African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, Volume 7 (3) - (2018) ISSN: 2223-814X

Towards achieving lifelong learning and employability through Ecotourism field trip experiences at the Durban University of Technology

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Abstract

Industry experience and expertise is commonly the first aspect asked of any prospective candidate by any employer in the field of ecotourism, irrespective of whether the person being asked is a fresh graduate or an expert employee. Employers anticipate and resolve to employ graduates who will 'hit the ground running'. The higher education has a challenge to equip these graduate with all the skills to match those who are already in the job market. This paper seeks to examine the use of field trip experiences in offering authentic and lifelong learning that prepare students for employability in the Ecotourism industry. A group of ninety, third year Ecotourism management students embarked on a field trip to learn hands on what it is like to work in the bush as their office and interacting with big game and interpreting what they have learnt to tourists. This qualitative study with a purposive sample comprised of two surveys, one of feelings pre field trip and the other of the actual experience. The comparison is drawn based on the students' expectations versus actual experience. The results show that not only do field trips provide an opportunity for lifelong learning, career guidance options, boost confidence and increase chances of employability, they also accommodate various learning styles which foster higher levels of success for students.

Keywords: experiential learning, authentic learning, field trips, lifelong learning, employability.

Introduction

This research sought to examine the use of field trip experiences in offering authentic and lifelong learning that prepare students for employability in the Ecotourism industry. Ecotourism is based predominantly upon natural and archaeological properties in its untouched natural environment. It is a non-consumptive aspect of nature that comprises scholastic, appreciation, preservation and sustainable components (Ting and Cheng, 2017). The use of field trip in teaching and learning helps to bring about effective and proficient learning in Ecotourism. Field learning is of utmost importance, if one is to remain current in the real world Albert, Strait and Strait, 2015). Field trips have transformed from the passive look-see to a spirited experience focused on transferable skills and critical perspectives on gender, ageism, disabilities and other themes (Albert et al., 2015). They continue to be valuable learning experiences for students and weave with an experiential learning cycle that involve planning, doing, observing and thinking (Krakowka, 2012).

Contemporary research and curriculum reforms have indicated the need for diversifying teaching approaches by drawing upon student interest and engagement in ways which makes learning significant (Coll and Coll, 2017). If a variety of teaching methods and styles are used, students get exposure to both familiar and unfamiliar techniques of learning that provide both comfort and tension during the process, ultimately giving learners multiple ways to excel (Kamboj and Singh 2015).

Literature review

Experiential learning founders and theorists (Dewey, 1938; Lewin, 1951 Piaget, 1936) recognized that learners have to be actively engaged within their surroundings if they are to gain applied knowledge, these philosophers emphasized pragmatism, asserting progressive education and that reality must be experienced, thus satisfying the need to learn by doing. The central condition of learning is involvement. Students actively influence their learning environments just as much as the learning environments actively influences them (Yardley, Teunisses and Dornan 2012). Student participation and guided education experiences provide opportunities to convey a strong and positive scholastic message (Green and Farazmand, 2012). Ting and Cheng (2017) indicate that the key element of experience-based learning is that students analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it in order to draw meaning from it in light of prior knowledge.

Students' participations through the development, implementation and maintenance of nature-based experiences, combined with professional guides in educating students has significant and positive effects (Ting and Cheng 2017). Field experiences is "a fundamental and integral component of an undergraduate education" (Rydant et al. 2010, 21-22). Field experiences give students opportunities to cultivate competencies, forge civic connections, and provide concrete experiences that inspire deep learning (Barton 2017). Through experiential learning, students engage with and participate actively in work-based scenarios, enabling them to apply what they have learned in class to real life (Mak, Lau et al. 2017). This experience is transformed into knowledge during the learning process (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

Field trips are one of the most effective pedagogical techniques in Ecotourism as they are natural opportunities for interacting with the 'real world' (Zwahlen, 2017). Field trips are experiential, authentic social events that create a new way of knowing an object, concept, or operation (Scarce, 1997). They play an significant role in curriculum development by enabling students to understand intricacies found in their field of study and to improve student learning outcomes (Santonino 2017). The aim in incorporating field trips is to provide students with a unique learning experience that would have an impact in their lives and careers. Field trips and fieldwork have a deep-rooted track record for augmenting education through the delivery of direct student experiences (Kent, Gilbertson, and Hunt 1997; Leydon and Turner 2013). Behrendt and Franklin (2014) resolve that such trips provide a real-world example of course content in action that is authentic, and utilizes more of the students' senses for a lasting impression of the knowledge learned. They enable students to digest course content and concept through direct, firsthand experience (Fluri and Trauger 2011; Wright and Hodge, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2013).

Field learning is an experiential activity that directs students towards a holistic learning process which takes place "on the field" by having students go to a specific site or location (Schaller 2018). When organized in conjunction with classroom lectures and group discussions, these site visits provide tangible experiences for those seeking to form connections between theory and practice (Pierce and Widen, 2016). This kind of learning involves most of the students' senses and caterer for different learning styles (Mchunu and Hlengwa 2018). This results in increased engagement with lifelong learning (Sibthorp et al., 2011). Students learn through observation and participation, which enables them to 'connect the dots' between theory and practice (Mchunu and Hlengwa 2018).

