

Experiential Learning as a Catalyst for Pedagogical Innovation: Perspectives of B.Ed Humanities Students at a South African University

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Abstract

This study explores how experiential learning, through a field excursion, serves as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation among B.Ed Humanities students at a South African university. The research is based on the belief that meaningful learning occurs when theoretical knowledge is connected to real-world contexts. The study aimed to investigate the perspectives of third-year B.Ed Humanities students on how a Geography and History-based field excursion influenced their understanding of content, student engagement, and future teaching practices. A qualitative case study approach was used with the interpretivist paradigm. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaires from 37 participants and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method. During data analysis, four themes were identified: enhanced conceptual understanding, real-world application of theory, pedagogical innovation, and increased student engagement. Students reported deeper content comprehension, increased interest in their subjects, and a shift toward adopting student-centred teaching approaches. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on experiential learning by showing its potential to transform teacher preparation in the South African context. It affirms that authentic, context-rich experiences help student teachers to bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately enhancing their professional development. The study recommends formal integration of experiential learning into the B.Ed curriculum, improved alignment between excursion content and academic modules, structured reflection processes, and further research on long-term pedagogical impact.

Keywords

Experiential learning, Pedagogical innovation, Field excursions, Reflective practice, Geography and History education

INTRODUCTION

Education in South Africa continues to grapple with systemic challenges, including persistent inequality, outdated pedagogical approaches, and a disconnect between theoretical teacher training and classroom realities. In response, there has been a growing emphasis on pedagogical innovation that fosters critical thinking, adaptability, and contextually relevant teaching strategies (Schreck, et al., 2022). In the modern education era, student-centred and experiential approaches that emphasise participation, critical thinking, and practical application are posing a growing threat to conventional philosophical methods. Experiential learning, as defined by Kolb (1984), is a process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This is a process by which a student comprehends and transforms new information through experience, which involves learning. It includes aspects like abilities, methods, and surroundings that guarantee the student acquires pertinent information. It emphasises active involvement in meaningful activities, reflection, and the integration of theory with practice. In the education programmes, particularly for Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) humanities students, experiential learning is not only a pedagogical tool but also a formative process that shapes future educators' professional identities and teaching strategies (Villarroel, et al., 2020).

Experiential learning is vital in addressing the historical legacy of student teachers that are largely theoretical and removed from practical realities (Morris, 2020). At South African universities, the integration of experiential learning is not only encouraged by policy frameworks like the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications

(MRTEQ) (Ramrathan, et al., 2024). However, it is increasingly seen as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and professional growth. With the South African curriculum that aims to produce competent and reflective pedagogical practitioners, the inclusion of field excursions, microteaching, and community-based projects offers an opportunity for student teachers to engage in pedagogical innovation, a shift from passive transmission of knowledge to dynamic, student-centred instruction (Foo & Foo, 2022). Pedagogical innovation refers to creative and adaptive teaching methods that enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes.

Despite its increasing adoption in South African universities, literature on experiential learning remains inconsistent in addressing its long-term impact on pedagogical thinking and practice among B. Ed Humanities students. While some studies highlight its benefits in improving conceptual understanding and professional growth, others point to challenges such as logistical limitations, poor alignment with curriculum goals, and inadequate reflection (Chigbu, et al., 2023). However, there are challenges associated with the integration of experiential learning in South African teacher training programs. While some institutions have embraced community-engaged learning and school-based practicums, others remain entrenched in traditional lecture-based models. Additionally, structural barriers such as limited resources, large class sizes, and resistance to pedagogical change hinder the full implementation of experiential learning. There is also a vast gap in the literature exploring how student teachers correlate their experiences in relation to their future teaching practice.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the perceptions of third-year B.Ed Humanities students at a South African university who participated in an educational field excursion. In teacher education, field excursions are especially important while teaching humanities studies. It gives our student teachers the chance to experience experiential learning, which enables them to investigate modern world events and get a more profound comprehension of the subject matter. Globally, it has been acknowledged that field excursions are important in teacher education since they can improve teaching practices, foster students' critical thinking skills, and promote cultural appreciation. The study investigates how experiential learning through structured field activities stimulates pedagogical innovation and redefines their approach to classroom teaching. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on Humanities students, whose pedagogical practices must often integrate interdisciplinary knowledge from History, Geography, and the Social Sciences disciplines that greatly benefit from real-world contextualisation. Although experiential learning is integrated into education programmes, there is limited understanding of how it shapes the pedagogical thinking and classroom practices of student teachers within the Humanities stream. This study seeks to address this issue by exploring: How do B.Ed Humanities students at a South African university perceive experiential learning as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation?

