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# Concept design An innovative approach to learning: The case of Saint James' Way as a playground for meaningful learning experiences

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**Concept design – An innovative approach to learning:  
The case of Saint James' Way as a playground for meaningful  
learning experiences**

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**Abstract**

Co-creation is increasingly being used as a tool for companies to position their products in the market. The aim is to enhance a dialogue with customers and enhance firm-customer value. In the experience industry co-creation is also increasingly linked with another major trend: storytelling. The aim of this narrative technique is to build a story around a business, a product or a destination. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and highlight the application of these techniques, together with experiential learning, in order to generate a new point of view on the learning process. These techniques are applied to the Saint James' Way in Spain, a major generator of experiences for tourists and pilgrims. The outcome of this research study is to produce a concept for a study trip based on creative tourism.

**Keywords**

Co-creation, experiential learning, storytelling, innovation, Saint James' Way, hospitality and tourism

**Introduction**

'Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.'  
(Confucius 450 B.C.)

This quote from Confucius best describes the central concept of creative tourism. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on the formula: '*Involve me, and I will understand*'.

Involvement and participation are central to creative tourism, and to the concepts of co-creation and experiential learning which are essential in developing creative tourism<sup>i</sup>.

This article explores how the methods of co-creation can be applied to produce meaningful learning experiences (experiential learning) for hospitality and tourism students. The Saint James' Way (*Camino de Santiago*) provides the physical setting where this experiential learning project is developed. The research presented here aims to develop innovative approaches to education, as well as advancing our theoretical and practical knowledge of creative tourism.

Co-creation is an essential part of the evolution of the experience economy, which is arguably the latest stage of economic development following on from the agrarian economy (focussed on commodities), the industrial economy (goods) and most recently the service economy (services) (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The advent of the experience economy had

long been foreseen by Alvin Toffler, whose seminal *Future Shock* (1971: 226) mentioned the 'upcoming *experience industry*'. Toffler pointed out that 'people in future would be willing to allocate high percentages of their salaries to live amazing experiences'. This shows that something was changing in the consumer market, and Toffler's forecast was later confirmed by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) in their article '*The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings and Fun*'. These two authors were pioneers in discussing emotional experiences linked to products and services.

In 1999 Pine and Gilmore summarised these trends in *The Experience Economy*, in which they explored how companies become successful by engaging customers in memorable experiences. Boswijk et al. (2007) added to this analysis by identifying different stages in the development of the experience economy. They classified the experiences described by Pine and Gilmore as 'first generation experiences' in which there was little interaction with the customer. The evolution to 'second generation experiences', in contrast, is marked by increased dialogue between producers and consumers, and an emerging system of firm-customer value creation, or 'co-creation' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a).

Co-creation is becoming a widely used strategy in business, and many companies are now devoting a significant part of their websites to this concept: for example Labello, the lip care brand, asked customers to co-create the appearance of their own lipstick, and Procter & Gamble developed the blog 'BeingGirl' to promote their Tampax brand. National and regional tourist boards are also moving in this direction. In March 2010 Tourspain, the Spanish National Tourist Office, launched a new marketing campaign based on co-creation called 'Spain, a country to share', which invites people to share their experiences as well as their favourite sights with others.

In spite of the growth of co-creation as a value-creation strategy, there is a shortage of scholarly research on this phenomenon in the tourism field, a fact highlighted by Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009). They drew attention to this gap in the academic literature and began to explore the field of tourism as one of the major experience generators.

Experiences have also been investigated from the perspective of experiential learning, and there are many authors who propose new learning methods, demanding a change in the educational system and presenting experiential learning as a possible solution. Chee (2002) presents one of the key problems of the current teaching structures: time-based and teacher-centred with an emphasis on covering material. In the same line, Schank (2002) points out the problems where learning is driven by grading and testing: students cheat,

compete and complain. In addition, Fry (2002) states that there is an issue in relation to learning productivity.