Authentic learning is student work that addresses real issues and that can be assessed by real-world standards (Knight, 2013). Mchunu and Hlengwa (2018) say that game reserves, zoological gardens, mountains, canyons, etc. are such real world areas which provide authentic learning environments for ecotourism students. Authentic learning is sometimes called project-based learning (PBL) or task-based learning (TBL) (Zwahlen, 2017). This type of learning increases student engagement, is motivating, and tasks are easier to understand which then leads to longer retention of information (Zwahlen, 2017; Fremerey and Bogner 2015). This gives students the chance to reflect, and results in enhanced engagement, motivation and learning (Zwahlen, 2017).

A student's approach to learning is comparatively a constant estimate of how they perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment (Kamboj and Singh 2015). As a result, the demands on student learning require a significant change in educators' methods that cannot be further postponed (Tadros, 2011). Surface learning is a rather passive style of learning based on memorization, whereas deep learning is more active, necessitating students to search for information, make connections and draw conclusions autonomously. Saunders (1997) suggested a paradigm shift from the "instruction paradigm" to a "learning paradigm," similar to Brandl's (2002) bid to move from "teacher-centred" to "student-centred" education. Relative to students taught conventionally, cooperatively-taught students display better analytical, creative, and critical thinking skills, deeper understanding of studied material, greater intrinsic motivation to learn and achieve, better relationships with peers, more positive attitudes toward subject areas, lower levels of anxiety and stress, and higher self-esteem (Johnson et al. 1998; McKeachie 1999; Felder and Brent 1999).

Santonio (2017) articulates the urgent need to close the gap between students with industry experience and students without industry experience in traditional and nontraditional learning settings. Employers need the institutions of higher education to better prepare students at thinking critically for the corporate world. This has resulted in industry advisory boards at universities emphasizing communication and critical thinking skills as areas for curriculum improvement (Santonino 2017). For academic programmes to enhance alignment with industry needs, etiquette and standards, it is crucial to cooperate with industry in the teaching, learning and assessment processes of a programme (Mchunu and Hlengwa 2018). Students that are able to apply learnt theory to practice can compensate for their lack of work experience (Avramenko, 2012). Further, he notes that leadership, decision making and negotiation skills gained through field learning, as well as exposure to positive standards and practices, have significantly contributed to graduates' self-confidence. This enhancement of confidence supported by the improved ability to discern a gap between theory and practice has been perceived by graduates as helping their employability (Avramenko, 2012).

The study is an exploratory case design seeking to establish a deeper understanding of field trips as way to foster life-long learning that is student centered. The study used Kolb and Fry's (1974) learning theory and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory as its framework. This theory supports teaching and learning becoming inherently spontaneous and student-centered when moved from the confines of the classroom into the world at large.

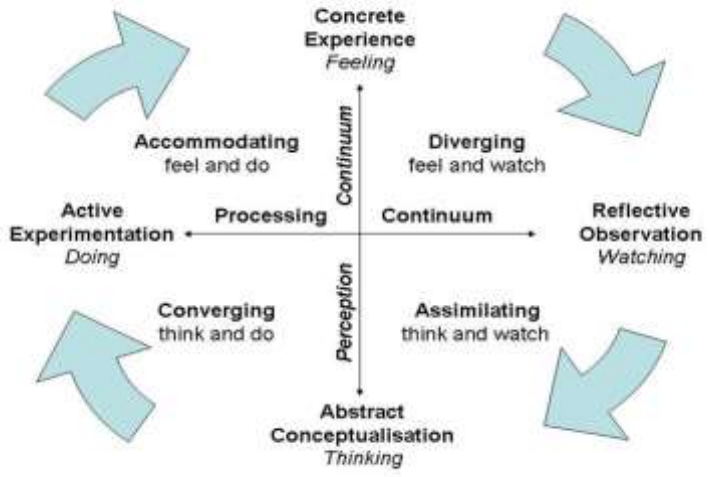

Figure 1: Kolb and Fry Learning theory (1974) and Kolb experiential learning theory (1984)
Source: McLeod (2013)

Different people prefer a certain single different learning style (Kolb and Fry, 1974). Various factors influence a person's preferred style (McLeod, 2013). Whatever influences the choice of style, the learning style preference itself is the product of two sets of variables or 'choices' that individuals make, which is presented as lines of axis, each with 'conflicting' modes at either end. A distinctive presentation of these two continuums is that the horizontal axis is called the Processing Continuum (how a task is approached), and the vertical axis is called the Perception Continuum (emotional response, or how one thinks or feels about it) (McLeod, 2013).

Figure 1 is illustrative of these learning styles which correspond with experiential learning stages. Firstly, assimilators, who learn better when presented with sound logical theories to consider. Secondly, convergers, who learn better when provided with practical applications of concepts and theories. Thirdly, accommodators, who learn better when provided with “hands-on" experiences. Lastly, divergers, who learn better when allowed to observe and collect a wide range of information. Corbett (2005) linked experiential learning with entrepreneurship, matching the four processes of entrepreneurship (preparation, incubation, evaluation and elaboration) with the four experiential-learning styles proposed by Kolb (1984). Mchunu and Hlengwa (2018) express the importance of higher education in attempting to cater for the learning styles of all of the students at least some of the time, instead of catering for the needs of some of the students all of the time.

