

## AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING-TEACHING MODEL IN RECREATION STUDIES: REFLECTIONS ON IMPLEMENTATION

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### ABSTRACT

*The recreation profession is a fast-growing, diverse, career field, creating unique challenges for academic institutions in preparing students. Not all the skills and competencies (graduate attributes) needed by entry-level recreation professionals can be achieved through academic curricula in classroom settings. Experiential learning pedagogy may address these challenges for recreation education. The Twin-Cycle Experiential Learning model (TCELM) can incorporate field- and classroom-based experiential learning into degree programmes. The purpose of this article is to investigate the experience of students in a recreation module that implemented an adapted TCELM. A holistic single-case is reported with qualitative data including student reflections, lecturer reflections and focus group interviews, subject to inductive coding. The merit of both cycles of the TCELM in student learning was examined. Group work and time management were two factors identified that may challenge the implementation of experiential learning. However, both these factors contribute to the development of essential skills for the workplace. It was concluded that the adapted TCELM is practically implementable within a recreation module at a higher education institution. However, attention should be given to student expectations, active learning opportunities and the time spent on experiential learning activities.*

**Keywords:** Experiential learning; Graduate attributes; Higher education; Recreation; Recreation education.

### INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Labor Statistics in the USA expects job opportunities in the recreation sector to grow by over 10% by 2024 (Seaman *et al.*, 2017). The recreation profession is a diverse career field, making it a desirable career choice for young professionals. This diversity creates a unique set of challenges for academic institutions to prepare students for a career in the recreation industry (West, 2016). The skills needed by recreation professionals cannot be achieved through academic curricula in classroom settings alone (Hurd *et al.*, 2014; Fisher *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to investigate whether the application of an experiential learning-teaching approach is practically viable and beneficial for students and lecturers alike.

### **Recreation as a unique study field**

The focus of recreation professionals is the management of the leisure time of populations and offering recreation programmes and activities to the benefit of participants, as well as the community at large (Goslin, 1983). Recreation as a profession offers many career opportunities with various job descriptions (Chen & Gursoy, 2008). Preparing students for all the possible career options available in the recreation industry is a challenging task. To ensure students can enter the career of their choice, academic institutions should not only focus on fundamental knowledge but also the required skills and competencies (graduate attributes) when preparing recreation professionals (Chen & Gursoy, 2008).

Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. It is vital to realise that, apart from the disciplinary knowledge of the degree, graduate attributes additionally include the qualities necessary for students to succeed professionally in an unknown future (Bowden, as quoted by Barrie, 2006). This is reflected by Schreck *et al.* (2020a), who identified passion for the profession, trainability, communication skills, leadership skills, teamwork and certain personal qualities, including adaptability, as the top-ranked graduate attributes needed by South African (SA) entry-level recreation professionals. Hurd *et al.* (2014) found that the competencies that recreation graduates lacked at the beginning of their careers were typically related to those concepts that they were exposed to in a lecture setting with limited exposure to practical experiences. They advocate for a way that students can put their classroom knowledge into practice, to gain self-confidence and feel prepared for their first employment in the field.

Ideally, this would be achieved through internships or work integrated learning, which has been touted for improving students' employability (Jackson, 2015). However, these types of learning also have time, logistical and financial implications, which may limit their use in certain settings. Also, within the SA context, and specifically the university used in this study, opportunities for undergraduate students to gain practical experience, either through internships or work integrated learning is limited, due to the scarcity of recreation providers within proximity of the university.

This led to a need for experiential learning within a class-based learning environment, without the option of work integrated learning. In hindsight, little did we know that the Covid-19 pandemic would further complicate the future of experiential learning at our institution and highlight the importance of finding alternative approaches to incorporate experiential learning in modules. The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic led to the widespread closure of available recreation service providers, while tertiary education successfully moved to online teaching-learning, making any form of field-based experiential learning almost impossible. Consequently, from a pedagogical viewpoint, the approach to recreation education must be reassessed.

### **Experiential learning as teaching methodology**

Learning philosophies are categorised into three prominent learning theories: behaviourist, cognitivist and constructivist, each with its own associated learning methodologies and strategies (Said *et al.*, 2012; Kay & Kibble, 2016). Constructivism is considered the modern paradigm of teaching and learning (Viviers, 2016), with Jean Piaget (the pioneer of constructivism) stating that learning "is in the eye of the beholder, knowledge is subjective and actively constructed as learners engage with, and make meaning of their experiences" (as stated in Kay & Kibble, 2016:21). Whereas previous learning theories focused on behaviour change and how information is processed, Piaget and fellow constructivists were more motivated by

what people do with information to develop new knowledge, thus how people learn (Jordan *et al.*, 2008).

