



Title	How should tourism education values be transformed after 2020?
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Citation	Tourism geographies : An international journal of tourism space, place and environment, 22(3), 547-554 <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760927">https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760927</a>
Issue Date	2020-05-02
Doc URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2115/81116">http://hdl.handle.net/2115/81116</a>
Rights	This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Tourism Geographies on May 2, 2020, available online: <a href="http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760927">http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14616688.2020.1760927</a> .
Type	article (author version)
File Information	2020-04-20_E.,_Transformational_education.pdf



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Why should tourism education values be transformed after 2020?

## Abstract

The objective of this commentary is to highlight values and axiology as necessary components of successful tourism education and research, whilst showing what areas future education will need to focus on. If ‘transformation’, is something that brings about “substantial change in a positive direction”, then COVID-19 might be a blessing in disguise for tourism higher education, as a substantial change has been due for quite some time. The transformative powers, that education hold, are introduced, and a division between learners’ internal and external transformations is created. Higher education holds the promise of transforming society, but it is here criticized as being too enmeshed in neoliberal values to productively equip students with capacities to transform the society they are entering. The research is based upon the scholarship of teaching and learning, and on foundational philosophies. As such, it represents a pondering upon the state of education, both generally, and more specifically tied to tourism higher education, and an argument why a stronger awareness of lived values and aspirational values are needed, to transform the way education is carried out. The significance of the argument is that all humans act and plan for the future according to lived values, but these are hardly ever overtly acknowledged in research or in daily parlance. It is only during a time when no certain future scenarios can be drawn that lived values come to the surface on a global scale.

**Keywords:** tourism education; transformation; COVID-19; axiology; values-based; foundational philosophies

## **Education – where transformation should happen**

Education has the opportunity to be one of the most transformative experiences any person can go through. By receiving education, be it at any level (skills, concepts, competencies, you name it), or of any type (formal, informal, life-long, coaching), the person who participates in it should by definition change (in a positive direction), that is the whole point with the exercise. If the change is really transformative depends on a range of issues, some of which are internal to the person being educated, and those around that person (including the people providing the education), other issues are external, and/or contextual.

I was privileged to work as a primary school teacher for two years some decades ago. The first year of teaching was first graders (approximately 6 – 7 years old in Finland, where I worked), the other year teaching fifth graders (10 – 11 years old). I experienced some amazing moments of transformation, such as students who ‘broke the code’ and learned to read and write, students who learned abstract thinking through mathematics, and students who learned ice-skating, and then went on to become professional ice-hockey players. My role in this varied, in some cases it was bigger, in other cases the students transformed probably despite being taught by me, my ice-skating skills are, for example, nothing to celebrate.

Societies invest a lot of money and effort in education, it is a way of creating national pride, inclusion, and equality. It is also a way of socializing young people into their future roles in society, initially by teaching about rules, expected behaviors, and naturally data that has been termed necessary for successful participation in any one society. Later, education might be a means to prepare students to become productive members of society as tax-paying employees or entrepreneurs, playing their given roles in a socially agreed upon reality (Lawson, 2019).

Transformative educational experiences are during the formative stages of students’ educational career (i.e. during their primary and secondary education) mainly internal and personal, and only in a few cases external and societal. I count in vocational training and schooling in this formative stage, as it ultimately is meant to prepare students for an existing reality, and to reproduce successful practices as efficiently as possible. Tertiary education, so called higher education, is meant to be research-led, -oriented, -tutored, or -based (Healey, 2005), meaning that there should be an intimate link between what and how students learn, and relevant research that has been, or is conducted on that topic.

Truly transformative practices in higher education are unfortunately not the norm, higher education has in many cases morphed into an extension of a meritocratic society, obsessed by ranking-tables, metrics, and neoliberal efficiency measurements where students are regarded as input and output in a system, rather than individuals who have the potential to transform the realities we all inhabit. There are naturally exceptions, innovations take place, and there are programs for students to become successful practicing scientists, or entrepreneurs, but this is not how higher education degrees are generally structured.