Methodology

This is a case design study seeking to establish a deeper understanding of field trips as way to foster life-long learning that is student centered and that make students employable. The population of the study constituted all ninety senior year Ecotourism students from Durban University of Technology, Riverside Campus. However, there were only eighty-three questionnaires analysed, this was due to some being spoilt. (Gomm et al., 2000; Yin 2009) postulate that a case can be a group, this cohort of students is therefore regarded as a single case in this study. This cohort was purposively selected (Patton, 2002) because they were the final year students who have covered all of the content of the three-year Ecotourism diploma program. These students embarked on the field trip based on the modules called Ecotourism Interpretation III, incorporating important elements of another subject called Wildlife Management I and II, Ecotourism biology I and II was also key during the field trip as students had to interpret wildlife using knowledge covered by both biology and wildlife modules. Ecotourism Interpretation III is a task based module requiring students to learn theories in the classroom and then to practice and show their skills in the field. This practice took place in the form of a field trip and bush experience over a period of five days and four nights. The overall outcome for the field trip was to apply field craft knowledge during field guiding in natural settings. This knowledge was to include survival skills, orientation skills, tracking knowledge and very importantly how to approach dangerous animals, especially Africa’s Big 5, on foot. This knowledge could not be transferred properly in the classroom setting, students had to experience it first-hand for learning to be authentic and lifelong.

The instrument used to gather relevant data for this study was a two time-phase (before and during the fieldtrip) qualitative questionnaires. This paper concentrates on both the ‘pre phase’ (expectations of the experience) and ‘during phase’ (actual experience) field learning. The students had had their normal module lectures, followed by a seminar with various industry guest lectures and class simulations. These classroom activities preceded the field trip to Hluhluwe Imfolozi Park (HIP) where the students got to experience wildlife and interpretation and to be assessed in the natural environment by industry experts. Both the pre and during field trip study sought to compare the students’ expectations of the field trip with the actual experience, then identify any gaps and gather suggestions for future learning.

The field trip itself lasted five days. The students were given the first ('pre phase') qualitative survey prior to embarking on the field trip. This was administered before the students left the campus to travel the six hours to the place of their field learning. The second ('during phase') qualitative survey was given during the field learning experience which lasted the five days. The data obtained from the instruments were analysed and organised using theoretical proposition, developing a case proposition as Yin (2003) recommends. Yin (2003) also suggest pattern matching, explanation building and replication logic, this study therefore predominantly used this technique of data analysis.

Findings

Research questions were analysed using themes emerging from the qualitative questionnaires before and during the field trip and assessing students' learning experiences. These themes have been presented mainly through the use of various graphs.

The students went to HIP on a five-day field trip and for nature training. Figure 2 shows that 80% of students anticipated that the field trip was going to expose them to authentic interpretation, guiding, and industry experience. They conveyed that it was to show them how to protect biodiversity, to understand animal behavior, to learn how to approach aggressive animals, to gain guiding skills, and to know more about historical heritage. They felt they would gain actual industry experience which will help them in the job market, this also achieves lifelong learning for students. The rest felt that as much as learning was important, it was just as important to enjoy being in the natural environment.