This study aims to explore the influence of experiential learning on the pedagogical development of B.Ed Humanities students by examining students' reflections on their experiential learning experiences, identifying how these experiences inform their views on teaching methods and student engagement, and investigating the extent to which experiential learning encourages innovative teaching approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Experiential learning has been widely recognised as a transformative pedagogical approach that bridges theory and practice, particularly in teacher education (Resch & Schrittesser, 2023). Rooted in constructivist and social learning theories, experiential learning emphasises active engagement, reflection, and real-world application (Alabi, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Humanities students, this approach is particularly valuable, as it allows student teachers to connect abstract historical, geographical, and social concepts with tangible experiences (Alabi, 2024). However, while extensive research exists on experiential learning in STEM fields, its application and perceived impact in Humanities education, especially in South African universities, remain underexplored.

Students' reflections on their experiential learning experiences

Research indicates that experiential learning in teacher education programmes, such as field excursions, enhances students' comprehension and retention of subject matter (Addo, et al., 2023). In South Africa, field excursions to historical sites (e.g., museums, heritage locations) and geographical landmarks have been found to deepen students' engagement with content by making abstract concepts tangible (Marovah & Ncube, 2024). However, students' reflections also reveal challenges, including logistical constraints (e.g., funding, time limitations) and occasional misalignment between field activities and curriculum objectives (Jones & Washko, 2021). Some students noted that without structured debriefing sessions, experiential learning risks becoming a passive activity rather than an opportunity for critical reflection (Foo & Foo, 2022). These findings suggest that while experiential learning is impactful, its success depends on careful design and facilitation.

Informing views on teaching methods and student engagement

Experiential learning shapes student teachers' pedagogical philosophies by demonstrating the effectiveness of student-centred approaches (Akintolu, et al., 2022). B.Ed students who participated in hands-on activities, such as mock classroom debates or community-based projects, reported greater confidence in using interactive teaching strategies. For example, a study by Golightly & Roopcharan, (2024) found that South African students who engaged in role-playing

historical events were more likely to adopt participatory methods in their future classrooms, moving away from traditional lecture-based approaches. Experiential learning fosters an appreciation for differentiated teaching. Students exposed to diverse learning environments (e.g., urban vs. rural schools during practicums) recognised the need to adapt teaching methods to students' cultural and socioeconomic context. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is most effective when situated in meaningful, contextually relevant experiences.

Experiential learning as a driver of innovative teaching approaches

Innovation in pedagogy often emerges when traditional methods are challenged through experiential learning (Foo & Foo, 2022). B.Ed students who participated in problem-based learning (PBL) or digital storytelling projects reported increased creativity in lesson planning, integrating multimedia and real-world case studies into their teaching (Aidoo, 2023). However, innovation is not automatic. Some studies caution that without institutional support (e.g., training, resources), student teachers may struggle to translate experiential learning into classroom practice (Chigbu, et al., 2023). Furthermore, in South Africa, where resource disparities persist across schools, students questioned the feasibility of replicating high-engagement activities in under-resourced settings. Thus, while experiential learning encourages pedagogical creativity, its scalability depends on systemic support.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) (ELT) and Schön's (1983) Reflective Practitioner Model. Figure 1 is Kolb's (1984) theory, which outlines a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. These stages guide how students absorb and apply new knowledge through direct experience. Kolb's model explains how activities such as field excursions and community engagements promote pedagogical development by encouraging active learning and continuous reflection.