Experiential learning as a teaching methodology is associated with constructivism principles (Viviers, 2016). Piaget believed that knowledge arises from actions and the way we reflect on these actions (Von Glasersfeld, 2005), the same underpinnings that define experiential learning in its most basic form – learning by doing, with reflection (Priest & Gass, 2005). Experiential learning mimics the real world with mostly unpredictable outcomes, where students need to take responsibility and manage their own learning (Schwartz, 2015). Reflection is critical for the success of this experiential learning process (Schwartz, 2015). Students must have the opportunity to reflect on their experience, analyse and challenge the current situation and think critically about the implication on future experiences (Hedin, 2010; Monk, 2013).

Kolb's experiential learning model is the most prominent model used in higher education for implementing experiential learning (Hedin, 2010), with numerous studies reporting on its application in the last 35 years (Svinicki & Dixon, 1987; Erickson & James, 2005; Almeida & Mendes, 2010; Bethell & Morgan, 2011; Cant & Cooper, 2011; Bower, 2013; Sukavejworakit *et al.*, 2018). Kolb's experiential learning model contains a single cycle involving four stages (Kolb, 2014). However, recent research questions the validity and reliability of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Bergsteiner *et al.*, 2010; Bergsteiner & Avery, 2014; Schenck & Cruickshank, 2015).

Schwartz (2015) explains that experiential learning can be integrated into higher education in two distinct ways: firstly, through field-based experiential learning, which includes internships, practicums and service learning; and secondly, through classroom-based experiential learning that involves activities, such as case studies, role playing and simulations. Because Kolb's model provides a framework for just one cycle, Bergsteiner and Avery (2014) suggest that most of the criticism of Kolb's model can be resolved by re-conceptualising the single cycle to a twin-cycle model.

As not all students are able to fully comprehend and cope with the demands of experiential learning (Liang *et al.*, 2016), some are more comfortable with learning from textbooks. Therefore, the Twin-Cycle Experiential Learning Model (TCELM) by Bergsteiner and Avery (2014) that incorporates both field-based and classroom-based experiential learning could be able to address this issue. It consists of two learning cycles, one for concrete, active, primary learning (CAP) and one for abstract, passive, secondary learning (APS). Both cycles encompass the four learning stages identified by Kolb (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2014), providing the opportunity to present class-based, as well as practical recreation modules (or part of modules) within an experiential learning framework. The TCELM is developed with a scale for learning potency, based on six learning modes. Furthermore, it identifies six learning-activity types; hear, read, hear and see, observe, write about and engage in, in which students participate. The use of the TCELM, utilising both field-based and classroom-based experiential learning, may also address the increased need mentioned by Yorio and Ye (2012) for creating teaching environments that will enable various sensory methods to promote students' engagement in learning activities.

In a recent special edition of the *Journal of Experiential Education*, focussing specifically on experiential learning research in higher education, the editor highlights the lack of submissions focussed on classroom-based approaches to experiential education (Roberts, 2018). This shows that there is a need for classroom-based experiential learning research. Additionally, apart from a single publication about the effectiveness of the TCELM (Schreck *et al.*, 2020b) no

publications on the use of the TCELM, and specifically regarding students' expectations and experiences of the implementation of the model in a field and classroom-based context could be found.

Understanding student expectations are important for improving student outcomes, specifically retention and performance (Beenen & Arbaugh, 2018; Sander *et al.*, 2000). Nicholson *et al.* (2013) found that students who knew that they were expected to take responsibility for their own learning, performed better than students who expected the lecturers to be responsible for learning. Additionally, understanding students' experiences and reactions to experiential learning may assist researchers and educators to improve their support to students and improve their education (McClam *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of students in a recreation module that implemented an adapted TCELM, by answering the following questions:

- 1) What were the expectations of students enrolled in the experiential learning module and were these expectations met?
- 2) How did the students experience the mostly abstract, passive, secondary learning cycle?
- 3) How did the students experience the concrete, active, primary learning cycle?
- 4) What additional factors had an influence on the workability of the model?