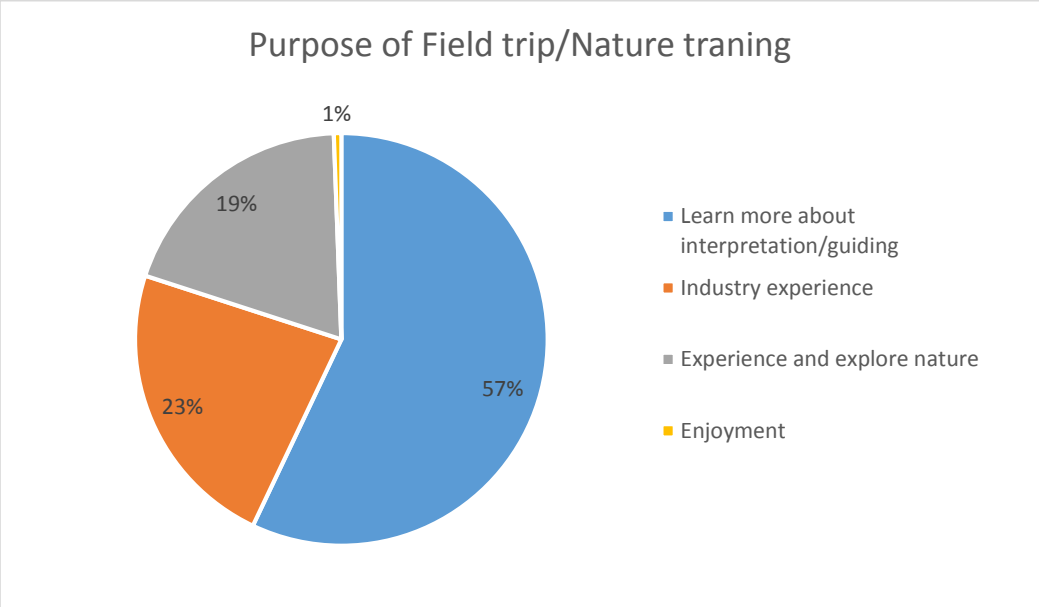

Figure 2: Purpose of Field trip/Nature training

Figure 3 shows a summary of the students' thoughts on what the purpose of the trip was. Majority of the students expressed that they will have practical experience in learning and dealing with animals and in guiding as a career option. They asserted they would be well informed, well equipped, be able to put theory into practice, be better people with a better view of life, history and heritage. They expected to be able to teach others about nature conservation and responsible tourism, to be able to express themselves, to choose the right career and to build their work profile. They looked forward to going on a guided bush walks on foot and on game vehicles, to learn all guiding skills including tracking and survival skills, and be better at interpreting the environment.

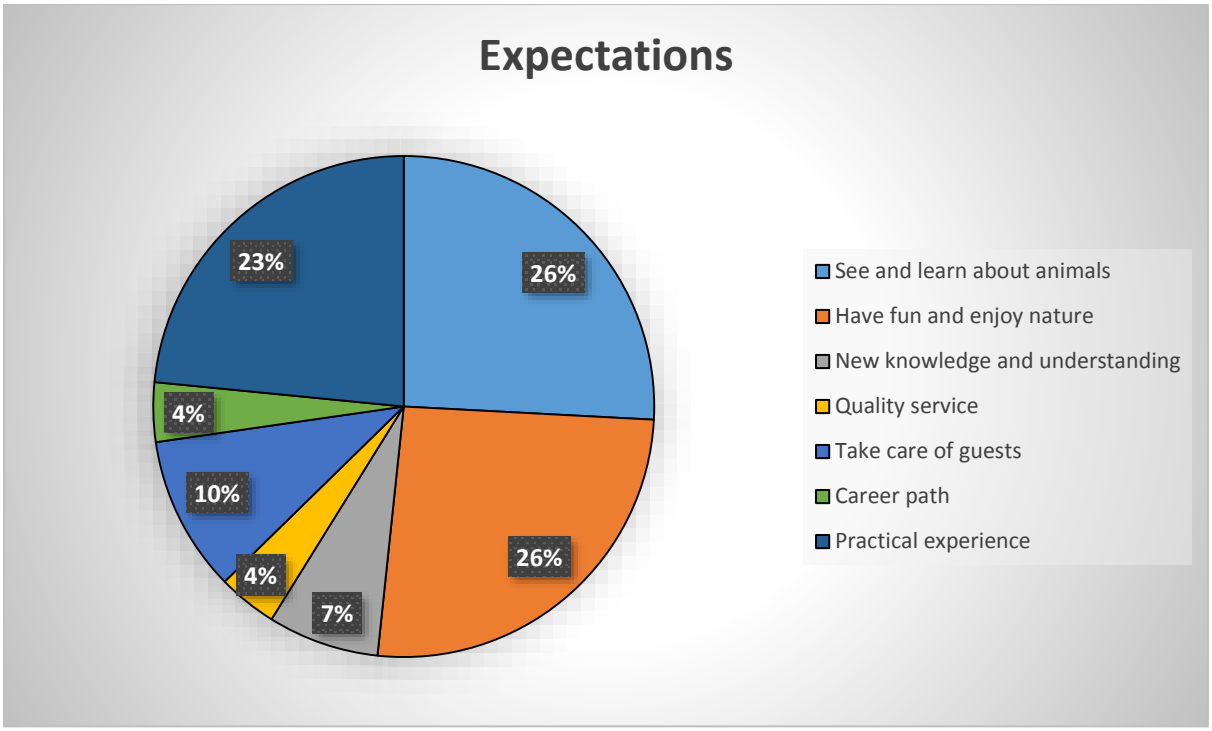

Figure 3: Students' expectations over period of training

Preparation for the trip was approached in various ways. The first way was academic preparation. This included students "researching about the park/reserve", "reading their notes about guiding/interpretation", "signed indemnity forms", and "brought notes/stationary". Secondly, they made sure they had appropriate clothing for the bush. The third way in terms of health, for example one student emphasized that he went "running", another "went for swimming lessons", others "bought insect repellents, sunscreens and sunglasses".