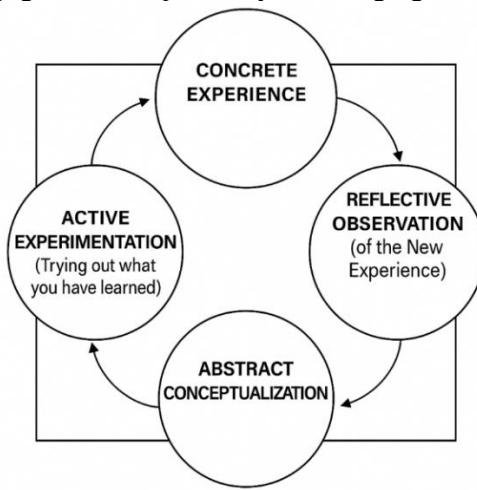


Fig. 1 The Kolb Experiential Learning Model. Source: Kolb (1984)

The student will have a new "concrete experience" as the cycle progresses, and the process will start over, marked by ongoing learning, introspection, and development. The teacher can anticipate better knowledge retention and a natural improvement in soft skills when students study in this hands-on way.

Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner" complements Kolb's theory by emphasising the role of critical reflection in professional practice. Schön (1983) distinguishes between reflection-in-action (thinking on your feet) and reflection-on-action (retrospective evaluation), both of which are key in teacher development. These frameworks collectively support the argument that experiential learning, when coupled with reflective practice, serves as a powerful mechanism for pedagogical innovation. Together, these frameworks underscore that experiential learning is not merely about "doing" but about meaning-making, a process essential for developing innovative educators. This literature affirms that experiential learning holds significant potential for pedagogical innovation in Humanities teacher education, particularly in fostering active, reflective, and contextually responsive teaching practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises on the understanding of the subjective meanings and lived experiences of participants (students) (Omodan, 2022). This paradigm is appropriate as it allows for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives within their educational context (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). It aligns with the study's qualitative nature, where knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants. A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain in-depth insights into how experiential learning influences pedagogical innovation among student teachers. This approach is ideal for studies that seek to understand meaning-making, perceptions, and behaviour in natural settings (Lim, 2025). A case study design was used because the researcher seeks to gain a holistic and detailed understanding of a phenomenon within a specific, bounded context. The bounded system in this study was a field excursion to Durban, South Africa, which included visits to the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), the KwaZulu-Natal Museum, and Green Corridors locations rich in historical, geographical, and environmental education relevance.

The population for this study comprises all B.Ed Humanities third year students at a selected South African university who participated in a field excursion as part of their teacher education program. The sample was purposefully selected to include students who had direct experience with the excursion, ensuring that participants could provide relevant and meaningful insights. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could best inform the research questions, focusing on academic year and subject specialisation to capture a range of perspectives (Campbell, et al., 2025).

Data was collected using a combination of a semi-structured questionnaire and open-ended interview prompts. To gather rich, descriptive data, the study utilised an open-ended questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument. Open-ended questionnaires are a powerful tool in qualitative research as they allow participants to express their experiences, reflections, and interpretations in their own words, without the limitations imposed by predefined response options (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method provided participants with the space to engage in deep reflection on how the experiential learning activity shaped their thinking about teaching and learning.

Data collection was conducted immediately after the field excursion to capture fresh reflections. A digital Google Form survey was disseminated to all participants via the university's communication platform. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and ethical considerations (e.g., anonymity and confidentiality). Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided. The collection period lasted one week to allow for thoughtful, reflective responses. The digital format ensured convenience and accessibility for participants across campuses. The collected data were exported into a spreadsheet for qualitative analysis. Responses were subjected to a thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify patterns and insights across the participants' experiences and perspectives. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed credibility, dependability, and transferability strategies. Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources (e.g., reflections, examples, and suggestions), while member checking was performed by sharing emerging themes with select participants to confirm accuracy.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analyses the data collected from student teachers who participated in an experiential learning excursion to Durban, South Africa. The data comprises both structured and open-ended responses aimed at capturing participants' reflections on how the field excursion influenced their pedagogical thinking, content understanding, and student engagement strategies. The findings are presented using a mix of descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic interpretation, consistent with Creswell's (2017) guidance on qualitative data handling.