The above-mentioned academics ask for a change in the education system. They look to new technologies as a possible solution to the current problems. Internet, presented as having never-ending learning possibilities, is highlighted by Fry (2002) whereas Chee (2002) or Schank (2002) discuss the use of the internet as a tool and focus on experiential learning as the learning method of the future. In fact, this is also recognised by Cope & Watts (2000) and Gold & Holman (2001, p. 385) who argue that 'the experiential approach to education is oriented to be more useful and meaningful if learning is grounded in experience'. Marsick & Watkins (1990) assert that learning is often experience-based, non-routine and tacit.

These studies imply that there is a need to improve current teaching methods, but many link experiential learning to the use of internet. The use of new technologies in general, especially in education, is now commonplace; virtual-world experiences are increasingly replacing contact with the real world. According to Stanley (2010), 'students miss this contact and their experiences, if only virtual, are normally evaluated in a non-positive way'.

In developing learning experiences, one of the important means of creating engagement with students or with customers is storytelling. Storytelling, or the use of narrative, has becoming increasingly important in the experience industry because there is no better way to engage people than through stories: speaking about human needs and making our lives meaningful (Mossberg, 2008). Creating a story helps to connect people and places and can create a magical atmosphere during a holiday or a study trip.

This paper uses analyses the use of techniques of experiential learning and storytelling as tools to co-create more engaging learning experiences for students by linking them to tourists and the communities that host tourists, enabling them to better understand the concept of hospitality.

### **Saint James' Way: the scenario**

In the field of hospitality and tourism, one of the most important set of skills that student have to acquire is related to the art of hospitality. But can you actually teach people to be hospitable? Is this something that can be taught in the classroom? One potential strategy to developing learning experiences related to hospitality is to offer students the opportunity of applying co-creation in a real-life setting, working with locals to co-create experiences

related to the places they live in. Residents become the main characters in their own co-created experiences, adding value to the tourist experience as well.

In this case, we use the St. James' Way pilgrimage, allowing students to play the role of clients and providing opportunities for them to develop a better understanding of hospitality and improve the experience of the places they visit. The project focuses on the part of the St. James' Way that runs through the Catalonia region of Spain. The history of Santiago, 'El Camino', the legends surrounding St James and the centuries-long strength of the attraction to numerous pilgrims provide a strong basis to help students learn: on the one hand, they learn about the origins and development of tourism and hospitality; on the other hand, students can use the trip as part of their own journey to spiritual discovery.

The Saint James' Way or 'El Camino' is not just a pilgrimage route. It is also a very good example of learning by doing, because the pilgrimage takes you back to the very roots of hospitality, the idea of helping strangers without the promise of monetary reward. In fact, it is said that the Way brings you back to your roots.

#### **Saint James' Way: A brief introduction**

The Way of St. James has existed since 813 A.D. It was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during medieval times, along with the routes to Rome and Jerusalem. This was a pilgrimage route on which a plenary indulgence could be earned. Furthermore, the *Codex Calixtinus*, considered as the first tour guide, dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the five books that form this Codex is devoted to the Saint James' Way. There are ten different pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela, seven of which can be travelled by bicycle, on horseback or on foot, two by sea, and last but not least 'the inner route or interior pathway' which eludes to the changes that every pilgrim experiences along the Way. There is no clear point at which to begin the 'Camino'; it is said that it begins at home and ends at the Plaza del Obradoiro, where the Cathedral of Saint James is located.

Looking back to the 1980s, very few pilgrims actually arrived in Santiago. But over the last decade the Way has attracted a growing number of pilgrims from almost every nationality. There are many books, films and documentaries that focus on the Way or 'El Camino', and the experiences undergone during the journey.

In the last few years, Saint James' Way has also been promoted by regional and national tourist boards as a major tourist activity, based not only on its religious function. As far as co-creation is concerned, both national and regional tourist boards have found in 'El Camino' a

good way to adapt to new trends. In order to enhance a dialogue, they have created blogs where they invite pilgrims to share experiences and tips.