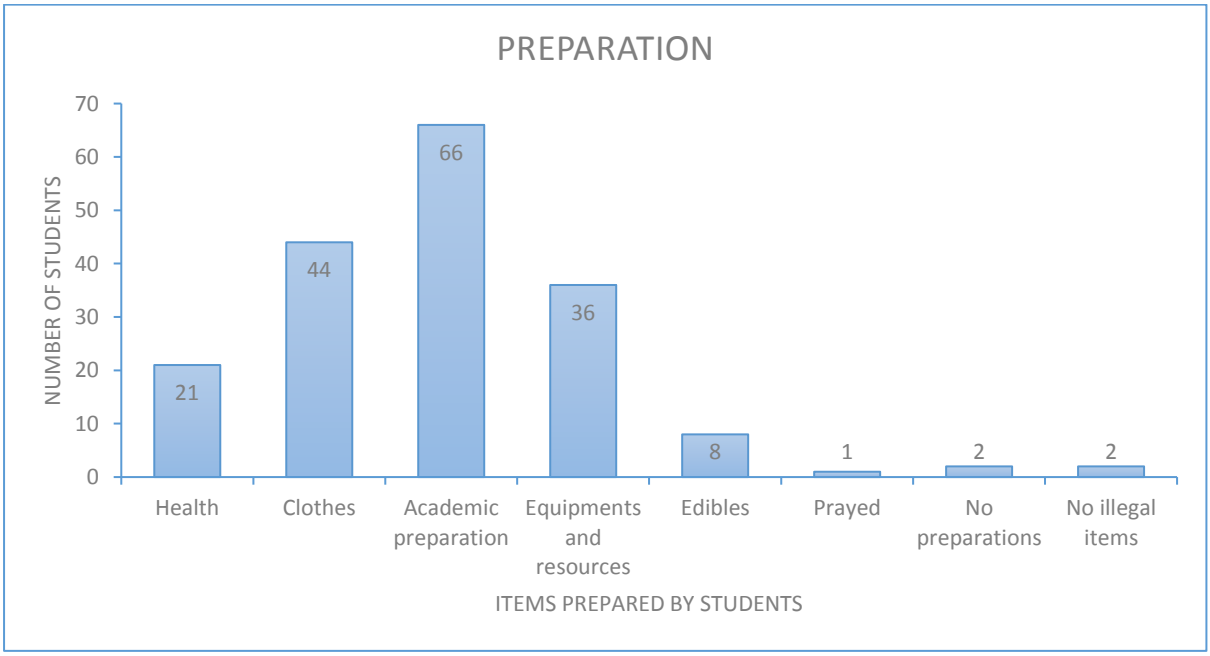

Figure 4: What was done in preparation for the trip

The trip incited many emotions for students. They described their feelings as “very excited”, “happy”, “anxious”, “can’t wait”. One student stressed that “all the theory I have learnt in these three years will finally be done practically”. Dewey (1938), Lewin (1951) and Piaget (1936) support the view that for students to gain applied knowledge, they have to be actively engaged within their surroundings. Another student felt this was “an opportunity of a lifetime, an experience I've always wished for”. While another added that “all students should get this opportunity”.

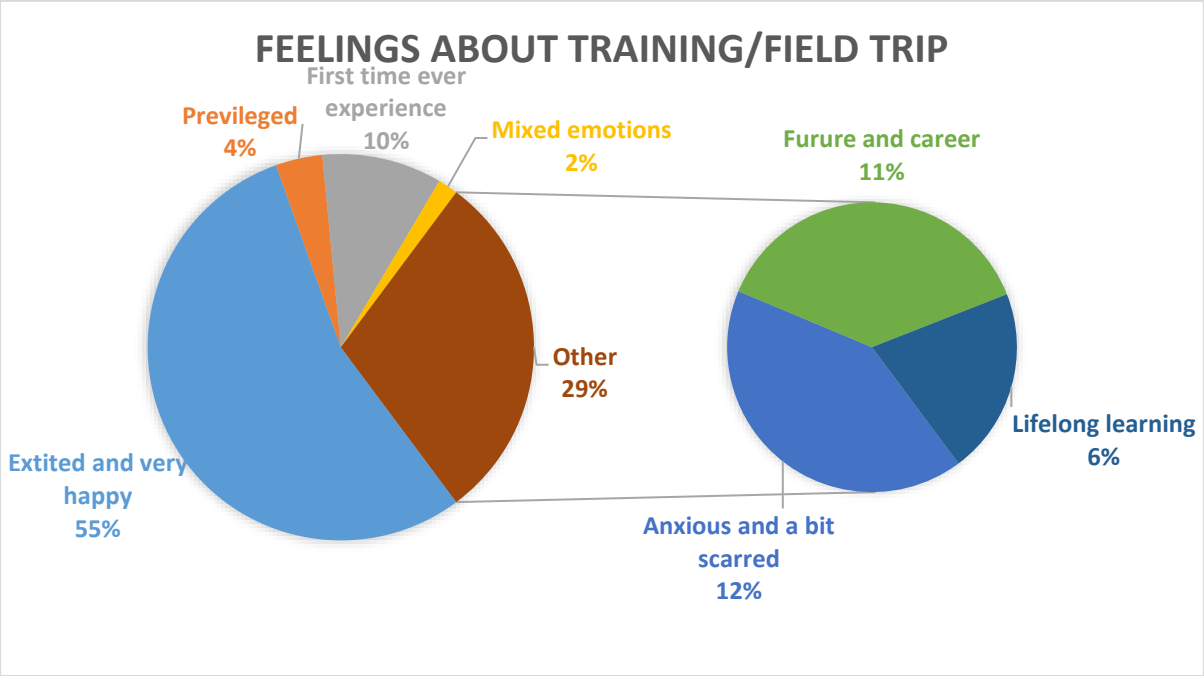

Figure 6: Feelings about the training/field trip

The students agreed to feeling this way (Figure 6) because this was their “first time experience and they had only seen this on TV”, this was a “rare opportunity” and what they have “always wished for”. Some responded they were excited because they were going “to learn about the beauty of the country”, one students pointed out that “it is not always I get to learn in such a manner, it's always just classroom learning”, another reciprocated that they couldn’t wait for the trip because they would have “physical/practical interaction with content learnt in the classroom”, numerous others asserted that “the experience will change the behavior and attitude about field guiding” and “offer career/job options”.

