



Blended Learning in Practice

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The use of authentic teaching methods in tourism higher education: A case study of Level 6 university students.

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Abstract

Tourism, Hospitality, and Events (THE) higher education has often been criticised for graduates who are poorly prepared for realities of the workforce. Authentic teaching is one method in which it is argued instructors can balance theory with practical application. This study used a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) philosophy to engage Level 6 university students who had experienced an authentic teaching method. The survey was conducted between 22nd February 2023 - 19th April 2023. The results showed that the majority of students felt authentic teaching was beneficial to their understanding of course content, whereas 100% of students enjoyed the task and would like to see more similar tasks applied in the future, indicating the overall benefit of authentic teaching.

Introduction

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Institutions of higher education are faced with growing pressure for excellence in performance measures such as research impact and teaching evaluation, that deliver on diverse goals such innovation, institutional competitiveness, and educating students to better fill employment gaps (Dredge and Schott, 2013). The traditional, didactic approach to teaching has largely been employed in undergraduate instruction because it efficiently communicates large volumes of information to numerous students (Smith et al., 2015). However, these practises prioritise the dissemination of knowledge and centre educators in the methodology, restricting the level of interaction between lecturers and students (Hsu and Li, 2017).

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is a model of research grounded in practice within higher education (Hubball and Clarke, 2010). It highlights the concept that good practice is rooted in the confluence of academic and local contexts (Felten, 2013), and through partnership with students. There has been a recent focus in higher education scholarship towards authentic practices in teaching (Kreber et al., 2007). It has been argued that authentic methods are important to 'good' education delivery, and there is a growing expectation for educators to subscribe to authentic pedagogy, and provide authentic learning environments (Bialystok, 2015). This is particularly important in Tourism, Hospitality and Events (THE) study, which as a vocational-based subject, is faced by the challenge of balancing theory with practical application (Smith et al., 2015). There have been calls for THE programmes to create closer links between the scholarship and industry

requirements (Arcodia et al., 2020; Steriopoulos, Goh, and Harkinson, 2022), through methods such as authentic teaching.

This article highlights previous research that investigates the importance of SoTL in higher education, as well as what is meant by authentic teaching practices, and the reasons for the growing interest in their application. It discusses THE higher education and the employment of authentic teaching practises to enhance the skills and experiences for tourism students. The research study is outlined, including philosophy, methodology, and implementation, before presenting the findings and accompanying discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

Aim(s) and Objectives

Aims

1. To identify the application of authentic teaching practices and their use in THE higher education
2. To assess student experiences of an authentic teaching method and use these insights to make recommendations for future applications in THE teaching practice

Objectives

1. To review literature of SoTL, authentic teaching practices, and their relationship to THE education
2. To conduct a survey of tourism higher education students who have been exposed to authentic teaching practices
3. To identify codes within student responses to provide insight for future THE education and delivery

Literature Review

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

There has been growing recognition of the role of academics in the facilitation of broad, meaningful education (Dredge and Schott, 2013). SoTL is a research practice which focuses on teaching and learning in higher education. It is primarily grounded in individual disciplines and is classroom based but addresses complex concerns facing practice in the real-world through working cooperatively with students (Deale, 2010). The partnership with students in particular is rising in priority as a central element to effective SoTL (Felten, 2013), alongside enabling disciplinary teachers to reflect upon their educational practice and positively adapt their teaching and learning techniques (Hubball and Clarke, 2010), subsequently sharing those insights for the public and fellow scholars to review (Deale, 2010). This process can be 'transformative' for both students and lecturers, and there is

growing evidence to show that this collaboration with students positively impacts motivation, self-esteem, and feelings of intellectual agency for both parties (Felten et al., 2013).

Scholars of SoTL employ diverse tools, methods, and approaches to assessment (Deale, 2019), with importance placed on the methodology being intentional and applied with precision in order to meet the needs of the research question (Felten, 2013). This permits practitioners to investigate their disciplines using the most appropriate tools, as effective methods may differ from discipline to discipline (Deale, 2010). It is however important to also recognise the criticisms of SoTL, including an apparent focus on teaching, and a lack of empirical data to measure the extent to which learning has occurred. This is particularly important considering SoTL enquiry often takes place within the classroom, and as such opens itself to accusations of a lack of rigour compared to other research disciplines (Deale, 2010; Deale, 2019). Furthermore, there is a tendency for SoTL scholars to default to familiar disciplinary methodological tools, which may not necessarily answer the research question in the most effective manner (Hubball and Clarke, 2010).

