

Problem-Based Learning for Hospitality Students. The Case of Madrid Luxury Hotels and the Recovery after the Covid Pandemic

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Abstract : Problem-based learning (PBL) is a useful tool for adult and practice oriented audiences, as University students. As a consequence of the huge disruption caused by the COVID pandemic in the hospitality industry, hotels of all categories closed down in Spain from March 2020. Since that moment, the luxury segment was blooming with optimistic prospects for new openings. Hence, Hospitality students were expecting a positive situation in terms of employment and career development. By the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, these expectations were seriously harmed. By October 2020, only 9 of the 32 hotels in the luxury segment were opened with an occupation rate of 9%. Shortly after, the evidence of a second wave affecting especially Spain and the homelands of incoming visitors bitterly smashed all forecasts. In accordance with the situation, a team of four professors and practitioners, from four different subject areas, developed a real case, inspired in one of these hotels, the 5-stars Emperatriz by Barceló. Students in their 2nd course were provided with real information as marketing plans, profit and losses and operational accounts, employees profiles and employment costs. The challenge for them was to act as consultants, identifying potential courses of action, related to best, base and worst case. In order to do that, they were organized in teams and supported by 4th course students. Each professor deployed the problem in their subject; thus, research on the customers behavior and feelings were necessary to review, as part of the marketing plan, if the current offering of the hotel was clear enough to guarantee and to communicate a safe environment, as well as the ranking of other basic, supporting and facilitating services. Also, continuous monitoring of competitors' activity was necessary to understand what was the behavior of the open outlets. The actions designed after the diagnose were ranked in accordance with their impact and feasibility in terms of time and resources. Also they must be actionable by the current staff of the hotel and their managers and a vision of internal marketing was appreciated. After a process of refinement, seven teams presented their conclusions to Emperatriz general manager and the rest of professors. Four main ideas were chosen, and all the teams, irrespectively of authorship, were asked to develop them to the state of a minimum viable product, with estimations of impacts and costs. As the process continues, students are nowadays accompanying the hotel and their staff in the prudent reopening of facilities, almost one year after the closure. From a professor's point of view, key learnings were 1.- When facing a real problem, a holistic view is needed. Therefore, the vision of subjects as silos collapses, 2- When educating new professionals, providing them with the resilience and resistance necessities to deal with a problem is always mandatory, but now seems more relevant and 3.- collaborative work and contact with real practitioners in such an uncertain and changing environment is a challenge, but it is worth when considering the learning result and its potential.

Keywords : problem-based learning, hospitality recovery, collaborative learning, resilience

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