as well as the class visiting businesses:

> I really enjoyed guest lectures and of course excursion to "business x". (Informant 17)

> I think it can be considered valuable because this forces us to use theory in practical examples. (Informant 26)

> The connection between the theory, given at class, and the reality, have been the best point of this course. (Informant 31)

Involving the student in real-life cases, with a business representative presenting a challenge actually faced, proved successful. Based on a topical problem proposed by a business, a work requirement is created and the students are invited to work in groups and solve different

tasks, closely connected to relevant theories. The feedback given throughout the courses shows that the students treasured being directly involved in working on a current issue for a business or an organization. First, this approach helps to reduce the gap between professionals and students, especially in terms of the power distance inherent in many non-Western cultures (Hofstede, 2011). Second, the students valued the fact that they could in turn come up with suggestions or future solutions to a problem, based on their own theoretical knowledge:

> The guest lecturer and special task (work assignment for company) was a very good idea to increase our interest. (Informant 9)

> The best part was the group assignment and excursion to "business x" at the beginning of the course. It was a really nice opportunity to see how this company works and really interesting to write about. (Informant 29)

Own experiences is key in contextualizing course material (Gruman et. al., 2009) and does enable student – business interactions. High-quality interactions enable individuals to co-create unique experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Similarly to Fleischman et al. (2015), co-creation with local businesses enhance engagement and the students different cultural backgrounds can contribute to the local community. In a traditional system, such as for instance in HE, the university and the lecturer will decide what is of value and quality for the student (Montserrat & Gummesson, 2012), treating the individual as passive. However, as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) point out, by creating an atmosphere in which all individuals can participate and interact together, the quality of the experiences and the value creation will improve. One way of bringing about good opportunities for interaction in a cross-cultural classroom is to work in collaboration concerning real-life business cases.

Value outcome (the process of value creation)

Montserrat and Gummeson (2012, p. 585) suggest a shift from a “value delivery approach”, corresponding with “doing something to students”, to a “co-creation approach”, namely “doing something with students”. This is in accordance with our experience as lecturers, namely that students’ value creation is not something a HE institution can deliver to a student, but is something that the students themselves must take part in. When summing up the comments given in the focus group interviews and evaluations, students found the value outcome, through a co-creation perspective, to be considerable. The facets of *involvement and participation* were especially stressed:

> Discussions of the topics in groups are great and it helps to understand the topics better. (Informant 14)
>
> This is the best course I have had during my three years of education here. (Informant 21)
>
> (…) Now I can say that I have knowledge in this field and that I am interested in it. (Informant 13)

Given the fact that satisfaction is even more likely when an individual, in this case a student, truly engages in a co-creation process through the time and effort invested (Prebensen, Woo et al., 2013), the consequence of joining in and prioritizing participation is proven worthy for the students.

This study implies that starting out with a thorough explanation of the design of the teaching–learning experience is a good starting point. Moreover, a *culturally inclusive pedagogy* seems vital to ensure access for a group of culturally diverse students (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). It also seems crucial to be clear regarding the expectations of the students:

> (The) lecturer was always clear about the expectations, (and) showed interest in working with the students not only during lectures. She (…) was also passionate about her work and managed to involve and motivate the students. (Informant 16)

Providing quality interaction and room for valuable co-creation should be an issue of importance for all institutions offering HE (Montserrat & Gummeson, 2012). Therein, rather than having a focus on handing over quality or value, one must invite students to co-create and take part in their own educational experiences. One student, who said he was not used to lecturers who cared about how he was doing or if he was there or not, expressed great satisfaction with the course overview and the information given throughout the course (Informant 24); he explained this was nothing like what he was used to. Gaining insight into students' expectations and thoughts can be of importance not only for the teacher, but also for the students' themselves and the rest of the class. This opens up dialogue and interaction and sets the stage for the co-creation process to take place.

Conclusions and implications

This study sheds light on cross-cultural co-creation amongst tourism and marketing students in HE experiences. Drawing it all together, course design, peer-to-peer discussions, teacher–student dialogue, collaboration with businesses and value outcomes can function as tools to overcome cross-cultural differences. To limit uncertainty and to be clear about expectations, pave way for cross-cultural co-creation. Group work and discussions may bridge the gap between individualism and collectivism, particularly when students are invited to bring in their own knowledge and skills. To create an environment of openness can reduce the power distance and make room for students and teachers to connect and interact, despite different cultural contexts. Collaboration with the tourism industry and combining practice and theory, initiates interaction between professionals and students.

The findings show that despite the students' perceptions of the courses as both demanding and challenging, students highly appreciated them, regardless of cultural background. Even though the courses required increased effort and commitment, students treasured the co-creative process as rewarding. Students reported improved value outcomes compared to those of the traditional lectures that they were used to. Dissimilarities based on different cultural backgrounds, languages and educational traditions, do not seem to affect the students' value creation and outcome in a negative manner; rather these are a strength in providing new knowledge and insights for tourism and marketing students.

We acknowledge that there could be some limitations of this study. The first is that the study is based on data from a limited number of students at one campus of a university. However, the intention was never to generalize the findings, but to explore the possibilities of a co-creation view in HE. A second limitation could be the potential for bias that might arise in cross-cultural studies, namely that the researchers are biased by their own cultural background. In this case, we were aware of this challenge in cross-cultural educational environments. A third limitation is that the students themselves might not know what is better for them regarding the conduct of a lecture. Using students as a main source of data in terms of the value of co-creation might therefore entail deficits.

The practical implications of this study are that co-creation principles do advance value in HE experiences. Moreover, a co-creation view is applicable in cross-cultural tourism education as a way of responding to the dynamism of tourism. Through close co-creation with local businesses and organisations, the students also become involved in the local community and can become a resource. Practical co-creation in educational experiences will advance the students employability in tourism and hospitality. The study contributes to literature in eliciting an alternative mindset and way of thinking, that can promote memorable educational experiences. From a teaching perspective, this can imply that by endorsing co-creation as an

approach, it can enhance tourism students' value outcomes in a cross-cultural educational context. Moreover, a co-creative approach can give teachers a deeper insight into cross-cultural student groups and it's benefits. Further research could tap into cultural variations in greater depth, aiming to reveal potential variations amongst students of different nationalities, which could affect the value outcomes in different ways depending on the cultural composition of the groups.

In a cross-cultural context, there are differences between the students, the teacher and the educational environment. Nevertheless, by implementing co-creation as a foundation for developing the course structure and curriculum, possibilities open up for including cultural differences as a resource within a common co-creative learning experience. Co-creation also promotes cross-cultural cooperation skills and increased cultural competency, expertise needed in future tourism (Kim & Jeong, 2018). A main contribution of this study is therefore the proposition that co-creation can function as a tool to overcome cultural barriers. Co-creation provides opportunities to embrace cultural differences as something that can enhance and develop the educational experience for students and teachers within tourism education. Co-creation as a tool in cross-cultural educational experiences allows value to thrive.

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