Authentic Teaching

The traditional approach to university learning centres the teacher and prioritises the dissemination of knowledge but involves limited student participation (Deale et al., 2010; Hsu and Li, 2017). Assessments and learning activities are also often abstract and decontextualized from industry (Herrington and Herrington, 2005), leading to possibly superficial comprehension (Smith et al., 2015). This presents problems for vocationally-based subjects such as THE in the transferral of understanding from the classroom to real-world practice (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000), where students may have no authentic experience and may struggle to apply what they have learned in their field of work (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021). As such, there has been an ideological shift towards greater interactivity and personalisation (Dredge and Schott, 2013).

Authenticity is rising in popularity as a higher education philosophy (Bialystok, 2015). A constructivist approach with real world value (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021), the aim of authentic pedagogy is then to require students to learn by putting knowledge into practice, applying it in context outside of the lecture hall (Smith et al., 2015) and thereby bridging the gap between the classroom and the workplace (Steriopoulos, Goh, and Harkinson, 2022). It should involve tasks that stimulate the integration and analysis of knowledge (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021), such as internships, discussions, or group projects (Smith et al., 2015). This can increase greater appreciation of course content (Kreber et al., 2007), as well as fostering critical skills including teamwork, problem-solving, decision making, and creativity (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021).

However, authenticity is hard to define, and there are numerous definitions evident in the scholarship (Kreber et al., 2007). There is also criticism that due to the nature of the

concept, it is hard to actively design 'authentic' practices into education (Herrington and Herrington, 2005). There are further challenges in implementing authentic teaching as it requires an investment of time and close collaboration between educators to continually develop and adapt techniques over time (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000).

THE Higher Education

The higher education study of tourism primarily developed in response to the need to educate graduates to meet growing industry demands between the 1980s and 1990s (Dredge and Schott, 2013). However, criticism has been levied that tourism graduates are poorly prepared and lacking in knowledge, skills, and practical application (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021). Nevertheless, university-level education is a component of the THE sector which could elicit an effect on the whole THE industry, directly or indirectly (Ayikoru, Tribe, and Airey, 2009). This is especially important given the capacity of the sector's recognised contribution to social change, and thus, there is a need for modern educational and research practice that positively impact societal issues and produce members of the workforce who are motivated and have the skills to create a better world (Dredge and Schott, 2013), and who demonstrate higher levels of professionalism (Edelheim, 2020).

A historical challenge of THE higher educational programs is the connection between communication of theory and the practical application of that knowledge (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021). The needs of the industry are practical, but traditional techniques such as lectures, essays, and tests may not be the most effective approaches in fostering students' learning (Deale, 2008). THE education has therefore also begun to shift towards authentic teaching methods (Steriopoulos, Goh, and Harkinson, 2022) that facilitates student experience of real-world problems and encourages deeper understanding (Smith et al., 2015). Such modes of learning are considered pertinent to the operational nature of THE sector, as well as encouraging students to develop higher cognitive skills and critical thinking (Steriopoulos, Goh, and Harkinson, 2022).

Authentic teaching practices can therefore become an important approach to aid students in developing their THE competency, through methods such as active learning opportunities (Steriopoulos, Goh, and Harkinson, 2022), where students engage in activities such as discussions, and problem-solving that encourage practical skills development. This may require time and effort on the part of educators to prepare THE graduates for the multifaceted demands of the workplace (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021), but should lead to a positive engagement and impact on social concerns such as oppression and injustice, displacement, and marginalisation (Dredge and Schott, 2013). Students also found that through authentic teaching, they had increased agency in the problems they were solving, as well as increased motivation for their learning as a result (Ruhanen, Axelsen, and Bowles, 2021).