## METHODOLOGY

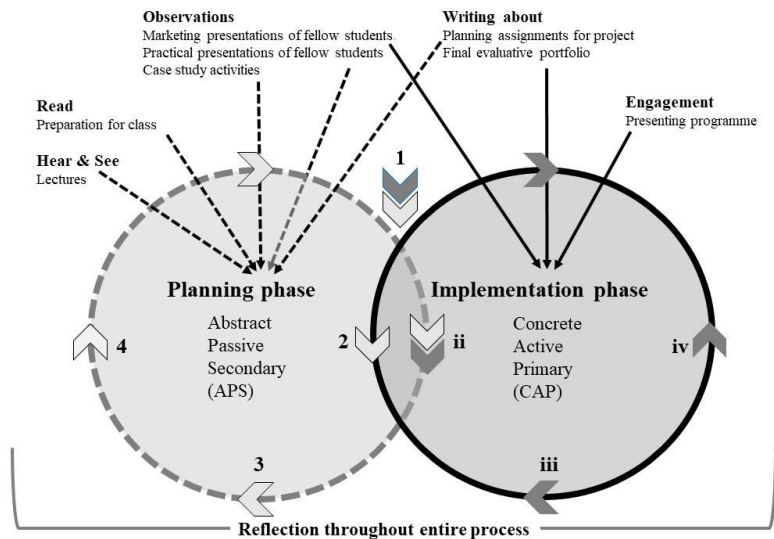
### Context

The TCELM formed the foundation for the development of an experiential learning-teaching model that integrates both classroom-based and field-based learning opportunities for recreation students. An adapted TCELM was implemented in a second semester (July–November 2018), final year module of a three-year recreation degree at an South African university. The focus of the module was for students to integrate and apply their skills and knowledge of the recreation profession in a practical project. The module outcomes focused on the understanding of key recreation concepts and processes; scientific inquiry into leisure needs and the analysis, evaluation and synthesis of the information and its application; accurate and coherent communication; and the ability to act as a group member and group leader to successfully complete a recreation project (NWU, 2018).

The eight-credit module (80 notional hours) continued for 14 weeks, with three contact sessions (3 hours and 45 minutes) per week. The 36 full-time contact students enrolled in the module were divided into seven 'project groups' with five to six members per group, with a specific management role assigned to each member (programme manager, finance manager, marketing manager, administrative manager or customer service manager). The groups were responsible for an entire project, including the planning, implementation and evaluation, with each member responsible for their part within the project. Nearly half of the contact sessions were classroom-based, focusing on theory, its application and the planning of their projects. The other half entailed implementing and presenting recreation programmes to clients in a practical setting.

### Contextualisation of the Twin-Cycle Experiential Learning Model

The TCELM, developed by Bergsteiner and Avery (2014), together with their classification of the learning modes and learning-activity types provided the foundation for the development of the experiential learning-teaching model (Figure 1) applied in this case study. The model consists of two cycles: one for mostly APS learning activities, and one for CAP learning activities. However, some overlapping can occur within the two cycles.



**Figure 1. ADAPTED TWIN-CYCLE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL**

During the first contact session, a learning need was created (at '1' in Figure 1) by introducing the students to the module and informing them of the project that they had to plan and implement. The semester started off with the planning phase of the student projects and various sequences of the first cycle (2/ii, 3, 4) of the model were completed. During each sequence, students conceptualised the learning activity (2/ii), planned what to do (3) and carried it out as an experience (4). Various abstract, passive and secondary learning activities, such as lectures, class tests and class preparation, were completed and followed the sequence 2, 3, 4 in the model. However, a number of the learning activities completed were either concrete, active, or primary, such as exploring case studies, observing other students' presentations and completing assignments directly related to their projects. These learning activities followed the sequence ii, 3, and 4 of the first cycle of the model.

During the second part of the semester, the students presented and evaluated their recreation programmes. These learning activities formed the second cycle of the model, and followed the sequence of conceptualising (ii), planning (iii) and experiencing (iv). Reflection was incorporated throughout the entire semester through guided reflections and a reflective portfolio.

## **Study design**

Ethical approval was obtained from the university where the research was conducted. A holistic single-case, case-study design with a qualitative approach was used (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Participation in the teaching-learning activities was compulsory for all students, as it formed part of the normal learning opportunities and studies, but participation in research activities, which included student reflections and focus group interviews, was voluntary with consenting students able to withdraw from the research at any time.

## **Participants**

Initially, 33 students agreed to take part in the study, with three students withdrawing towards the end of the study. From the remaining thirty students, 14 were also willing to take part in the focus group interviews that were held at the end of the semester.

