

# Collaborative Learning Application in Destination Management

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## Abstract

Collaborative learning is an educational approach, which can be easily applied to a business setting. However, it is often unconsciously implemented in organizations in general, whereas, some of its aspects are not perceived at all as new contributions. In order to take advantage of all its benefits, it should be a guided process. Based on an assessment of theory, this conceptual paper provides the classification of collaborative learning in destination management grounded on a few dimensions and several implications related to its proper application. Through a comparison, it proposes an enhanced model of collaborative learning in line with the requirements of managing tourism destinations. The concept of collaborative learning represents a good fit for enhancing stakeholder engagement, improving collective education and reaching consensus.

**Keywords:** learning, tourism destination, collaborative learning, management

**JEL classification:** P46, L83, Z32

## Introduction

Collaborative learning in a business setting, in its purest form is "a workshop consisting of a selected working group of employees guided by a coordinator with the goal of solving a business problem or task whose secondary outcome involves new skill and knowledge gaining." (Slivar, Golja and Plavšić, 2018, p. 462).

When applied to destination management, it has a twofold contribution: as a technique to enhance community participation and as a lifelong learning method. The sense of responsibility towards the group and the drive to actively learn, are such features which make collaborative learning adequate for an informal training of tourism stakeholders. Namely, during the process, participants have an active role, unlike in classic ex-cathedra schemes, thus it incites participation. Furthermore, reconciling different points of view to reach a common denominator i.e. concrete solution - has always been a challenging task of destination management.

This paper aims to stress the need of continuous collaboration and education through the use of collaborative learning in strategical management providing thus new skills, knowledge and competences for the proper recognition of social (i.e. aesthetic, symbolic, spiritual, historical, authentic, ethical and scientific) not just economic value of tourism and its role in the context of supporting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of stakeholders of the destination as a whole.

Applying comparison, synthesis and analyses, the goal of this paper is to propose a model of enhanced collaborative learning specifically for destination management and elaborate its key characteristics according to several dimensions.

The study adds significant value to theory as is one of the few linking the established method of collaborative learning to destination management research.

Apart from introduction and conclusion, this paper provides a literature review in chapter two regarding collaboration of stakeholders in destination management assessing previous collaborative learning applications in this field. Its core lies in chapter three where the Enhanced Model of Collaborative Learning in Destination Management is proposed.

## Collaboration and collaborative learning in destination management

The tendencies towards a more inclusive approach in destination management are noted in the structured of DMOs whereas these entities are more often semi-public partnerships worldwide whereas also key stakeholders are included (United Nations World Tourism Organization (2010, p. 13). According to the same source, 85% of European local and regional DMOs are results of collaborations of non-profit and public/private initiatives.

Community involvement is being more frequently used in destination management instead of outsourcing tourism strategies to just external partners and consultants. Experience has shown many plans failed due to low community participation, among other reasons. The most critical part is the planning phase; thus, the voices of locals should be heard in the early stages of the planning process (Gunn and Var, 2002).

Jeffrey (2009) suggests seven core values for the practices of gaining meaningful participation of stakeholders, whereas the three most relevant are:

- "Stakeholders should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives or essential environment for life.
- Stakeholder participation includes the promise that stakeholder's contribution will influence the decision.
- Stakeholder participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate."

However, research show that still, not all stakeholders are being involved (Ruhanen, 2009), even though they should be engaged in all the phases of destination management (Gunn and Var, 2002). Timothy (1999) uses a typical normative model of participatory planning principles to investigate what is actually being done in tourism planning in the developing country of Indonesia, especially in terms of local constraints upon many of the principles recommended by researchers. One of the issues impeding proper implementation is the inequities of power related to stakeholders and the abuse of it to limit the local community (Ruhanen, 2009).