These students learning styles fit in perfectly with Kolb and Fry (1974) learning theory. It proved that they learn better when provided with practical applications of concepts and theories and “hands-on" experiences as McLeod (2013) also attests. This similarly supports what Mchunu and Hlengwa (2018) about varying teaching methods to cater for different learning styles. Figure 7 further draws out the students’ reasons for feeling this way (Figure 6).

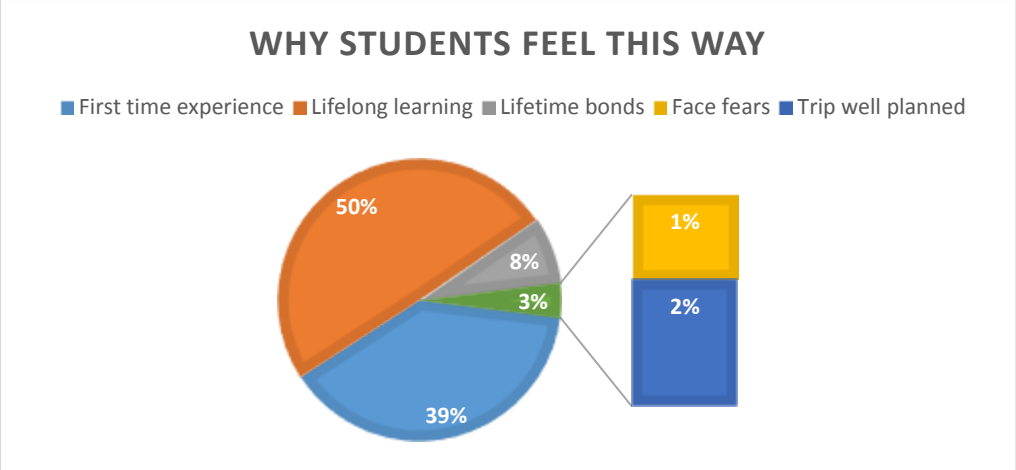

Figure 7: Why students feel this way (from Figure 6 above)

The students were accommodated at HIP's Hilltop camp. Majority of them shared 3 bedroom chalets sleeping six people each, a few stayed in rondavels shared by two people.

The facilitators for this nature training were from varying organisations in the Eco/tourism and environment/conservation fields. Their expertise included tourism/tour operating business managers/entrepreneurs, marine and terrestrial field guiding, trail tracking, professional hunting, bush survival skills, birding specialists, ethology/animal behavior specialists, astronomy, and nature interpretation. Ting and Cheng (2017) statement about student participation through the nature-based experiences, combined with professional guides in educating students has significant and positive effects as experienced in this particular field trip.

The activities that the students engaged in over the five-day period were: enjoying and connecting with nature, quiz/game evening, survival skills, history/culture of the Zulus and the San people, early morning game drives, sunset game drives, guided walks in Bid 5 game park, classroom sessions, astronomy/star gazing, briefings, situational awareness, interpreting tracks and signs, tracking animals, bird identification, track identification and interpretation, sign identification and interpretation, plant identification and interpretation, animal identification and interpretation, learning about prominent trees, storytelling, and animal/bird charades games. These activities gave students opportunities to develop competencies, and encouraged deep learning as Barton (2017) also agrees.