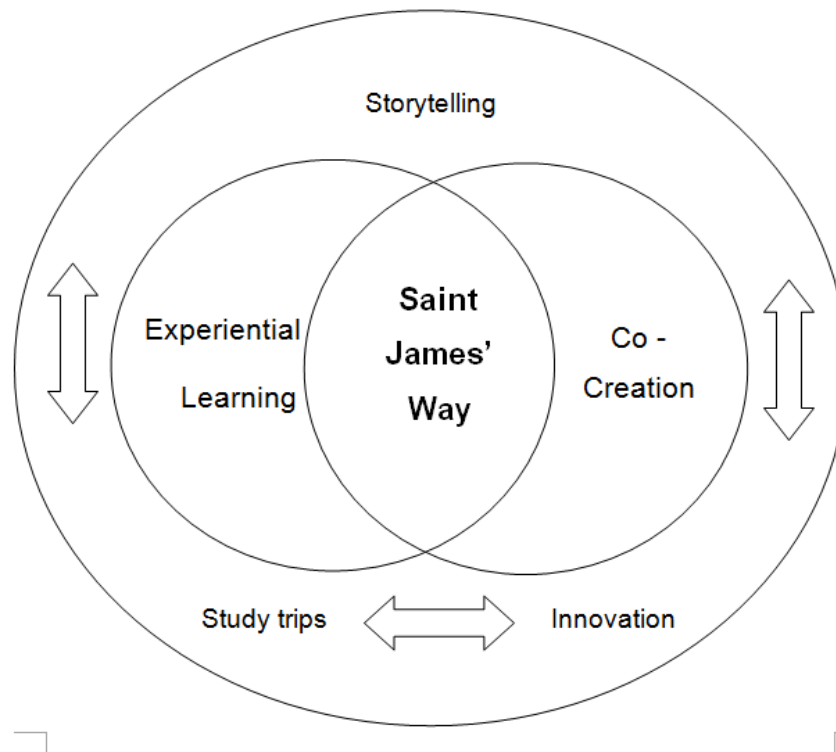
The Camino is today considered as one of the biggest experience generators in Northern Spain. In 2010 St. James' Day fell on a Sunday, and it was therefore declared a 'Holy or Jubilee' year. This provided an opportunity for companies from different areas to focus their attention on the Way to launch new products or marketing campaigns, offer programmes to their employees, or just to be one of the Xacobeo 2010 sponsors.

In the banking sector, Banco Santander created a new range of programmes to offer to their employees thanks to 'El Camino'. One example is 'América Camina', a programme aimed at employees of Santander Group – America Division. This programme allowed employees to become pilgrims and travel approximately the last one hundred kilometres of the route to Santiago de Compostela. BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria), one of the Xacobeo 2010 sponsors, offers free accident insurance to pilgrims. This sponsorship is part of the bank's corporate responsibility plan. Aquarius was another sponsor of the Xacobeo 2010. They launched a website called 'La era Aquarius' (The Age of Aquarius) where you can follow the kilometres travelled by a bottle that starts its pilgrimage in Roncesvalles (the beginning of the French Way). The bottle's pilgrimage could also be followed on Four Square, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

Last but not least, regional and national tourist boards are now moving towards co-creation. They have devoted part of their websites to pilgrims. In these sections the pilgrim is the main player, able to interact with other pilgrims, ask questions, recount his or her experience and request improvements: a completely free space devoted to dialogue.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 summarises the main elements of the current research, which focuses on the development of experiential learning and co-creation in the context of a trip along the Saint James' Way. The closer the different concepts are to the centre of the diagram, the greater their importance in this study. The Saint James' Way lies in the heart of the research project, forming the scenario where the concepts of experiential learning and co-creation converge. Co-creation enhances experiential learning, because participation is essential for developing the project outline. Students are expected to co-create with local people, tourist guides and with 'El Camino' itself.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework

This will lead to the development of a new learning experience for hospitality and tourism students, in which the context, the Saint James' Way, will be the main protagonist. This approach can be seen as a form of 'educative co-creation', an innovative method that allows students to move away from their everyday environment to a stimulating new way of learning. The final element explored in this project is storytelling. Storytelling helps to provide coherence and consistency to the co-creation and experiential learning concepts created for the study trip. Narrative techniques are used to develop a story that will stimulate students' imagination, amuse and emotionally involve them in the project. The outcome should be a unique experience difficult to reproduce.