There are not many papers dealing with collaborative learning in destination management. Jamal, Borges and Figueiredo (2004) focus on ICT to examine the potential of dynamic systems modelling as a community destination planning tool which involves collaborative learning. The concept of collaborative learning is included as an ingredient of destination governance in adaptive co-management as proposed by Islam, Ruhanen and Ritchie (2018).

Tourism destinations are complex systems with a fragmented tourism offer dominated by SMES (Scott, Parfitt, Laws, 2000; Buhalis, 2000), while tourists perceive the destination as a whole which implies the need for collaboration (Reitsamer and Brunner-Sperdin, 2017). Thus, stakeholder engagement must rely on a product-based focus, as the key goals of destinations are creating tourism experiences and assuring competitiveness on the long run (Golja and Slivar, 2014). The process itself should include key steps such as: recognizing key stakeholders, gaining a deeper understanding of their key values and goals, grouping them adequately, developing

a share understanding and vision of tourism in a destination, identifying clear responsibilities, procedures and methods to structure the decision making process (Pacific Asia Travel Association, N/A). That is yet, one of the possible methods of increasing stakeholders' involvement reflecting, as most others, the Deming cycle (PDCA - Plan, Do, Check, Act). The focus in this paper will be on using collaborative management to enhance stakeholders' engagement and to gain the maximum of its educational component.

## Enhanced model of collaborative learning in destination management (ECLDM)

The starting point for the development of the new model is be the elaboration of the concept of collaborative learning adopted to a business setting / organization in general according to Slivar, Golja and Plavšić, 2018. The proposed model of collaborate learning adopted to the destination management is presented in Table 1, through a comparison of Collaborative learning in organizations.

Table 1. elaborates the differences between Collaborative learning in organizations compared to the proposed model of collaborate learning adopted to the destination management.

Using synthesis, a vertical approach to Table 1., provides the definitions of the terms collaborative learning in organisations (Slivar, Golja and Plavšić, 2018) and the definition of a more advanced model of collaborative learning in destination management – ECLDM (Enhanced Collaborative Learning in Destination Management), whereas the focus will be on the latter.

Table 1

Comparison of Collaborative Learning in Organisations vs. Enhanced Collaborative Learning in Destination Management (ECLDM)

	<b>Collaborative learning in organisations</b>	<b>Enhanced collaborative learning in destination management (ECLDM)</b>
<b>Situational applicability</b>	Workshops	<b>Various business operations and strategy formation</b>
<b>Executor</b>	Coordinator of collaborative learning	<b>The collaborative learning coordinator should act as a facilitator and moderator</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Participants of the workgroup/ workshop	<b>All representatives of relevant stakeholders of a tourist destination</b>
<b>Goal</b>	Solution to a problem involving also gaining new knowledge / skills	<b>Sustainable tourism development and growth along with collective knowledge/skill gaining.</b>
<b>Timeframe</b>	Till the problem / task is solved	<b>Predefined periodical application</b>
<b>Environment</b>	Collaborative	<b>Collaborative</b>
<b>Level of knowledge/skills gained</b>	<b>It is of secondary significance</b>	<b>Taken in account</b>

Source: Authors' work and Slivar, Golja, Plavšić (2018)

An analytical approach to Table 1. (horizontal) will be elaborated below:

1) Situation applicability - among business operations in destination management, the concept of collaborative learning can be applied to promotion, brand formation, enhancing entrepreneurship in tourism, gathering information, training and education, development of new tourism products, events, tourism attractions etc. According to Deming's cycle, participatory planning, co- decision making, ongoing control and improvements are key steps to strategy formation, whereas the concept of collaborative learning is a desirable approach.

2) Executor – The coordinator of ECLDM should act to lessen gradually its own leadership power in favor of newly established leaders within stakeholder relationships and afterwards primarily as a moderator.