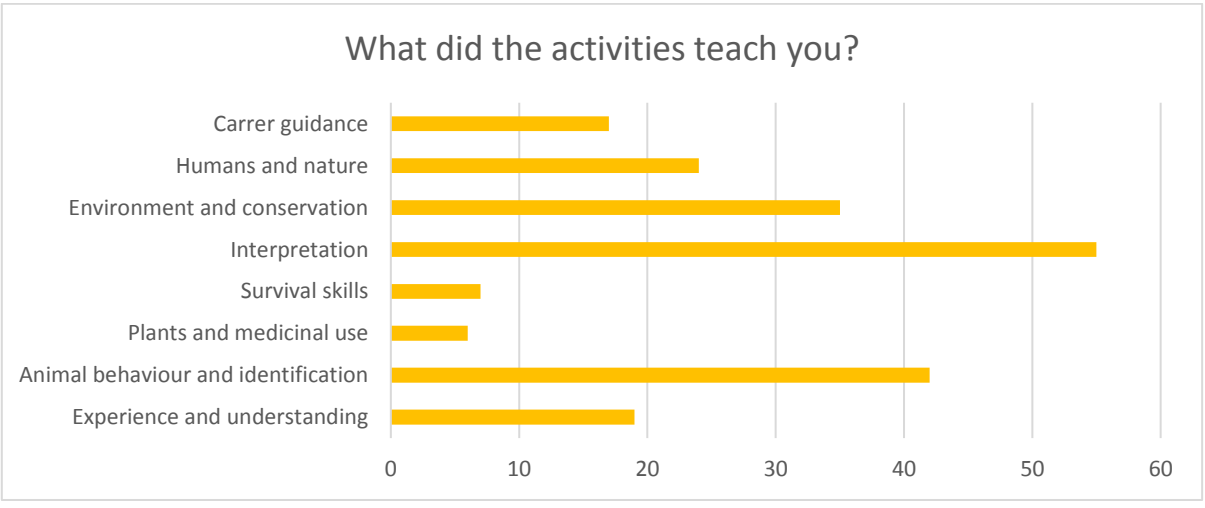

Figure 8: What the activities taught the students

The above skills in Figure 8 are closely reflective of Kolb and Fry's (1974) and Kolb's (1984) styles and cycles of learning. They support teaching that is student-centered and encourage lifelong learning (Mchunu and Hlengwa, 2018). The field trip and nature training was not in the confines of the classroom but in the field, full of "hands on" experiences and practical skills. Kent et al. (1997), Fluri and Trauger (2011), Sibthorp et al. (2011), Wright and Hodge (2012), Leydon and Turner (2013), Gilbert et al. (2013), Behrendt and Franklin (2014), Pierce and Widen (2016), and, Mchunu and Hlengwa (2018) highly esteem this style of learning. Figure 8 therefore highlights themes of skills and knowledge obtained by students during the nature training/field trip. These include 'experience and understanding', which consists of skills such as bird identification, animal tracking, and animal behavior.

The next theme is 'animal behavior and identification' which mainly dealt with how to approach dangerous game. The 'plants and medicinal use' theme had to do with a lot of indigenous practices when it comes to plants. In the theme 'environment and conservation', students highlighted the key role of different species in the environment, how nature connects with biodiversity, relationships between environment and its species, appreciating the beauty of and conserve nature and the overall environmental awareness and behavior. The other important theme was 'career guidance' which students cited importance of time management, various career paths, how to work with other people, teamwork, and being passionate about nature. Furthermore, 'history and culture' was viewed as vital.

The students concluded that the subjects: Interpretation, Wildlife and Biology, have the closest integration (Figure 9) with field guiding. They expressed how these just came alive for them and made so much sense. They gave the following reasons in how these subjects integrate, firstly, Interpretation: Interpretation is about guiding skills in the natural environments, it is about conducting tours, delivering information and facts, it requires good communication skills, storytelling and survival skills, tracking skills, delivering game drive briefings, interpreting and educating tourists about the history and culture of people, give understandable meaning to nature, and that interpretation is practical.

Wildlife is concerned with biodiversity, conservation creates space for wildlife guiding, information on plants and animals, nature conservation, animal management, biomes, history of the game reserves, conservation enables biodiversity persistence, animal behavior, impact of animals, wildlife conservation, astronomy, and bushwalks.

Biology is strong in ecology of the areas, information on plants and animals, human use of plants, relationship between humans and biodiversity, endemic species, symbiotic relationship between animals and plants, coexistence of animals, plant species and their useful properties, and environment and biotic species.

The rest of the other subjects like Management, Development, Marketing and Practice also showed integration with Filed guiding but this was not as predominant as the three subjects above.