Research Design

The research paradigm that this study subscribes to is that of constructivism. Simply put, constructivism is the search for the meanings of both the researcher and research subject (Glaser, 2007). It is a theory regarding how people learn, through the process of bringing our own contexts into the participatory educational space with other learners (Splitter, 2009). Constructivism places focus on encouraging student understanding through active engagement in a social environment (Hyslop-Margison and Strobel, 2007), which closely aligns to the aims of authentic teaching. According to Splitter, *'Only when student-generated inquiry meets key standards for disciplinary content and disciplinary process can that inquiry qualify as authentic'* (2009, pp.140).

This study also employed an abductive approach to data. Abduction is a process which is grounded in existing theory, knowledge, or clues (Bajc, 2012; Tomasella, 2022) that inform the context of the findings and provide structure, whilst also allowing the flexibility to produce emergent insights (Hadjielas et al., 2022). It is a method which is appropriate for a small-scale, exploratory study such as the current one, as it facilitates the construction of new theories and ideas (Hadjielas et al., 2022). It is also consistent with SoTL ideology, as it is argued that only through collaboration with, as opposed to observation of, research subjects (such as students in pedagogical research) can creative thinking and discovery be achieved (Magnani, 2005; Bajc, 2012).

Data collection

Sampling

Purposive sampling was the technique employed for this study. It is the deliberate selection of subjects due to their possessed traits (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim, 2016) such as knowledge or experience, who are able and willing to inform research objectives (Tongco, 2007). In this case, tourism students in their final year of study (Level 6), who have experienced an authentic teaching method in the classroom were selected as they were judged to be the best placed to provide information that met the aims of the study.

Study Implementation

The study recruited Level 6 students at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) on a Tourism Planning module during Semester A of the 2022-23 academic year. The students had, as a part of the course, engaged in an authentic teaching task that was designed to illustrate the theories of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) and the circle of representation (Jenkins, 2003) in practice.

The task asked students to position themselves as tourists to the UH's De Havilland campus, and within a 30 minute period, take 5-6 photos which they perceived to be a typical tourist photo. These photos were uploaded to Google Jamboard and shared with the class. These photos were then compared to photos obtained by the lecturer from social media, marketing, and the University website, to see whether and to what extent, the content of these photos was similar. The aim of this task was to demonstrate the real-world replication which tourists engage in through socially and technologically constructed patterns in which the tourist gazes on a location or object they have already consumed through images (Larsen, 2014).

A questionnaire survey hosted by SurveyMonkey (Appendix 1) was sent out via the 'Announcement' tool, which is disseminated to all student emails on that course. It was explained to students that the purpose of the questionnaire was for providing feedback on the task in order to inform future module development. As the data collection was expressly related to module improvement and development, the University of Hertfordshire did not require ethical approval in this instance. The questionnaire was opened on 22nd February 2023, and closed on 19th April 2023. Responding to the questionnaire was voluntary. However, due to a lack of initial engagement, a follow-up announcement was sent to remind students of the questionnaire, and the researcher also spoke to some students in person whom they were teaching in Semester B, after the classes.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 7 students out of 36 completed the questionnaire, representing a 19.4% response rate. This limitation will be addressed later. All the questionnaires returned were valid and have therefore been included in the study.

Figure 1 shows students' primary understanding of the meaning of the word 'authentic'. Four student responses include the perception of verisimilitude, citing words such as 'real,' 'genuine,' 'true,' and 'pure.' Two responses mention factors of originality, and two discuss lack of copy/replication. This is consistent with definitions of authenticity which is '*the quality of being real or true*' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., no pagination), demonstrating an overall good understanding of the concept. In addition, there was mention of being grounded in evidence, which may be linked to concepts of academic/scientific authenticity. One student (Student 7) also highlighted 'being active or taking action' as a facet of authenticity, which does not fit with the standard definition. However, this notion of proactivity is consistent with the aims of SoTL research, and with authentic teaching insofar as the practice involves active participation of both staff and students in order to proactively improve teaching and learning.

Student	What is your understanding of the word 'authentic'?
1	worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact
2	pure
3	Something real
4	Not <u>copie</u> , genuine
5	Original not a copy
6	True, original
7	An aspect that involves being active or taking action

Figure 1: What is your understanding of the word 'authentic'?

