
Nice Meeting You - Have We Crossed Paths Before? Envisioning a Collaborative Future for Hospitality Educators and Practitioners

Abstract

Amid the ongoing discussion about adopting a solely practice-based vocational perspective, a hospitality-oriented business management approach, or a combination of both, modelling hospitality education from a design perspective offers a new direction.

This paper explores the consequences of design-based learning (DBL) in hospitality education for existing education-industry partnerships. A hotel management school that implemented design-based learning experiences intensified and transformed collaboration between educators and industry practitioners driven by the collaborative, contextual, and designerly learning principles underpinning DBL. Yet, the impact of design-based learning on education-industry partnerships seems largely overlooked or only minimally considered. Utilising Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and including the phenomenon of boundary-crossing, we argue that partnerships must be reenvisioned as collaborative futures, leveraging mutual strengths. We propose a Change Laboratory intervention facilitating opportunities for expansive learning of educators and industry practitioners.

Key Words Design-based learning, education-industry partnerships, cultural-historical activity systems, boundary learning mechanisms, collaborative future

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Departure requires a rending that rips a part of the body
from the part that still adheres to the shore where it was born,
to the neighborhood of its kinfolk,
to the house and the village with its customary inhabitants,
to the culture of its language and to the rigidity of habit.
Whoever does not get moving learns nothing.
Serres (2009, p. 7)

Introduction

Dutch higher hospitality education ensures a continuous influx of well-educated professionals from various programs (AD, Work & Study, bachelor's, and master's). It exists within an international landscape of hospitality education that offers purely practice-based vocational programs, hospitality-focused business management schools, and hybrid curricula—specific perspectives on effective education shape model choices (Oskam, 2018). In particular, European hotel schools have developed hybrid business-vocational education models, most of which are integrated into Universities of Applied Sciences (Catrett, 2018). In this context, the Dutch Association of Hotel Management Schools, a consortium of six higher education institutions, has developed, in consultation with industry practitioners, its Professional and Educational Profile to convey the aim of educating agile and resilient students capable of navigating disruptions and transforming challenges into innovations in the international hospitality industry and beyond, emphasising the overall prosperity of all (Association of Dutch Hotel Management Schools, 2023).

To meet industry requirements and expectations, hotel management curriculum designers have, for example, adopted concepts of real-world learning (e.g. Rawlinson & Dehurst, 2013; Richards & Spanjaard, 2025), often combined with pedagogies such as Problem-Based Learning (De Boer & Otting, 2011). These curricula integrate theoretical expertise in management disciplines with knowledge construction based on real-world cases, company visits, guest lectures, and interactions with industry professionals during events. Furthermore, on-campus training hotels and internships within the international hospitality industry enhance students' industry socialisation and preparedness (e.g. Griffin, 2022; Sufi et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2018). Real-world learning signified the shift in hospitality education from the perspective that good hospitality education must imitate the industry, visualised in practice-based vocational models, to an “industry-inspired” perspective visualised in academically rigorous, theory-driven business management models with integrated industry-related components (Catrett, 2018; Oskam et al., 2018; Otting, 2000). Nevertheless, Catrett (2018) remains sceptical about whether the perspectives and models “that have paralleled the developments in both industry and academia” are still adequate. He argues that a “postindustrial” hospitality sector requires higher hospitality education to embrace a design paradigm and “now enter a third phase” in which hospitality education transcends a singular approach of “practice-based training or management science education” and incorporates “arts approaches and design” in current hybrid business-vocational education models (Catrett, 2018, p. 31).