**THE higher education, built on shaky premises?**

Education, teaching and learning, in the travel, tourism, hospitality, and events sector (for short THE from here onward) has often been a secondary thought behind something else. For the sectors of societies that lobby/lobbied for THE to be included in higher education, the reasons are/were often utilitarian – to fill skill shortages in existing systems Lo (2011). This is natural, people do live in present tense, and are informed in their decisions for the future by the past, and the needs of yesterday and today are always more pressing than any uncertainties of the future.

The gradual growth of THE, as a sector with significant economic implications in many societies, has also led to a need for higher professionalism in the workforce, and in the administration and management of enterprises within the sector. Higher education has, for the sectors depending on the workforce, often just been seen as a continuation of secondary education schooling, more skills and data to drum into young minds, in order to fill gaps in the workforce, albeit now at a higher level. Catrett has done an excellent historical analysis of how hospitality higher education has developed. In this he shows the meeting of two schools of thought; industry-created management training institutes' incorporation into universities on the one hand, and university program specializations stemming from geography, sociology or a similar related field, on the other hand (2018).

However, for THE to be accepted as 'serious' academic disciplines, on par with established sciences, academic research needs to be created, published in accepted channels, and surrounded with an apparatus of competitive grants, impact factor calculations, and the like. The whole game of gaining tenure, or other kinds of full-time employment in universities, is imbued with metrics, jargon, and an own reality that at times seems to be existing in parallel, rather than in symbiosis, with the fields it is supposed to be examining.

There are many THE academics who have never worked full-time, for a longer period of time, or at all, in the fields they are higher education specialists in. This does not have to be a problem, if they are able to connect with that other reality in fruitful ways, but it can be a problem, if they never see the reason for that connection to be made, and to continue living in that parallel existence. The whole academic reality is so strongly connected to measurable output through funding models and grants that education again receives a secondary role. There are some systems where teaching portfolios are parts of promotion processes, but they are seldom seen in the same light as publications. This secondary role of education is even built into the language of many academics when they refer to their professional roles being a mixture of duties to teach, but freedom to conduct research.

Examined in union, firstly, the misconception held by many that THE higher education is a continuation of schooling for existing roles, secondly, the divide between THE academia and the sectors that these academics are focusing on, and finally, the division between research and teaching, makes for quite a problematic mix. Like I said above, the past and the present shapes the ways we plan for the future. Thus, the current impetus on COVID-19, as it has reduced the past and the present's capacity to inform us in any way for what the future will be like. This is a time when true transformation of THE higher education could take place, so that it would lead to students being equipped for transformative practices as an outcome of their studies.

### **Explicit lived values and aspirational values**

If the aim is not to go back to the same practices and realities that created overtourism, gentrification of city centers, communities and even nations with tourism dependence, natural resources unequally used by visitors rather than hosts, and a range of other challenges that the current model of tourism has created, then the curricula of THE higher education needs to be substantially overhauled, and the teaching practices needs to be radically changed. TEFI – Tourism Education Futures Initiative, has since its foundation urged for THE higher education to become values-based. There are five *universal* values that the founders instilled (*professionalism, knowledge, ethics, mutuality, and stewardship*), and these have been implemented in different settings (Schott, Feng, & Fesenmaier, 2013).

However, education is always already values-based, and this is also important to highlight now. There are *lived* values that relate to how each and every one of us make sense of the lives we are living, and that we act by. Some of these lived values are *cultural* values and *social* values, that form the way we act properly in our respective communities, and in interactions with one another. There are *political* values that determine how we vote, how we create policies, and how we decide on boycotting or giving a 'thumbs up' for issues on social media. There are *ecological* values, that we turn to in our realization that nature is not only a resource, or a place of living, but also an experience (Suopajarvi, 2001). There are also *economic* values, that for long have dominated the way success and progress have been measured, and that now should be questioned for their relevance. These are not the values that the founders of TEFI referred to when they urged for values-based education, their universal values are *aspirational*, but in order to reach those aspirational values we need to first acknowledge the ones we live by.