When asked, 57% of students stated that they were familiar with the term 'authentic teaching', whilst 43% of students had not (Figure 2). This is surprising insofar as students are typically expected to be more interested in the content that will form part of their examinations, as opposed to the pedagogical modes of delivery. However, with rising interest in authentic assessment and teaching, and positive student perceptions including greater professional relevance and deep learning (Nyanjom, Goh, and Yang, 2020), perhaps it should not be shocking that students are taking greater interest in the teaching practices employed.

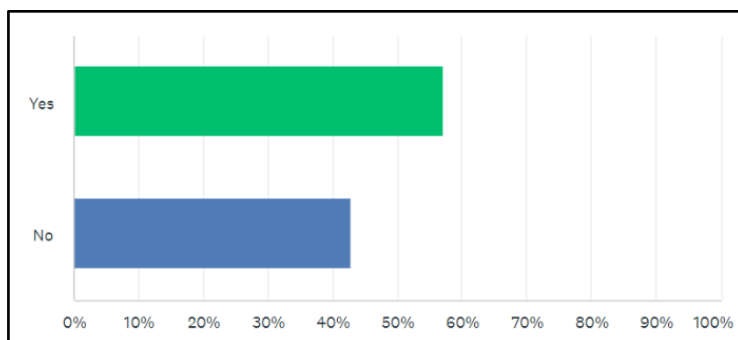


Figure 2 Have you heard of authentic teaching?

When asked for students' understanding of 'authentic teaching' (Figure 3), two students correctly identified that it is an instructional approach, but one did not attempt to explain the nature of the approach. Of the students who described their understanding, there are three mentions of truthfulness/veracity, which is consistent with the definition of 'authenticity' we have previously discussed. Two students also correctly linked authentic practices to real-world concerns, and the same student (Student 7) mentioned active participation, both of which are congruent with goals of authentic teaching as discussed in the literature review. There are three mentions of academic discussion, which again highlights student participation and greater interactivity than didactic teaching methods.

Most notably, there are two responses regarding authentic teaching topics being those of most interest to the student. Kreber et al. (2007) have argued successful authentic teaching

is that which engages students more impactfully. As such, it can be argued that student interest should be a core consideration when designing authentic teaching tasks, alongside their real-world applicability.

Student	How would you define 'authentic teaching'?
1	In education, authentic learning is an instructional approach that allows students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner
2	pure and truthful teaching
3	Academic discussions are genuine
4	instructional approach
5	Allowing students to research, discuss, and construct ideas and concepts and lets the learner work real world problems that are of interest to the student
6	something that gives space for interesting debates and conversations
7	A type of teaching that involves learning through real/active activities

Figure 3 How would you define 'authentic teaching'?

100% of the students surveyed responded that they enjoyed taking part in the authentic teaching task (Figure 4). This supports the previously discussed notion that tasks which actively engage students are viewed more positively and can, as a result, increase student motivation (Felten et al., 2013). It is recommended that in future research investigates in greater detail the reasons for this favourable response, for example through a focus group or interviews, in order to gain a deeper understanding of student motivation.

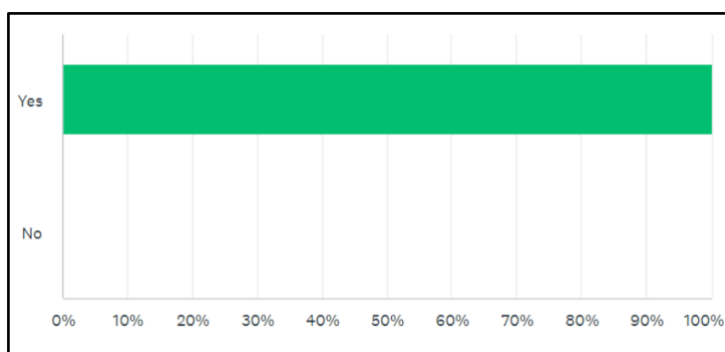


Figure 4 Did you enjoy this task?

Responses show that 86% of students thought that the task was helpful in illustrating the theory topic of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). Yet 14% of students stated that they felt the task did not increase their understanding (Figure 5). This was also reflected in the number of students (86%) who felt that the task facilitated their understanding of the links between

the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) and the circle of representation (Jenkins, 2003), compared to 14% of students who felt it did not facilitate this understanding (Figure 6).