Regrettably, significant contributions (e.g. Catrett, 2018; Oskam et al., 2021) promoting the design paradigm in hospitality education seem to overlook the impact of a turn towards design for education-industry partnerships. A design-based curriculum requires intensified interactions between educators and industry practitioners (Assen et al., 2023), evolving from merely facilitating learning at the curriculum level to enhancing the mutual prosperity of education and industry and the professionalisation of their practitioners. Furthermore, a design paradigm aims at lifelong learning that bolsters economic prosperity, enhances employees' personal and professional well-being, and ultimately strengthens democratic societies (e.g. Biesta, 2006). Therefore, transitioning from student to practitioner is no longer linear and straightforward. Instead, it is a continuous and evolving journey where learning and working coincide, blurring the boundaries between student and practitioner. Consequently, the entrenched perception of education and industry as two separate practices where knowledge and skills are transferred from academia to professional practice, and essential learning occurs solely during the years of formal education, concluding at graduation, can be challenged (Bakker & Akkermans, 2016). However, developing a new understanding of the interconnectedness of

education and industry is challenging, as “different camps making up the hospitality curriculum debate tend to hold stubbornly to their separate positions” (Catrett, 2018, p. 27).

In this paper, we argue that a shift towards design-based learning in hospitality education changes views on current education-industry partnerships and invites educators and practitioners to focus on collaborative futures aimed at mutual change and growth while leveraging their respective strengths. We posit that the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and included under that the phenomenon of boundary-crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Engeström, 2001) offers promising avenues for those pursuing such a collaborative future. First, we outline the design-based learning principles used in a hospitality curriculum to explain the rationale for changing views. Then, we introduce CHAT and boundary-crossing learning, which are illustrated iteratively through a CHAT analysis example from a qualitative study to explore the perceptions and experiences about learning at the workplace among industry practitioners (De Boer et al., in press). Finally, we suggest a direction for embarking on this journey to cross paths and move towards a collaborative future.

Design-based Learning in Hospitality Education

In 2020, a Dutch undergraduate hotel school transformed its curriculum to educate future-proof game changers capable of strategically anticipating change and positively impacting the global hospitality industry and the world of tomorrow (Assen et al., 2021). The teaching and learning approach transitioned from Problem-Based Learning (PBL) to Design-Based Learning (DBL) as PBL could not fully support the school’s changed mission and vision.

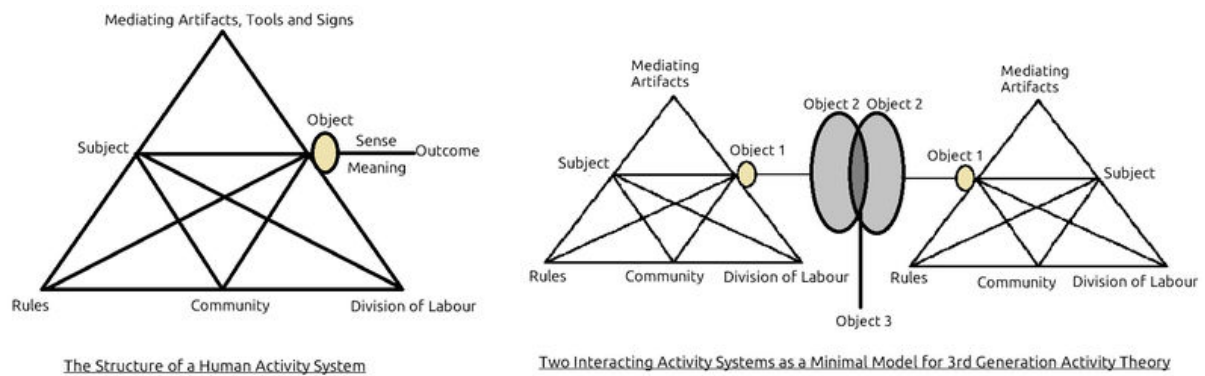
Although PBL and DBL share the educational philosophy of sociocultural and cognitive constructivism encompassing the principles of self-directed, collaborative, contextual and constructivist learning, DBL—integrating learning, design, and research—necessitated the introduction of new principles of civic civic-action and designerly learning and the revision of existing learning principles. For instance, *Collaborative learning* evolved from a learning and working process of only students to a triological learning process involving students, educators and industry practitioners. These so-called partners-in-learning work and learn interdependently and with shared responsibility while designing solutions for real-life issues. Furthermore, *contextual learning*, initially defined as using real-life hospitality issues to construct knowledge with limited or no industry practitioners' involvement, now requires the implementation of design challenges aiming at practical solutions while engaging with industry practitioners and learning at the boundaries. The new principle of *designerly learning* connects the future hospitality practitioner's management and designer realm. This principle asserts that designing solutions occurs through an iterative reflective process of thinking and making. Hence, students cultivate *design awareness*, enabling them to embrace uncertainty, curiosity, and reflection on and in action; they acquire *design literacy*, allowing them to use design practices, strategies, and tools (e.g., design thinking); and they adopt a *design attitude*, encouraging them to accept working with provisional yet evolving knowledge (Hospitality Education Research Group, 2023). These reconceptualised learning principles determine a collaboration between students, educators, and industry practitioners. Educators' and industry practitioners' views on partnership suffice the expectations of real-world learning but seem no longer aligned with the new conditions.