3) Participants – According to the type of stakeholders involved in destination management, one can distinguish:

- o Internal stakeholders (all relevant stakeholders based within a tourist destination)
- o External stakeholders (e.g. tourists, consultants)
- o Non-destination related stakeholders (stakeholders of another tourist destination e.g. working on solution for the same problem or in bordering areas)

Having the “External” type of stakeholders only, is clearly a malfunctional example, as the literature review has showed in terms of strategical planning, whereas all relevant representatives of stakeholders of a tourism destination should be involved.

4) Goal – Sustainability is a must. It should be restressed that tourism is not the goal itself, but rather just a means in function of the local community wellbeing. Thus, the local community should be in the focus, not seen as a resource in function of tourism, as concluded also by Laws et al. (2011). This is exactly where ECLDM comes into play by providing both inclusion, participation as well as education to interested parties.

5) Time frame - according to the temporal dimension, collaborative learning distinguishes:

- o Discontinuous application
- o Predefined periodical application

Collaborative learning in its purest form, when applied to a business context, takes the form of a workshop lead by a moderator. It needs organization and a predefined structure. It is therefore clear it cannot be a permanent, continuously ongoing activity. This is the reason why the opposite category of “Discontinuous” is not named “Continuous”.

Destination marketers can set regular workshops (predefined periodical application), as in ECLDM or organize them only if needed (discontinuous application).

6) Environment – The environment must be collaborative to enable both concepts, as knowledge sharing fluidness is the key (Slivar, Golja and Plavšić, 2018).

7) Level of knowledge / skills gained – In the classical form of collaborative learning, the educational part is a sporadic consequence, while the goal is the solution to a problem. That is why these issues of knowledge and skills gaining should be viewed in combination with the key goal of collaborative learning (i.e. solution to a problem), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

A Matrix of Classification of Collaborative Learning According to the Level of Knowledge / Skills Gained on one axe and According to the Quality of the Solution Generated during the Process

Knowledge gained	Solution of the problem		
	Basic	Good	Excellent
Basic			
Intermediate			
Advanced			x

Source: Authors' work

According to Table 2. the most desirable achievement is gaining the maximum out of both benefits of collaborative learning i.e. reaching the highest performances: advanced level of knowledge and excellent solution of the problem (marked with X) representing one of the key achievements within ECLDM. The least desirable outcome in terms of solved problems is the situation of the intersections of the two "Basic" levels which correspond to basic collaborative learning.

As mentioned previously, educations of stakeholders could be organized as collaborative learning workshops under the moderation of the coordinator.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights the key potentials of collaborative learning in the context of destination management. It advocates an active involvement of all relevant stakeholders during the whole process since the synergic approach can stimulate knowledge creation and problem solving aimed towards reaching a sustainable tourism agenda.

The contribution of this paper is twofold, namely in its comparison of collaborative learning in organizations vs. in destination management according to several dimensions; it also provides a model of enhanced collaborative learning for tourism destinations (ECLDM).

In order to take full advantage of applying collaborative learning in managing a tourist destination, it should: 1) be planned ahead to accommodate destination managements requirements (strategical and operation level), 2) be a adequately guided process with balanced leadership power, 3) involve all relevant stakeholders of a tourist destination, 4) aim at sustainable growth and success 5) follow a goal-oriented periodical application 6) be organized in a collaborative environment and 7) guide the educational process as well. The above-mentioned requirements describe the proposed model of ECLDM, which fits well into existing destination management essential concepts and principles such as transparency, engagement, participation, consensus, collective growth and sustainability. It is in line with other studies presented in the literature review which also found adequate to link collaborative learning with destination governance and/or management.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is twofold, namely, besides providing the enhanced model of collaborative learning for tourism destinations, it also compares this model to the concept of collaborative learning in organizations according to several dimensions. The model is applicable in practice both in the context of decision making and independently as an educational approach of group knowledge acquisition. Special attention should be paid to the selection and adequate education of coordinators guiding the process of implementation of ECLDM.

The limitations of this study derive from its conceptual nature, whereas the model has not been tested in practice. Besides testing it, future studies could research the degree of use of collaborative learning in practice, its scope of application and effects.

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