## **Why COVID-19 might be the impetus THE higher education needed to change**

COVID-19 can be a blessing in disguise, because it has created a shock to the system which has stopped all activity without a tangible pre-warning. Yes, there have been studies suggesting that a viral infection of pandemic scales is imminent, but there are also studies showing that a catastrophic collapse of the earth's ecological system is imminent, and neither of these types of studies have been heard loudly enough for a majority of the population to react to. Gradual change, like the one we all know is happening in the anthropocene, is hard to react to.

The destruction of the earth is not happening overnight, and it is not directly threatening the lives of most of those taking part in activities contributing to the change, like the pandemic is. However, WHO estimates that ambient air pollution is already now killing more than four million people on earth yearly (WHO, 2020a), and natural disasters, that are becoming more frequent due to climate change, are killing 90,000 people, whilst affecting a further 160 million people annually (WHO, 2020b). These are combined figures that the pandemic of 2020 probably will not even come near to, and still, COVID-19 has stopped most kinds of non-essential mobility, both internationally, and domestically. It has closed down factories, it has created national lockdowns where distance work and education keep roads and public transport empty, and it has cleared the air in polluted regions so that people have been able to see blue skies, or surrounding mountains, for the first time in decades.

At the same time, we read daily reports of the estimated billions of dollars the standstill will cost different sectors of society, with THE being amongst the worst hit. Wealthy countries have decided to give financial incentives to companies to furlough workers, poorer nations are reporting how those dependent on the tourism trade are in dire straits. When COVID-19 would allow all stakeholders time to reflect on the rationale in trying to keep sectors going in order to restart them 'as soon as it is over', ominously little reflection seems to take place.

One factor that has not been reported much on in media yet, but that has at least briefly been mentioned in Trinet postings, is what COVID-19 will do to student enrollment in THE degrees in the future. With current employees being laid-off, furloughed, or working minimal shifts, new graduates are heading out into a work life that probably never will look the same again. There will now be many parents wondering if their children should rather focus their education on those fields that have been deemed 'essential', rather than one that

for the most time is distinctly non-essential and built on leisure time, discretionary money, and unlimited mobility (Leiper, 2004).

A casual glance at which faculties THE are mostly connected to in higher education will also illustrate what lived values the sector is perceived to be related to. Economics, business and management dominate, and social sciences, arts, humanities, or natural sciences, to name some, are only in a few institutions the home for these studies. This will naturally shape the thoughts created, the research conducted, and the educational goals that are set for future THE professionals.

For example, each time we read an article or book about tourism that starts with the words ‘Tourism is the XX largest sector in the world, and employs XX% of the workforce’ or similar, then we know that the mindset the text is written in has economic values at the forefront, and that will ultimately shape the whole argument. It is naturally near impossible to expect all THE academics to stop researching whatever it is that they have specialized themselves in, or change their specialization, because that is what all our professional identities are based upon. But that is not the point here. Transformation is needed on many levels, and for that we need the expertise of colleagues that live by different values.

It is also evident that all schools, faculties, and independent institutions focusing on THE will not go unscathed through the events of 2020. The moment enrollment numbers start to drop, there will also be flow-on effects in THE academia. Whereas this is a worrying thought as many of us, me naturally included, might be not have a job in the future doing exactly what we are doing now, it is simultaneously a chance for COVID-19 to lead to a better form of THE higher education.

### **How axiology and values-based education might be part of a future path**

One way to transform THE higher education is by instilling a stronger sense of all three of the foundational philosophies that all research is built upon. Epistemology, and a modernist focus on truth, credibility and knowledge, has long been the frontrunner in our field, just like in academia generally. It is the philosophical norm by which much research is measured, regardless of what paradigm the education takes place in, or research is created in (e.g. Belhassen & Caton, 2009; Tribe & Liburd, 2016).