## **Data collection and procedure**

Data collection included student reflections and focus group interviews. Participants completed six guided reflections on their experience throughout the semester. The first five reflections (n=33; n=33; n=33; n=31; n=33), completed during the planning phase, focused on students' expectations of the module and feedback on the teaching and learning activities used. The last reflection (n=30), completed after the implementation phase at the end of the semester, determined how the students experienced the entire module and provided an opportunity to compare the planning and implementation phases.

Three focus group interviews (n=5; n=5; n=4) were conducted at the end of the semester to explore students' experience of the way the module was presented and to determine how workable the presentation of the module was. An interview schedule was used to provide a framework of questions focusing on topics, such as the difference between the planning and implementation phase, the execution of the planning and implementation phases and the workability of the module.

The lecturer as researcher, kept a reflective journal throughout the semester and reflected directly after each contact session on her own experience by summarising what happened during the session, evaluating and analysing of the session, and formulating an action plan for improvement. During the implementation phase, she reflected on the implementation of the programmes.

## **Data analysis**

Data analysis adopted Yin's five-phased cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling and arraying, interpreting and concluding (Yin, 2011). ATLAS.ti 7 (version 8.2.32), was used to assist the researcher in analysing the various focus group interviews and documents. The student reflections, lecturer reflections and focus group interview transcripts were inductively coded by the researcher, after which they were co-coded by an independent researcher. The researcher and co-coder discussed the codes and consensus was reached on the various codes. Thereafter, the codes for the various documents were concurrently analysed for categories and subthemes. The emerging subthemes were grouped in themes to answer the research questions.

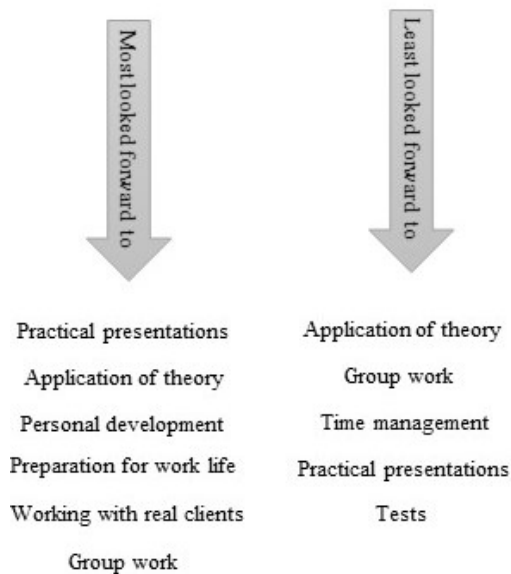
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, attention will be given to the students' module expectations, subsequently, their experiences in the planning and implementation phases will be discussed. Lastly, additional themes, as well as the overall experience of the students will be discussed.

### Student expectations

As students are responsible for learning within an experiential learning context, it was important from the outset of the module to ensure that students had realistic expectations regarding teaching and learning. After an orientation to the execution of the experiential learning module in the first week of class, students reflected on their feelings and expectations of the module. The students had mostly positive or mixed feelings about the module, as reflected by a student stating that she was *"very excited as it prepares me for the real work environment"* and another who was *"extremely excited and proud about the module. A little nervous because it is new, but definitely looking forward to gain[ing] the practical experience."* Some students experienced negative feelings due to uncertainty about what exactly the module will entail that can be outlined by one student saying, *"I feel anxious because I don't know what to expect, but also excited because of the practical"*. Another voiced his uncertainty about the content of the module: *"I am unsure. It feels as if we are only going to revise the work we did the last two years"*. Negative feelings were also experienced by students about what their part in the module would be, as one student said, *"[I am] a bit anxious, because I'm still trying to find my way around it [the module]."*

During the first guided reflections, students were also asked what they looked forward to the most and least in the module (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF THE MODEL**

Most students were most excited about the practical presentations and working with real clients as stated by this student: “*Practically offering programmes to real clients, so that I can precisely apply what I have been studying and also learn from mistakes*”. When asked what they were not looking forward to, they mentioned specific theory, such as planning, finances, marketing, and administration. When asked to back up these statements, they reported a lack of knowledge and experience in these fields: “*...the marketing part. Marketing is not my strong point*”. Group work also stood out as one of the main concerns, with the fear that everyone in the group might not do their part, as illustrated by the following: “*The meetings and working [in a group]. I fear that not everyone will give their 100%*”.