It is important to highlight that in both cases, the respondent who did not feel it was helpful was the same student (Student 3). This could highlight a lack of individual understanding or engagement with the content, or it could be indicative of a greater trend of overall task effectiveness. However, additional research would be required to see if there was a consistent, replicable percentage in both positive and negative responses.

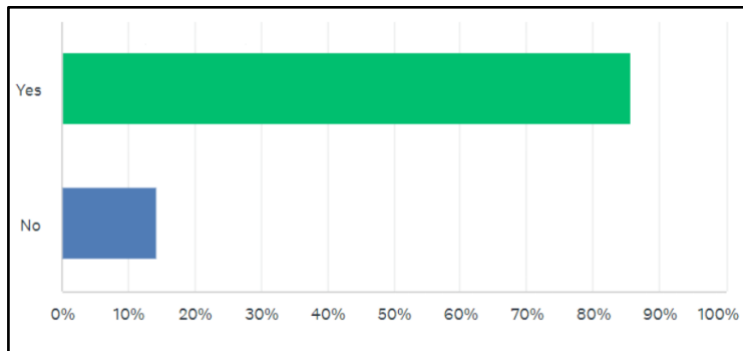


Figure 5 Do you feel this task helped you understand the tourist gaze better?

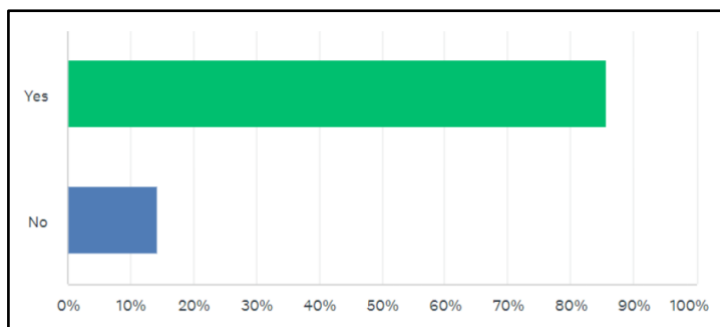


Figure 6 Do you feel the task explained the link between the circle of representation and the tourist gaze?

When asked whether they would have known if the task was an authentic teaching task (Figure 7), less than half (42%) said they would have been able to identify it, whereas 58% of students said they would not have been able to recognise it. There is some question of hindsight bias (Roese and Vohs, 2012) given the nature of the questions in the survey, however, as we have already discussed, more than half (57%) of students stated that they were familiar with the concept of authentic teaching. As such, it is also worth considering that although students said they were aware of the practice, fewer students were able to recognise it in action. This suggests that despite familiarity with the theoretical concept, students are perhaps unable to link this with practical application.

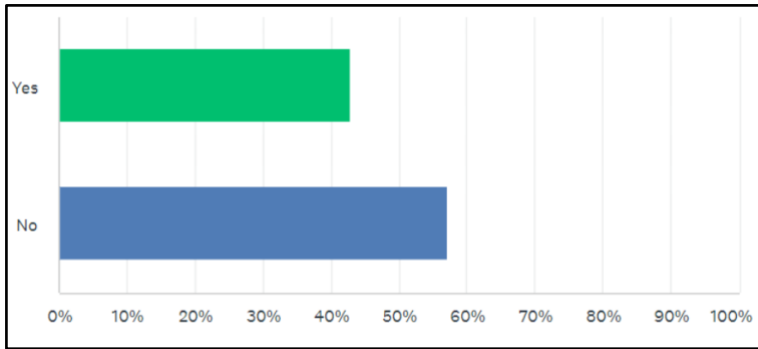


Figure 7 Would you have known that this task was an authentic teaching task?

Lastly, 100% of students stated that they would prefer to see similar authentic teaching tasks employed in future studies (Figure 8). This is interesting insofar as, as previously highlighted, there were 14% of students who did not feel that the task was beneficial to their understanding of the theory applied. However, the response to this question indicates that despite a perceived lack of benefit to theory cognition, students still valued the task, supporting the assertion that authentic teaching can result in greater enjoyment and engagement with the course overall (Kreber et al., 2007).