There is some THE research focusing on ontology, but mainly connected to research training, seldom investigating the actual being or meaning of THE, albeit such studies exist too (e.g. Franklin, 2008; Veijola, Germann Molz, Pyyhtinen, Höckert, & Grit, 2014). A real

paucity is however to be found in the third foundational philosophy; axiology. Again, it has mainly been publications related to research methodologies that have even acknowledged this (e.g. Jennings, 2010; Killion & Fisher, 2018), research that discuss values are otherwise scattered between lived and universal values, often without explicitly grounding itself in what axiological assumptions the research is created by.

When ‘values’ enter the educational arena, they are almost always connected to ethics, as if this would be the only way values can be examined (Arnaud, 2014). Alternatively, when the ‘value of’ is investigated, the eyes turn to economic values. Neither of these are necessary, if axiology, and values would be considered a primary consideration in higher education (McDonald, 2004). Imagine how different both education and research would be, if the articles we read would spend as much effort on describing the values by which they are created, as the current attempts at showing their credibility or truth claims.

Transformation of THE higher education is only possible if we start to question how and what it is that we value in concepts such as ‘growth’, ‘greed’, ‘development’, ‘globalization’, or ‘climate change’. None of these concepts are value-free, quite the opposite, they are value-laden, and they shape the way we go about our daily lives, or how we create our professional identities.

COVID-19 might be a blessing in disguise again here, as transformation of THE as a sector in the longer term is only possible if we equip our students, through the education we provide them, with tools not only to transform themselves, but also to transform the realities they will inhabit. The wonderful concept of worldmaking (Hollinshead, Ateljevic, & Ali, 2009), should be taken seriously. Each time we make a decision we are making the world that we are dwellers of.

### **What stands in the way of transformation happening, and what are alternatives?**

The resistance to these transformations will mainly come from the economic lived values of our societies. Because we currently imagine reality through economic terms that circle around GDP, inflation, taxation, salaries, and all the other numerical functions, we are blinded from alternatives. There is so much sunk cost in societies, airplanes and cruise ships are made and sold, hotels and amusement parks are built and staffed, and so are countless universities, all invested in the belief that the current way of living is unchangeable, and that ends will always justify means.



We have for years learned that we are consuming close to two earth's worth of resources per year, and that human created changes affects the climate in harmful ways, and still, we carry on doing it. For all the economic stimulus that takes place right now across the world in the face of COVID-19, hardly any is invested in changing the path taken. When politicians discuss the implications of the pandemic, they are commonly referring to the economic ramifications before any health-related ones.

The protracted economic downturn that is forecasted for the years to come from 2020 onwards, coupled with the fear of contracting diseases in unfamiliar environments, or onboard closed settings, such as cruise ships, will most likely lead to a stronger demand in tourism that is local, national, and based on activities that can be done in relative safety. There will be economic hardship along the way to any kind of recuperation, but that is probably the only way for actual transformation to happen. Politicians have an urge to keep the 'economies' (as they so tellingly call the constituencies they are elected to govern, rather than societies or communities) healthy by keeping them open 'for business' as long as possible. They are thereby disregarding medical advice and international warnings, and they are thereby creating environments where people are put in harm's way. However, if the virus is not under control, many businesses will be forced to close for good.

THE higher education will have to adapt to a different reality, and words that have been added to degrees in the past, such as 'international' or 'global', will no longer have the same ring to them. Courses planned and executed for years using textbooks and readings that highlight the 'need' for growth will look dated, and rather pathetic. Attention will need to be directed at safety and security, health issues, and microenterprises that serve the THE sector whilst simultaneously being engaged in other fields that can secure an income in case of another lockdown. The whole sector of financial forecasting will need to be rewritten, as no forecasts hold in the current situation, and the same is true for both macro- and micro-finance after the debt burden of nations, organisations, and companies will reach levels never experienced on a global scale before. For any higher education provider who is currently planning their next semester's material a close examination is needed in order not to serve up a dated view of reality.

## **Finally**

By taking a step back, by thinking of what is valuable for us, for its own sake – not for what it potentially will do, we take the first step towards transformation. Realizing the importance

of both lived and aspirational values for how we live, act, and make sense of the world, gives us the key to become the positive worldmakers that we all have within us. It is worthwhile remembering that we live our lives in communities and societies, not in economies.

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