Exploration of CHAT and Boundary Crossing

Cultural-historical Activity Theory and Activity Systems

The Helsinki School-based Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) provides a theoretical framework for analysing the practices of individuals and collectives. Key to this theory is the cultural and historical dimensions of such practices, defined as activity systems that dynamically encapsulate the multilayered, multivoiced “object-directed and contradiction-driven” human actions and activities (Sannino & Engeström, 2018, p. 44). Activity systems comprise six interrelated components that weave the system's fabric and are visualised in a triangle (See Figure 1, left).

Figure 1. Structure of and Interactions Between Human Activity Systems, adapted from Engeström (Source: Parker, 2016)

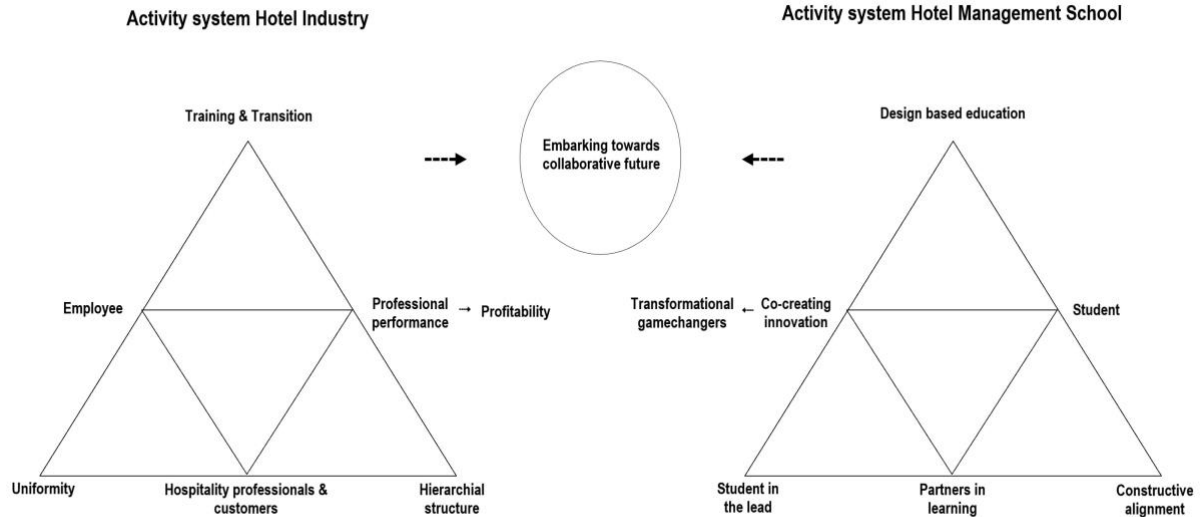


The component *Subject* refers to the individual or subgroup whose position and perspective serve as the point of reference for the analysis. *Object* pertains to the “identity” and “direction” of the activity that leads to “personal sense” and “social meaning” (Sannino & Engeström, 2018, p. 45), realising the object’s *outcomes* through *mediating artefacts, tools, and signs* such as theories, concepts, and models. *Rules* address both written and unwritten norms, procedures, and expectations. *Division of labour* explains the vertical and horizontal allocation and distribution of tasks and roles among participants. *Community* includes all those within the system who work towards the object (Engeström, 2001).