### **Study Outline**

The objective of this study is to demonstrate how hospitality and tourism-related studies can be developed using qualitative and experiential methods. It is hoped that this innovative approach will provide a more complete and engaging curriculum for students, enabling them to develop useful skills for their future as professionals in the industry. The data collection methods used in the project were as follows:

- Ten depth interviews were held with experts in the field to provide an overview of the main topics of the research. The list of interviewees can be found in Appendix 1.

- 100 questionnaires were completed by pilgrims at the final point of pilgrimage in Santiago. The questionnaire was designed to examine the experience of pilgrims in terms of their experiential learning.
- Non-participant observation was conducted to analyse pilgrim behaviour.

The expert interviews were used to identify key issues in the research field and to provide input for the subsequent stages of the research. The key issues identified from the interviews were experiential learning, co-creation and innovation and tourism development.

The first topic analysed was experiential learning. A sample of hospitality and tourism teachers was interviewed to gain a better insight into education processes. The experts emphasised the need to improve the current education system in order to incorporate experiential learning. Learning through experiences should form a more important part of the curriculum, but there also needs to be a balance between classroom-based, traditional learning and experiential learning methods. As Ricard Santomá remarked: “Students remember what they care about. When students are asked what they remember once they have finished the degree their answers are never related to subjects, but to experiences. Hence, the experiential learning activity along the Saint James’ Way is one of the most common answers”. In general the opinions of the experts interviewed reflect the position of Gold and Holman (2001): ‘the experiential approach to education is thought to be more useful and meaningful if learning is grounded in the experience of the person and involves learning through doing’.

The following theme, co-creation and innovation, was identified as a current trend which is gathering speed in the marketplace. Companies from different areas are using co-creation to enhance dialogue with their customers and are creating new websites, marketing campaigns or blogs in an effort to co-create with consumers. In general, companies are following the DART model (Dialogue, Access, Risk Assessment and Transparency) (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b) to create these new products. Examples from the tourist industry include Barcelona Creative Tourism, a network platform created in Barcelona in 2006 to fulfil the needs of the creative tourist (see Couret in this special issue). The experts interviewed identified the development of new business models in which, as discussed by Vargo et al. (2008), ‘value is created collaboratively in configurations of mutual exchange’.

This creation is result of combined efforts of companies, employees, customers, shareholders, government agencies and other entities involved in the exchange. However, it is always ‘determined by the beneficiary (e.g. the customer)’. Vargo and Lusch (2008) also



underline the importance of active participation of all the service providers engaged in the exchange.

The analysis of the expert interviews indicated that the new types of tourist, such as the creative tourist, are seeking experiences rather than visiting traditional tourist sights. The experts also underlined the need to develop mutual exchange in order to create value, and that more direct forms of interaction will produce experiences that are more memorable once tourists return home. This also requires all service providers to work together, which places an emphasis on networking as the basis for future innovation in the tourism industry. Collaboration has become an important way of creating value in tourism products.

In terms of tourism development along the Saint James' Way itself, it is clear that the popularity of this route has increased. This is reflected in growing numbers of visitors, with an increase in pilgrims reaching Santiago from less than 3,000 in 1987 to over 125,000 in 2008. Many more people travel along the route (or part of it) without formally completing the pilgrimage or obtaining their *compostela*. People therefore have a range of motivations for undertaking the Camino, from the purely religious to more leisure-based or cultural motives. What links most of these journeys, however, is their experiential component, as Daniel Malvido remarked: 'Trying to understand why people take a backpack and start walking. It is no wonder that it is a very appealing product, where the main thing is not the final destination but the journey itself and how to cover it. This is the key for getting a meaningful experience'. He also highlights the recognition of an 'inner or interior pathway' among the different routes that can be taken to Santiago.