Some students looked forward to the practical application of theory, practical presentations and group work as activities, while others did not. This variety in responses could be ascribed to being unfamiliar with the type of activities, negative previous experiences, or diversity in learning styles and preferences. To ensure the successful implementation of an experiential learning-teaching model, lecturers should acknowledge the diversity of students in a degree programme and create different opportunities that resonate with diverse student groups to master the content. Lecturers must adopt “an appropriate pedagogical response that accommodates a wider range of both learning styles and preferences and a wider range of language, cultural and educational backgrounds” (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010:119) to accommodate all students. The adapted TCELM does just that, by providing two cycles for different student preferences, but still grounded within experiential learning principles.

### **Student experiences of planning phase**

The APS cycle or planning phase (Figure 1) was six weeks of classroom-based theory focused teaching with students completing case study assignments not directly related to the projects.

### ***Value of theoretical class sessions***

Students were asked which of the theoretical class sessions during the planning phase were of most value and of least value and why. Various themes emerged as displayed in Table 1.

Students had different opinions with no consensus about the value of the different contact sessions or the reasons for them. The only class session that was just mentioned as “most valuable”, focused on project finances and included various applications of theory directly related to the students’ own projects. The class session that focused on the administrative processes of the project was the only session just mentioned as “least valuable”. It also included various applications to the students’ projects, but no theory was introduced or revised.

The students regarded class sessions as valuable if they provided additional information, explained by this student: “*Factors were mentioned that we have not thought of*”, and if they provided new insight, as underlined in the following: “*I got better insight into all the work connected with marketing.*” However, class sessions were regarded as least valuable when students felt that they already knew the theory and nothing new was learned, as explained by this participant about the class on inclusiveness: “*We already know the necessary theory to ensure the programme is inclusive*”, and the marketing class: “*Marketing, the session dragged. I feel like we knew the information already, we had the class not so long ago*”.



**Table 1. REASONS FOR VALUE OF CLASS SESSIONS**

Class session was most valuable	Class session was least valuable
<i>Informative</i> “It was very interesting, to learn how to ask questions effectively and get the information you need with the most simple and least amount of questions.”	<i>Nothing new</i> “I have done it a lot; it is nothing new.”
<i>Practical/active</i> “I enjoy classed that are more practical. I enjoyed seeing and understanding the facility.”	<i>Not practical/active</i> “It just required static work, such as typing.”
<i>Personal interest</i> “It is what I am interested in, and what I like the most.”	<i>No interest</i> “I don’t like marketing a lot, I am not really interested in that.”
<i>Challenging</i> “[I had to] think out of the box, it challenged me.”	<i>Not challenging</i> “The information is self-explanatory. Our group understood the concepts.”
<i>Group work</i> “I enjoyed it to analyse the data with my group.”	<i>Group work</i> “Our team was unorganised and not properly prepared.”
<i>Application</i> “It gave us the opportunity to use our theory.”	<i>Did not meet expectations</i> “Because it was not what I expected.”
	<i>Boring</i> “It was kind of boring.”
	<i>Not difficult</i> “It is not difficult, and I know what to do.”

**Active learning vs. traditional teaching**

Engaging in the practical work was one of the main reasons students experienced a class session as valuable: “*We could physically do the work, have a look ourselves and apply it. We could move around. If you see it yourself, you learn more*”, and “*It was more theoretical than practical, so I didn’t gain much knowledge*”. Engaging in practical work provided students with active learning experiences. Lujan and DiCarlo (2006) found that most first-year medical students received the greatest benefit from active learning strategies. Adib-Hajbaghery and Aghajani (2011) concluded that active teaching methods resulted in more effective learning than traditional lectures for second-year nursing students. Govender (2015:25) recommends that in an SA context, “Lecturers should adopt pragmatic teaching methods that aim to empower their students through active participation”.

It is evident from the students’ feedback that they perceived the teaching activities that were more “active” and/or “primary” as more valuable, as they learned more. The adapted TCELM provides opportunities, with the two cycles that overlap, to present theory from a more primary, active and concrete standpoint, but still grounded in an experiential learning framework.