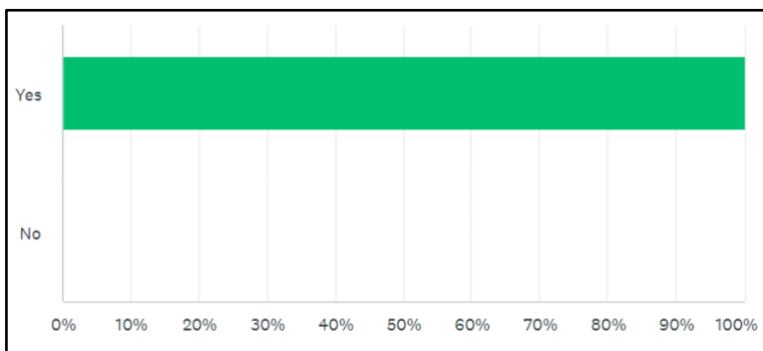


Figure 8 Would you like to see more tasks like this included in future lectures?

Conclusion and Limitations

There were some limitations to the current study, primarily in terms of sample size and selection. The study participants were Level 6 students in the final semester of their university careers. Elston (2021) states that the timing of data collection can impact willingness to participate, and this was reflected by a small sample size despite numerous attempts to contact and recruit students. It was initially planned that a follow-up focus group would be conducted after the survey, however due to lack of engagement this was not possible. The challenge of engaging participants is most likely to be due to the perceived pressure of upcoming final assessments and exams, which have a strong contribution to the final degree result. It could also be the result of a value-judgement that due to students'

degrees coming to an end, the results of this study would not have impacted their learning experience and thus was not worth the effort expended.

It is also likely the students who self-selected to participate had an existing rapport with the researcher or were already engaged in their education process. As such, this could have resulted in individuals disproportionately volunteering themselves as participants leading to self-selection bias, which can result in bias within the data (Bethlehem, 2010).

Both of these limitations bring into question generalisability, reliability and consequent validity of results. However, this was designed as a small-scale case study to gain the opinions of students within a single class group, and highlight their experiences in order to make recommendations for future practice and research. So, while generalisability of results will be limited, it is hoped the findings are useful to inform further study and application.

The results showed that students had a good understanding of the term authenticity and were largely able to apply this to their understanding of authentic teaching. More than half (57%) were aware of teaching as a pedagogical practice, but fewer (42%) would have been able to recognise the activity they engaged in as authentic teaching. This indicates that there may be greater need for explanation and signposting to ensure students are more aware of the aims and activities they are participating in. Recommendations could be made to include a reflective task at the end of the assignment in order to increase recognition and bring it to a more rounded conclusion.

The majority of students also stated that they felt the authentic teaching task aided in their understanding of the course theory. However, students' enjoyment of the task was unanimous, as was their desire to see similar activities included in future lectures. Therefore, despite a small percentage (14%) of students not finding that the task deepened their understanding, students still found gratification in taking part. Thus, it can be argued that despite the learning gained, authentic teaching tasks can provide a positive impact by impacting student engagement and motivation.

However, given the small sample size and exploratory nature of the study, it is recommended that a larger study be conducted to increase reliability and generalisability of results. It is also recommended to follow up with a focus group, to gain deeper insight into student's understanding of authentic teaching and further delve into some of the reasoning behind responses.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Participant Questionnaire

1. What is your understanding of the word 'authentic'?

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2. Have you heard of the term 'authentic teaching'?

Yes

No

3. How would you define 'authentic teaching'?

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In the module 6BUS1212 Tourism Planning, Unit 8 - The Tourist Gaze, you were given a task in groups to treat yourselves as tourists to the University of Hertfordshire and take 5-6 'tourist' photos of De Havilland Campus. These photos were then compared between the groups and against social media and marketed images.

4. Did you enjoy this task?

Yes

No

5. Did you feel this task helped you understand the tourist gaze better?

Yes

No

6. Do you feel the task explained the link between the circle of representation and the tourist gaze?

Yes

No

7. Would you have known that this task was an authentic teaching task?

Yes

No

8. Would you like to see more tasks like this included in future lectures?

Yes

No

9. Do you have any other comments or recommendations about the task?

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Thank you for filling out this survey.