The world’s complexity and interconnectedness compel activity systems to collaborate around overlapping objects (See Figures 1, right), which can result in a “potentially shared or jointly constructed [third] object” (Engeström, 2001, p. 136). “Thirdness” (Engeström, 2001, p. 138) goes “beyond and transcend the available opposing forces or options, pushing the system into a new phase of development” (Sannino & Engeström, 2011, p. 371); this is visualised in the circled embarkment to collaborative futures.

The triangle is used to analyse and visualise human engagement in “purposeful collective activities” (Sannino & Engeström, 2018, p. 45), representing the status quo of the activity system or its needs and direction for necessary change. Likewise, the triangle is used to compare systems. De Boer et al. (in press) conducted a CHAT-based analysis of a status quo in the activity systems hotel industry and a hotel management school, providing an insightful understanding of the respective activities. The study proposed a direction for change (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Status Quo Activity Systems and Opportunity for a Collaborative Future (Developed by the first author, based on Engeström, 2001)



On the left, the hotel industry is broadly depicted. An employee (*subject*) interacts and engages with colleagues and guests (*community*) to ensure seamless performance and provide a positive guest experience (*object*) while pursuing profitability (*object's outcome*). It requires unwavering attention from service employees, leaving little room for error. Performance-oriented activities emphasise uniformity and consistency in task management, ensured by standard operating procedures (*set of rules*). Staff and managers seem reluctant to deviate from these procedures, as doing so might impair performance. Consequently, there is limited space for authentic performance, with staff members moulded into routines and socialised towards a specific image. Organisational hierarchies (*division of labour*) contribute to a culture where employees hesitate to approach higher-ranking managers or supervisors to share improvement ideas. Focusing on performance and profitability often limits opportunities for observation, reflection, or meaningful dialogue with colleagues that could enhance workplace learning. Training (*mediated artefacts, tools, signs*) varies in diversity across the hotel industry. Large international hotel chains typically have robust human resource development programs and significant training budgets. In contrast, small and medium-sized (SME) hotels, often privately owned, usually have limited budgets and time for training and development. Both types of hotels transmit workplace-relevant knowledge, instruct on technical skills, and socialise employees into the service culture through informal on-the-job instructions, external (non-) formal courses, and internal platforms with digital tools (also available after working hours, so they do not need to interfere with performance).

On the right, a hotel management school is visualised. Here, students or future practitioners (*subject*) are immersed in a dynamic learning environment, interacting with academic and industry experts (*community*) to foster innovation and become transformational game changers (*object and outcome*). Constructive alignment determines working with learning outcomes, assessments and delivery (*set of rules*). The educational activities are organised democratically, encouraging student autonomy (*division of labour*). The *mediated artefacts, tools and signs* that guide human action and the system's activities are informed by DBE.

Contradictions and Formative Intervention

Collaboration in and across activity systems initiates perceptions of contradiction that challenge accepted ways of thinking and working that, however, might paralyse thoughts and habits. Contradictions are common phenomena arising from historical and sociocultural developments and the system's multivocality. Though they can be unsettling, they are crucial for an activity system's vitality: they urge the system to move beyond one's object while embracing "a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137) and entering a third space.

Identifying contradictions is difficult. Established norms and prevailing power structures often resist change, obscuring or suppressing signals of necessary change. Contradictions reside in the past and are no longer part of a tangible reality. Therefore, they can only be recognised and identified as "discursive

manifestations” expressed in conversations or written texts (Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 370). Four manifestations of contradiction can emerge in and between activity systems: dilemma, conflict, critical conflict, and a double bind (See Table 1). Contradictions manifested as double binds are especially essential for identifying transformation opportunities.

Table 1. Discursive Manifestations of Contradiction (Source: De Boer et al., 2025. Based on Engeström & Sannino, 2011, p. 373-374).

Discursive manifestation of a contradiction	Explanation
Dilemma	“An expression or exchange of incompatible evaluations between people or within the discourse of a single person”
Conflict	“Taken in the form of resistance, disagreement, argument and criticism.”
Critical conflict	“Situations in which people face inner doubts that paralyse them in front of contradictory motives unsolvable by the subject alone.”
Double bind	“Processes in which actors repeatedly face pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in their activity system, with seemingly no way out.”