Traditional teaching activities, such as lectures and class tests formed part of the planning phase in the first cycle of the adapted TCELM. Students were asked if they deem these traditional teaching activities as important and beneficial and the conflicting results highlight students’ diverse preferences of teaching activities. Several students considered these traditional teaching activities essential, as explained by this student when asked if the theory needs to be repeated in class by the lecturer: “*Yes, there is stuff that I just understand better if*

*the lecturer explains it". The same was true of class tests: "I think having structured class tests help[s] you gauge your progress and having semester tests help[s] you gauge where you are. So, a lot of time I felt I might have failed the first test and the second test I did really good [sic]. The one was bad and the one was good, so you don't really actually know how you are doing. And normally in classes, I will know I am doing well because of tests. So, I think [a] proper standardised test would actually be nice for the subject."*

Several students thought that lectures and tests were "a waste of time", and that they wanted to apply the theory during class, as explained by this student: "I don't need the theory, since I prepare for class and have done this before. So, I prefer applying it, because that is how I best learn and remember it". The notion of preferring teacher-led teaching and learning but with active participation by the students is supported by the research of Sander *et al.* (2000) on students' preferred teaching and learning methods. Govender (2015) likewise confirmed that lectures remain one of the most popular teaching methods, especially since they can effectively be used to teach factual information to large classes in short time frames. However, lecturers are advised to use more innovative methods of teaching for the new generation of students. Similarly, Sander *et al.* (2000:321) suggest that a "lecture can have many forms", such an interactive lecture, making it more 'active'.

### **Student experiences of implementation phase**

The implementation phase (CAP cycle) took place during the second part of the semester. Student groups had to implement the recreation programmes that they had planned during the first part of the semester. Furthermore, each group was required to observe and assess, according to given criteria, the programmes presented by fellow students.

During the focus group interviews, students reflected on their experience of the implementation phase of the module. The students were unanimous in their response on the value of this part of the module, stating that "if it was not for the practical part, there would not have been a module. Because in the beginning [planning phase], you learned all the theory..., but where you actually started learning physically in this module was when you applied it practically". Students saw the practical implementation as essential, as elucidated by this student: "I feel it [implementation] was very necessary. We could see how everything we've planned are [sic] put into motion, and that our planning was successful. And that we could get more learning experience out of it, than if it were only the planning. I feel if we just did the planning and stopped, we would not have learned much, really. Because then it would not have showed us how to apply it in a practical manner and we would not have been able to improve on what we have done".

Students emphasised the importance of the first phase as well: "One thing that I can say in general when looking at the classwork, that I also liked a lot. It was like a framework for you that you are not that lost... And truly, if we did not do it, I would have still been busy with the assignment. Because there are [sic] a lot of stuff that you don't think about, like the admin and the finances you have to do...". The concern of keeping a balance between traditional and novel approaches to teaching, such as experiential learning methodologies, has been raised by Govender (2015) and, consequently, supports the adapted TCELM that makes provision for a more traditional approach through class-based teaching activities, as well as a "new" approach, through field-based teaching activities within a module.

### **Additional influencing factors**

Group work and time management emerged from the data as additional factors that may influence the effective implementation of the model.

#### **Group work**

The greatest challenges mentioned by the students were working in groups: *“My biggest challenge was working with people who think differently than I do”*, and conflict management as a result of the group work: *“because everyone’s personalities clashed with each other, that is just conflict because everyone tried to follow their own vision and didn’t want to give in and listen to the vision of the other people”*. In the lecturer reflections, the challenges of group work were a prominent theme, with students in a group not contributing equally, and challenges of students from diverse cultures and languages forming groups and working together. Similar challenges in group work in higher education have also been reported by various other researchers (Turner, 2009; Poort *et al.*, 2018; Šerić & Praničević, 2018). Soetanto and MacDonald (2017) reported on the same obstacles experienced by groups, but found that self-selected groups experience even more obstacles than groups assigned by the lecturer, as in the case study.

Being assigned to groups might be part of the reason why, in contrast, group work was also mentioned as the greatest reward when students were able to work productively in a group. For example, one student mentioned, *“To understand more people, on a different level, to get to know them better and understand them in depth, who they are and where they are coming from”*. Poort *et al.* (2018:224) also reported that *“culturally diverse groups led to better, broader and more applicable end products”* and participants made life-long friends with students they normally would not have had connected with. Šerić & Praničević (2018) likewise reported meeting and knowing people, insights on different viewpoints and mutual support between group members as social benefits of group work. The forming of relationships was also mentioned by this participant: *“...and I think what I liked the most, a high, was to work each day with the group. We created a nice bond, that I enjoyed the most”*.