In terms of the specific development of the Camino in Catalonia, the experts emphasized the need to make local people aware of the importance of the Way, as an important step in recuperating this historic route for contemporary use. Josep Font, explains the work done in relation to this recovery: 'The St. James' Way captures the attention of a lot of people. There is a deeply-rooted excursionist tradition in Catalonia. The St. James Way simply consists of walking with a direction and a clear aim. We are working on promoting 'El Cammi de Sant Jaume' in Catalonia. It was a forgotten, lost tradition. Local people need to understand the difference between being a pilgrim and an excursionist. Therefore, the first task to accomplish is to provide an explanation about the profound, interior meaning of the pilgrimage in the places where 'El Cammi de Sant Jaume' has been recovered. It is hard work'.

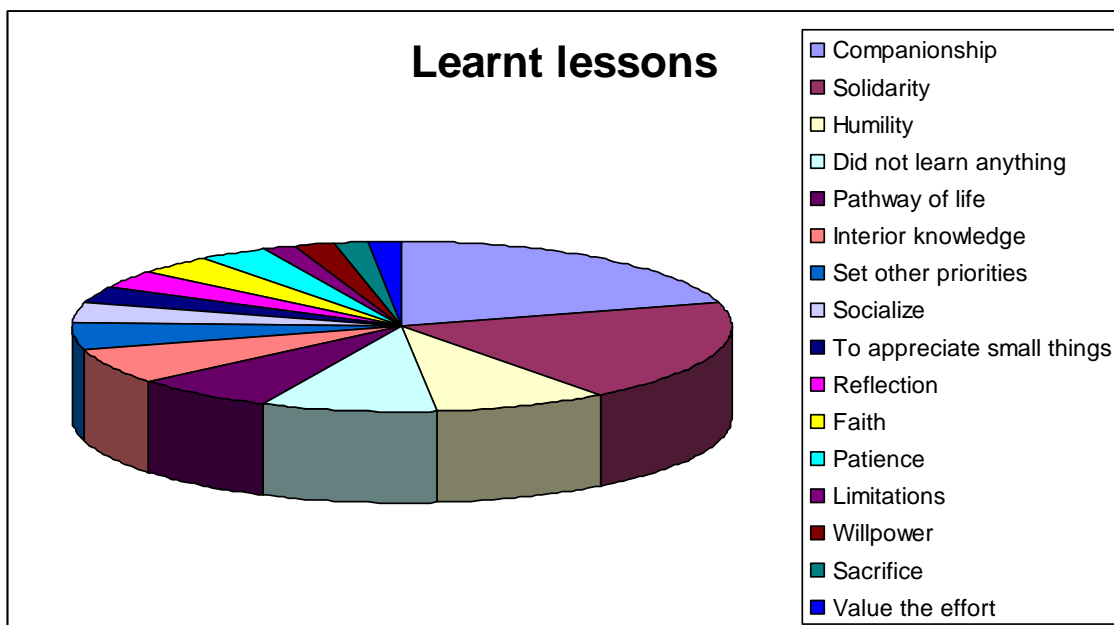
Laia Cicuéndez also pointed out the importance of this difference in the case of Montserrat (an important attraction along the Catalan section of the Camino): 'We make a strict distinction between the pilgrim and the excursionist. When we receive a new reservation we really need to know if the person is a tourist or a pilgrim. The kind of accommodation is not the same; the pilgrims are not accommodated in the hotel. We have two different kinds of visits'. She states in fact that there is a wide range of segments and products in Montserrat, those devoted to pilgrims being the most specific.

**Visitors**

The questionnaires were designed to examine if the Saint James' Way is an important form of experiential learning practice. When asked to define what the Camino meant to them, visitors were most likely to mention difficulty (17%), beauty (14%) and sense of reward (13%). In contrast, spirituality and faith were mentioned by relatively few visitors.

Almost 90% of those interviewed agreed that the Saint James Way was an experiential learning activity. When asked what they had learned, there was a very wide range of answers (Figure 1), but these could be grouped into a few main categories, including: companionship (21%), solidarity (19%), humility (9%), pathway of life (7%) and interior knowledge (7%). There were some pilgrims, however, who said they had not learned anything from their journey (9%).