Participant Overview

A total of 37 students participated in the survey. Of these:

- 20 (54%) had previously participated in academic excursions.
- 17 (46%) had no prior excursion experience.

This balance shows that the majority had some familiarity with field-based learning, but nearly half experienced such learning for the first time, offering rich comparative insight. Participants were asked to rate their overall experience. A combined 84% rated the excursion as either "excellent" or "good," confirming that the event was both impactful and positively received. As Kolb (1984) posits, learning through direct experience often increases satisfaction and knowledge retention among students.

Impact on Interest and Engagement

Students responded affirmatively or positively when asked whether the excursion increased their interest in History or Geography. The reflections suggest the importance of engagement through physical interaction with subject matter: "Yes, I was able to experience the content matter first hand." "It actually made history more interesting because we saw exactly what we read about." "Geography was taught pragmatically, I was taught while seeing the process." This aligns with Alibi, (2024) , who argues that experiential learning enhances both emotional connection and interest, particularly in content-heavy subjects like History and Geography.

Conceptual Understanding and Classroom Connection

When asked what they learned and how it connected to their classroom understanding, students consistently mentioned the improved clarity of abstract concepts: "Now I am able to compare what is taught to what is real." "Seeing the mangrove forest helped me understand the concept of an estuary." The ability to connect theory to real-life experience supports Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice. It confirms findings by Akintolu, et al., (2022) who note that experiential learning bridges the gap between university content and community realities.

Influence on Teaching Practices

Students were asked how the experience would influence their own classroom teaching. Responses highlighted future intentions to adopt observation-based and interactive methods: "I will use demonstration and group learning techniques." "It showed me the power of field-based teaching and student involvement." Such responses suggest a growing awareness of pedagogical innovation, as encouraged in Du Plessis (2022), who asserts that field experiences nurture flexible, student-centred instruction among teacher teachers.

The analysis demonstrates that the field excursion provided a highly effective and enriching learning experience for the B.Ed Humanities students. It supported a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts, increased subject interest, and encouraged more innovative teaching approaches. However, findings also suggest the importance of aligning field content with curricular objectives for a more cohesive learning experience.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework, this section presents the findings derived from a thematic analysis of survey responses students. The six-phase framework generated four dominant themes: Enhanced Conceptual Understanding, Real-World Application of Theory, Pedagogical Innovation and Reflective Growth, Increased Subject Interest and Student Engagement. These themes are discussed with direct references to student responses and aligned with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Schön's (1983) reflective practice model.

Theme 1: Enhanced Conceptual Understanding

Participants consistently reported improved understanding of abstract concepts due to direct exposure to physical settings, natural phenomena, and historical landmarks. For example: *"I understood geography more, especially environmental geography."* *"Now I am able to compare what is taught to what is real."* This resonates with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which asserts that knowledge is constructed through direct experience, reflection, and experimentation. In particular, topics such as landforms, river systems, and biodiversity became more tangible for the students. The excursion bridged the often-observed gap between textbook knowledge and spatial awareness, confirming findings by Akintolu, et al., (2022) on the value of authentic learning contexts in teacher education.