From their analysis, De Boer et al. (in press) concluded that the shift to design-based learning and a new understanding of collaboration with industry practitioners as learning partners has created a fundamental contradiction. The education’s focus on autonomy, innovation, and transformation conflicts with the industry’s focus on socialisation, standardisation, and performance for profitability. Therefore, the actions of educators and industry practitioners may no longer be consistent. Additional double binds were identified, including the tension between academic and practice-based language, a one-size-fits-all communication that neglects the industry’s multifaceted nature, and the contrast between instructive, transmission-based training in the workplace and constructivist approaches.

The unravelled contradictions raise questions about collaboration practices and call for a reconceptualisation of actions and activities. A formative intervention method, such as a Change Laboratory (CL) (Sannino & Engeström, 2018; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013), seems promising for envisioning collaborative futures. A CL, serving as both a method and a secure physical space, enables individuals and groups to engage in a systematic, iterative process facilitated by researchers to co-create without preconceptions “expansive solutions to developmental contradictions in activity systems” (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013, p. xvii).

Learning at the Boundary

Akkerman (2011, p. 22) defines boundaries between practices as entities distinguishing “dynamic constructions”, which, in essence, are problematic for a relationship. They can be a literary or figurative brink that signals the difference between the familiar and unfamiliar. A “dialogue between the familiar and unfamiliar” (Akkerman, 2011, p. 22) is essential for catalysing learning and advancing practices and perspectives. However, merely interacting or participating with another practice while ignoring the difference does not result in boundary-crossing learning (Bakker & Akkerman, 2011). Bakker and Akkerman (2016, p. 16) identified four mechanisms for learning at the boundary: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation (See Table 2).

Table 2. Mechanisms of Learning at a Boundary (Bakker & Akkerman, 2016, p. 17 - 21).

Learning mechanism	Result
Identification	“... concerns renewed insight into how different practices distinguish themselves from each other or how an individual relates to different practices. The boundaries

	are made explicit and a way is sought to deal with those boundaries without eliminating differences.”
Coordination	“...deployment of new or existing tools and procedures to enable effective attunement and coordination between practices.”
Reflection	“... refers to formulating one’s perspective (perspective making) or looking through the eyes of someone else to one’s own (taking perspective).”
Transformation	“ indicates forming new practices (boundary practices) or identity. Typical processes include confrontation, acknowledging of a shared problem, development of new boundary objects, hybridisation, and integration.”

De Boer et al. (in press) worked with two of the four mechanisms in their research: identification and reflection. The *identification* mechanism occurred as the researchers felt an unfamiliarity with the industry’s activities. This learning moment was followed by the *reflection* mechanism, which involved consciously exploring the differences between the systems. Consequently, they viewed the school’s practices through the eyes of industry practitioners and gained insight into the possible implications of the differing positions for collaboration. It pondered whether sociocultural-based unfamiliarity is a topic of discussion for both parties. As they experienced the value of learning at the boundary and its opportunity to strengthen education-industry partnerships, they wondered which opportunities would hold significant potential for transformation and expansive learning.

Embarking for a Collaborative Future

In this paper, we stated that design-based learning in hospitality education intensifies and changes the focus on education-industry partnerships. Design-based learning, and thus the design paradigm, calls for a courageous and interdependent departure to envision collaborative futures that educators and industry practitioners have not yet imagined. This involves crossing institutional and cultural boundaries, engaging in learning and transforming while embracing the tension and contradiction that emerge from divergent perspectives. As De Boer et al. (in press) provocatively asked: Can hospitality educators and practitioners collectively embrace the unfamiliar and embark on a transformational journey?

Our response is an invitation: Through a Change Laboratory intervention, researchers, educators, and industry practitioners can create a space to challenge the status quo, question assumptions, and co-construct new practices. As philosopher Michel Serres reminds us, stepping into the unknown is not only necessary but essential for authentic learning and transformation. Let us move forward together towards innovation, resilience, and excellence in hospitality education and industry.

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