**Figure 2: Lessons from the Camino**



Although a few people felt they had not learned anything, the overall assessment of the St. James' Way as an experiential learning practice is extremely positive. Almost half of the respondents rated the Way between 4.5 or more on a scale of 1-5.

### **Observations**

Observations were conducted at the final pilgrimage point: the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, where there was interaction with pilgrims. Once pilgrims had reached the Obradoiro Square (the Cathedral Square, the end of the pilgrimage) most of them were not willing to be disturbed. This provoked a sensation that there was something special happening at this final moment of the pilgrimage. Consequently, I looked for a place to sit close to other pilgrims and try to enjoy that silent moment just as they were doing. This was in fact their moment for final reflection.

It was evident that most of the pilgrims who had reached that point were trying to find a place to sit down and admire the Cathedral. At that moment they wanted to be left alone; groups of pilgrims who had reached the end together after the group celebration were searching for their own moment of silence and inner peace. However, there were some pilgrims willing to fill in questionnaires and engage in a conversation. A couple of pilgrims that had walked over 3,000 kilometres in four months and four days from Austria to Santiago de Compostela completed the questionnaire in approximately one hour. They paused at every question and explained stories, made complaints and/or expressed their feelings. They emphasised values such as hospitality, support and courage. That is what the Way or 'El Camino' had taught them the first time round and they had decided to start the pilgrimage again in order to express their gratitude for the experience.

The best moment to approach the pilgrims, when they were most open to answering questions, was while they were queuing to get their 'Compostela certificate' that attests they have completed the pilgrimage. Most of them were in a state of euphoria, their faces expressing optimism. They were queuing, chatting or singing. Indeed, their attitude was completely different from their peers who were sitting in front of the Cathedral. During the last few metres of the journey to the Cathedral it really seemed as if they were going over in their minds all they had experienced along the Way. The Pilgrim Office defines this situation as 'Start the Way thinking you know who you are, return home with a stranger'.

This statement best describes the internal process undergone by the pilgrim during their route to Santiago de Compostela. There is an inner transformation, a reflection and a contact with the roots of humanity, where the little things are appreciated. This 'inner or

interior pathway' that the pilgrim covers during their Way, which is a break from routine that makes the individual experience a process of change.

### **Co-creation in tourism; a tool for an experiential learning activity**

The findings of our research suggest some ways in which new teaching methods can be developed and students can be a new approach to learning, where dialogue plays a key role in the teacher-student relationship. The objectives of the project were as follows:

- Introduce students to key concepts such as innovation, creativity and design thinking (co-creation).
- Introduce students to the origins of hospitality, cultural and creative tourism.
- Introduce students to experiential learning.
- Apply experiential learning and co-creation to improve teaching methods and ensure concept assimilation by the students, to enhance innovative tourism concepts and product design.
- Apply creative and innovative models suitable for the student's background.

The scenarios chosen to implement the project were the city of Barcelona, especially its cultural and creative tourism sites, and the Saint James' Way in Catalonia. In order to physically experience the Camino, students start their own pilgrimage in Manresa and complete a full leg, 25.5 kilometres, to arrive in Montserrat.

In order to link the experience of the Camino to the learning outcomes for the students, co-creation, experiential learning and narrative are linked together in the form of a book. The title of this book is 'Wake up, start walking'. The comma joins and separates the two different parts of the experience. The 'Wake up' phase cover six days or chapters (one day for each chapter). The setting for this part of the journey/narrative is the city of Barcelona and its creative, innovative and cultural sites. Every day or chapter has a title that reflects the main purpose of the day, for example the first day is named 'Once upon a time' whereas the second day, which aims to inspire the student, is 'The Awakening'. The first part is devoted to innovation, clearly shown by the name, where the objective is to rouse the student, to feed their souls with Innovation, Imagineering, Events and Virtual Worlds. Students will also experience different areas of the city, participate in design-thinking activities and visit a new model of business: EsadeCreapolis, an international center, supported by the Esade Business School (Barcelona), to develop new forms of business based on innovation.