Theme 2: Real-World Application of Theory

Students participate in practical, real-world activities like an excursion during the first level, known as concrete experiences which serves as the basis for introspection (Kolb, 1984). Students emphasised how the excursion contextualised theoretical knowledge and provided a framework for connecting classroom content to real-world issues. One participant shared: *"Seeing the mangrove forest helped me understand the concept of an estuary."* Others spoke of understanding ecosystems, climate adaptation, and historical resistance by visiting memorials and natural heritage sites. These experiences align with Schön's (1983) model of the *reflective practitioner*, which posits that real-life engagement enhances professional growth through "reflection-in-action." Morris, (2020) similarly argues that contextualised experiences help teacher candidates confront assumptions, engage critically with content, and develop professional maturity. The students were able to interpret geographic and historical data meaningfully because they could directly observe and interact with the environments they had previously only read about.

Theme 3: Pedagogical Innovation and Reflective Growth

Another strong theme was the shift in student thinking about how to teach. Many participants described their intent to move away from traditional teaching methods in favour of more interactive, student-centred approaches: *"I'll use demonstration and group learning techniques."* *"This excursion taught me not to rely on one teaching method."* Such reflections show the power of experiential learning to inspire pedagogical innovation, as emphasised by Addo, et al., (2023). The students began to view teaching as facilitation rather than instruction, echoing constructivist principles of learning-by-doing and learner agency. Some participants also mentioned their intent to incorporate field-based projects, storytelling, and participatory inquiry into their future teaching strategies. This supports Chigbu, et al., (2023), who note that exposure to varied, authentic contexts empowers student teachers to develop adaptable, inclusive, and transformative teaching practices.

Theme 4: Increased Subject Interest and Student Engagement

Numerous responses highlighted increased enthusiasm for both History and Geography as a result of physically engaging with content. Comments such as: *"Yes, the excursion made history more interesting because I was able to see what we learn about in real life."* *"Seeing King Shaka's home and hearing the untold stories made me want to learn more."* These responses indicate heightened subject curiosity, especially when the excursion content aligned with students' lived realities. Akintolu, et al., (2022) support this, arguing that experiential learning increases engagement by making learning emotionally resonant and personally relevant. Moreover, the ability to "see and feel" history and geography firsthand aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which emphasises learning through observation and interaction within a social context. Students did not merely receive content; they co-constructed meaning in dialogue with their peers and the environment.

The field excursion served as a transformative experiential learning opportunity that expanded the pedagogical and conceptual horizons of student teachers. It encouraged deep reflection, reshaped instructional beliefs, and fostered a stronger emotional and intellectual connection to their subjects. However, the study also highlights the need for better alignment between site content and course objectives to harness the potential of experiential learning fully.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to explore how experiential learning through a structured field excursion shapes the pedagogical perspectives and professional growth of B.Ed Humanities students at a South African university. Framed within the

interpretivist paradigm and informed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Schön's Reflective Practice Model, the research illuminated how direct engagement with geographical and historical content fosters deeper conceptual understanding, critical reflection, and pedagogical transformation. The findings revealed that participants viewed the excursion as a powerful learning tool that brought theory to life. Students reported enhanced comprehension of complex academic concepts, improved ability to connect classroom knowledge with real-world environments, and a shift toward student-centred teaching approaches. Many participants indicated that the experience had not only increased their interest in History and Geography but also inspired them to adopt innovative teaching strategies such as demonstration, observation-based learning, and interactive methods. Experiential learning emerged as a vital component of meaningful teacher education. It fosters professional growth, cultivates reflective practice, and enhances subject matter engagement. For B.Ed Humanities students in particular, it offers an invaluable opportunity to internalise content and envision transformative pedagogical approaches appropriate for diverse South African classrooms.

Based on the findings, this study recommends formally integrating experiential learning into the B.Ed curriculum as a core pedagogical tool, ensuring that field excursions align closely with academic content and learning outcomes. Universities should prepare students for reflective engagement through structured activities such as journals and guided debriefings. Additionally, students should be encouraged to apply insights gained from these experiences in their teaching practice by adopting student-centred and inquiry-based methods. Field educators and site facilitators should be trained to deliver content that is accurate, inclusive, and curriculum-relevant. Lastly, further longitudinal research is needed to explore the lasting impact of experiential learning on teaching practices and professional development.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

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