Oblinger (2004) stated that millennials prefer teamwork in their learning environments. The way that group works was used throughout the entire project and built trust between the group members, as underlined by one participant: *“Having a team to trust on in tough times”*, and another stating that *“for the first time I enjoyed group work, and I learned a lot from other people”*. These insights underlined group work as an indispensable part of the learning experience, even more so when implementing an experiential learning approach.

#### **Time management**

However, group work exaggerated the other challenges the students highlighted: *“it is difficult for a group to get together, because everyone’s programme is different”* and *“having to meet all the time and doing extra planning”*. Thus, time management and balancing the experiential learning module with other modules and their personal lives were highlighted. The workload associated with the module was mentioned by numerous students, pointing out *“the challenge is doing this project of good quality in time with other modules and preparing for unprepared class tests”*. Beenen and Arbaugh (2018) found that students enrolled in modules that utilise a “flipped” approach, where students must prepare before class and apply the preparation in class, experienced the modules as more demanding and challenging than those with a traditional lecture approach.

## Overall student experiences

During the final reflection, the students responded on how they felt about the module now that it was almost completed. The response was largely positive, with students describing the experience as “enjoyable, fun, irreplaceable...” and stating, “*I feel excited about moving forward with the knowledge I have learned*”. One participant expressed his need for more experiential learning-based modules as part of his recreation degree: “*I am very excited about the module; it was very nice, and I wish more of our modules can be like this*”.

There were three main reasons for students continuing to experience negative feelings at the end of the semester. Firstly, students still had to complete a final summative assessment, with negative feelings demonstrated by one student’s response, who felt “*frustrated about all the information that needs to be filled in now, it is very repetitive*.” Secondly, the workload of the module elicited negative feelings and, lastly, uncertainty about what was expected of them, as explained by a participant: “*[I feel] frustrated, it was a very short semester, so there was limited time to complete everything. We received information piece by piece, that resulted in a lot of uncertainty*”.

Most students felt positive throughout the experiential learning module and expressed the need to have experiential learning implemented in more of their modules. However, the time needed to plan and implement the projects and compiling a portfolio of evidence were challenges, especially as the students had other academic responsibilities in a full timetable. This was emphasised by this student: “*I am relieved. The module took a lot of time, and it was difficult to get time for all my other modules*.” These challenges led to students developing essential time management skills, an indispensable skill needed to succeed in an experiential learning environment, as highlighted by this participant: “*It [the module] helped me to develop a timeline of what must be done, and when it must be finished*.”

Despite presenting the module in such a manner that students had to take responsibility for their learning, they still needed the module to be structured, planned and executed well. The current students can be categorised as ‘millennials’ (Main, 2013) who prefer structure in learning (Oblinger, 2004). Similarly, Stinnett and Oregon (2018:465) reported the need for structure, stating that “well-designed course assignments and assessments are imperative for maximizing student learning”. Even though the TCELM provides a structure for implementing experiential learning activities, as noticeably required by the students, student feedback highlighted that lecturers should provide well-defined guidelines and structure on what is expected of the students during the application of the model. Henceforth, helping students develop realistic expectations of the nature of teaching and learning within an experiential learning approach, and taking responsibility for their own learning are important for improving their performance (Nicholson *et al.*, 2013).

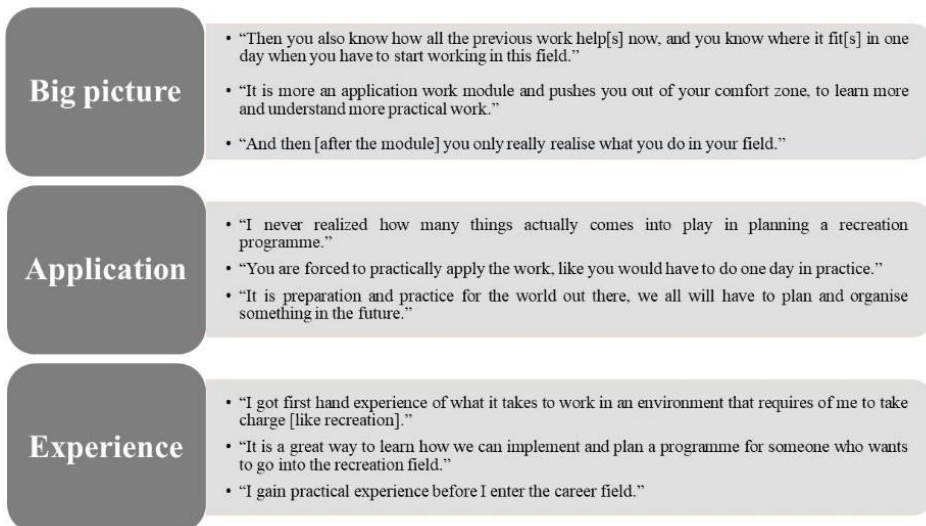
At the start of the semester, students were asked if they believed they had enough theoretical knowledge to plan and present their recreation programmes. Students evidently believed that they had all the needed knowledge, as this participant underlined: “*Yes, I have already learned enough*”, implying that additional theory classes would be redundant. This notion can be explained by research on students’ ability to predict their academic performance, which indicate that students tend to be overconfident in their academic abilities (Hacker *et al.*, 2000; Miller & Geraci, 2011).