The second part is titled 'Start walking' and is formed of 4 days or chapters which take place on the Saint James' Way through Catalonia. This part is strictly devoted to experiential learning or the act of learning by doing. Students will move away from the city of Barcelona and will start their own pilgrimage through the Catalan part of 'El Camino' towards Montserrat. The activities carried out in this part will be co-creating with locals, experiential learning (learning by doing) and fostering a destination as a learning scenario. In line with the first part of the study trip, every day will have a title, for example the first day is titled 'Begin with the end in mind: Montserrat'. This is because pilgrims begin their route to Santiago de Compostela knowing their final physical destination, but that is the only thing they do know. The inner or internal process of change has not yet started, at least in some cases, since they know they want to arrive in Santiago but what awaits them is as yet unknown.

During their journey to Montserrat, students will be asked to create their own book. They will be given a blank book on the first day for their personal use as a diary where they can write their comments, experiences or personal reflections. The history of Santiago, 'El Camino', the legends around St James and the durable strength of the attraction over the centuries for numerous pilgrims, act as a strong basis to help students: on the one hand, they learn about the origins, development and innovation of tourism and hospitality concepts. On the other hand, the students can guide their studies and lives towards their own mission to create a new kind of spiritual discovery.

The final assignment or epilogue will be completed back at home, with the creation of a virtual book to finalise the study trip. This concept is presented as a recommendation to improve future study trips and to offer the student a different learning model. This new model differs from the traditional one, where students attend classes in the morning and workshops in the afternoon. The objective is to wake up the student, to provide them with knowledge in a different format, to let them observe, reflect on and experience the pilgrimage themselves, to enhance a dialogue with other players, to learn from each other.

### **Conclusions**

The main problem posed at the beginning was the need to develop a concept for a study trip in accordance with new trends in the market and using a new approach to education. To achieve these objectives, the methods consisted of a data content analysis, interviews, questionnaires and non-participant observation of the main topics of the research.

It has been concluded that pilgrims do consider Saint James Way as an experiential learning practice as well as a life-time experience. In fact, out of one hundred respondents, 33% had travelled Saint James' Way more than once. Concerning education, teachers pointed out a need to improve the current system, especially relating to the hospitality and tourism field. As they observed, experiential learning is a need in this area. Although some subjects have to be taught in a classroom, there are others which must be seen and experienced. Values are taught along 'El Camino'; this pilgrimage is a break in our everyday life and a trip back to our roots. There is no time pressure, no telephones ringing, no traffic jams, no noise apart from those made by nature; 'El Camino' gives you time to think, to reflect, to learn both from yourself and from others, to appreciate small things in life, to meet other people without labelling them. Along the Way, there is no difference between a general manager and a blue-collar worker; they are all pilgrims.

People engage in dialogues along 'El Camino' and memorabilia plays an important part in this experience. Ricard Santomá stresses that once students finish their degree, when asked what they remember they would point the experiential learning activities. Pilgrims do not forget the situations they have experienced. When you meet pilgrims you can see that something has changed in most of them: their eyes are brighter, keener, their expression is relaxed and they are willing to share experiences. Companies such as Chiruca (a company specialised in boots), and the Spanish and Galician tourist boards have created blogs where pilgrims are asked to share their experiences and offer tips to future pilgrims.

Therefore, the creation of this concept for the study trip aims to offer students a new approach to education. Furthermore, it is said there is no education without transformation. If we look back at Non-participant observation (page 14) this transformation is noticed in pilgrims during the last hundred metres of 'El Camino'. This is the inner transformation that we would like the student to go through.

Experiential learning has been brought to the forefront by academics, as one of the possible improvements in the education system. As a result, it has been grouped together with one of the current trends in the market, co-creation, to offer a complete experience. This programme has been linked through storytelling, which is a current trend too; this technique is now applied to products, organizations or destinations. The concept of the study trip as a book is the perfect combination for the use of storytelling. These findings contribute to the knowledge of academics and practitioners by offering a case study which can be applied to provide a new approach to education, not only in the area of hospitality, but in other academic fields as well. This research is therefore valuable for the academic community to

carry out further research in experiential learning or the application of co-creation to the development of tourism experiences.

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