During the focus group interviews, however, students were asked, in hindsight, if they think they would have been able to present successful programmes without the theory-based planning phase. The students all agreed that they needed the class-based theory sessions to present successful programmes, as illustrated by this student: “*I think if we didn’t...have the planning*

phase, as I say it was preparation, so...it would just as well be someone throwing me in the deep end of the pool, and I have never swum before". It is, therefore, important to incorporate theory into the experiential learning-teaching module used, to ensure that students receive adequate guidance to master the learning outcomes.

### Value of module

After successfully completing the academic module, students recognised the greater value it presented, as reflected in Figure 3. Feedback on the value of the module can be categorised into three main themes. Firstly, providing students with a big picture of what recreation as a profession entails; secondly, affording students the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge gained over the previous three years; and, lastly, affording them the chance to expand their experience in the recreation field. These three main benefits were reflectively summarised by one participant, who stated, "Thank you for getting us out of our comfort zone".



**Figure 3. GUIDED REFLECTIONS AND FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS: VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODULE**

### CONCLUSION

Govender (2015:465) stated that "quality teaching initiatives depend strongly upon lecturers considering their actions and their roles in the light of students' experiences, as these offer understanding of, and insights into, how to teach better, more effectively and more efficiently". The aim of the study was to ensure that the student voice and their experience of the module were heard, as suggested by the above author, with the results leading to a better and more effective teaching approach in recreation studies. Furthermore, this study has built on the work of Knee and Thomas (2018) on how to implement the field of recreation's active signature pedagogy practically 'out of the stands and onto the court', through the TCELM, implemented in a recreation module. Both the cycles were valuable in providing students with the opportunity to learn, through both theory and practical application. This model is suitable for recreation

education, as students were able to apply previous and new knowledge in a practical “real-life” environment where they continued learning through experience.

Certain concerns, however, must be addressed to ensure the model meets the need to incorporate experiential learning into a classroom-based setting, as well as practical settings. Firstly, lecturers must ensure that students have realistic expectations of what the teaching and learning (the application of the model) will entail and expectations adjusted where unrealistic. These expectations must be carefully considered, adjusting the teaching and learning where appropriate, although these expectations should not become the sole driving force in planning the module (Sander *et al.*, 2000). Secondly, the teaching and learning activities in the APS cycle must include the required theory and be presented in ways that are well structured and demand active student involvement. Thirdly, the experiential learning-teaching model should be the foundation for an entire module, and not just random teaching and learning activities within a module.

This is supported by the research of Coker *et al.* (2017:74), stating that “more experiential learning is better” – either the amount of time spent per experience, or the number of experiences engaged in. Lastly, as reflection forms an essential part of experiential learning (Priest & Gass, 2005), lecturers must either provide structured opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences or provide guidance on how to reflect on experiences, to ensure that experiential learning does not occur ‘accidentally’ but rather because of deliberate and well thought out reflection.

A new generation of students is entering higher education institutions, and although we found that the adapted TCELM can be successfully implemented with current students, further research into the teaching and learning preferences of the new generation of students is recommended to ensure the experiential learning-teaching model stays relevant to the changing student corps. Additionally, Covid-19 had far reaching implications for higher education and the ability of students to engage in field-based experiential learning. Hence, educators had to find alternative ways of implementing some sort of experiential learning in mostly online classes, and the TCELM with its field- and classroom-based experiential learning could be of value. Although the adapted TCELM was implemented and evaluated in a recreation module at a higher education institution, it is suggested that future research should determine its applicability in other practically orientated academic degrees.

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