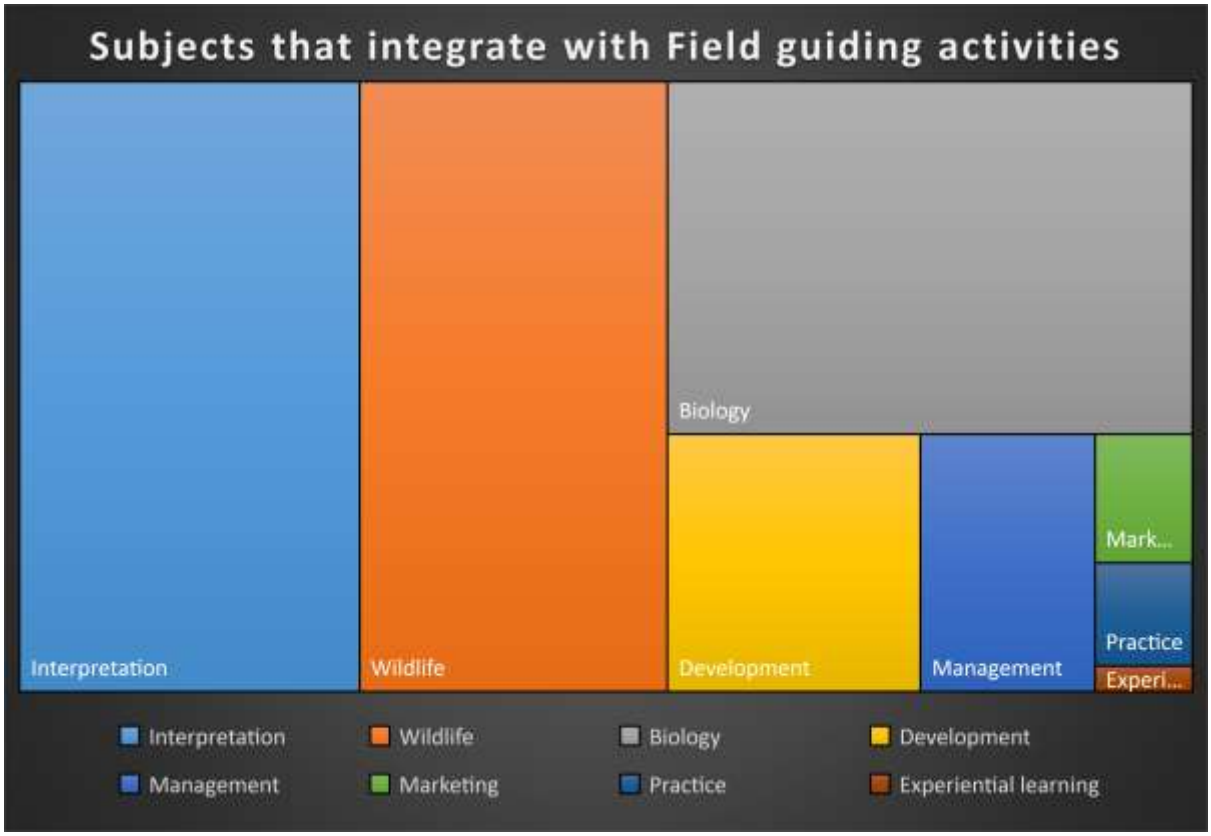

Figure 9: Subjects integrating with Field guiding

This integration highlights the need for a paradigm shift from 'instruction' to 'learning', from teacher focus to student focus (Saunders, 1997; Brandl 2002), it encourages critical thinking skills (Johnson et. al., 1998; McKeachie, 1999; Felder and Brent, 1999), and is what Kolb and Fry (1974) and Kolb (1984) reinforce, they elaborated that students learn by feeling and doing, by feeling and watching, by thinking and watching, and by thinking and doing.

In the first 'pre' phase, students were asked what their expectations were (Figure 3 above), and their responses were themed as: 'to see and learn about animals', to 'have fun and enjoy nature', to 'acquire new knowledge and understanding', to 'receive quality service', to 'be able to take care of guests', to 'choose a career path', and to 'gain practical experience'. They were further asked how the feel about the field trip and nature training (Figure 6 and Figure 7 above). They exclaimed how excited they were, mentioning how they would draw from this experience, options for careers and that the experience offers lifelong learning.

These expectations can be compared to the activities that the students engaged in during the training, which included: enjoying and connecting with nature, quiz/game evening, survival skills, history/culture of the Zulus and the San people, early morning game drives, sunset game drives, guided walks in Bid 5 game park, classroom sessions, astronomy/star gazing, briefings, situational awareness, interpreting tracks and signs, tracking animals, bird identification, track identification and interpretation, sign identification and interpretation, plant identification and interpretation, animal identification and interpretation, learning about prominent trees, storytelling, and animal/bird charades games.

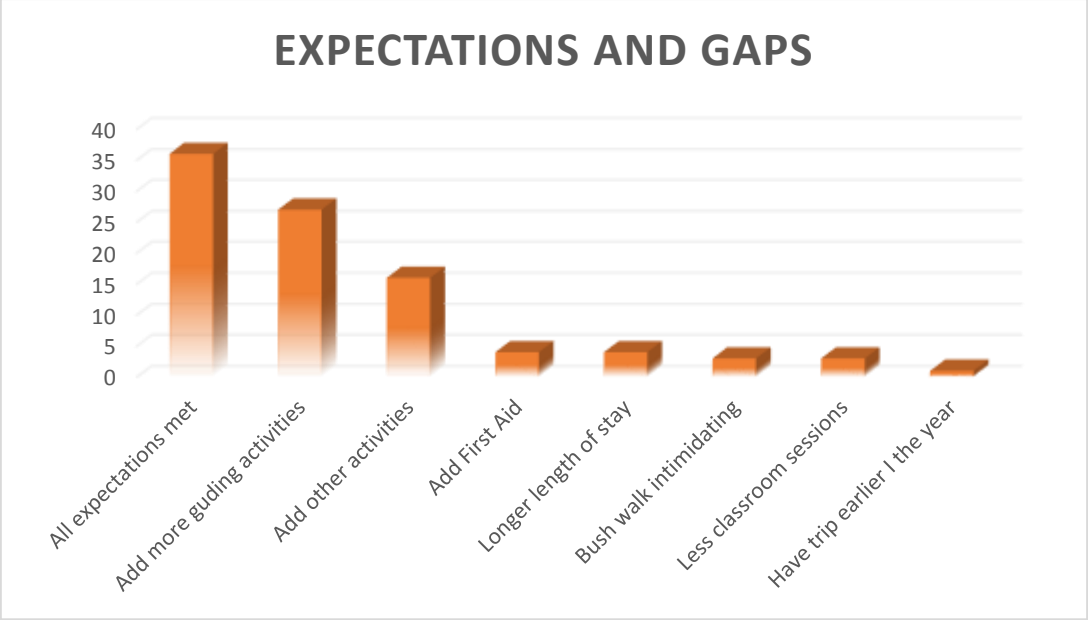

Figure 10: Expectations and Gaps

Figure 10 summarizes the students' evaluation of the field trip including gaps they felt should be closed for the next field trips and nature training. It answers the evaluation question: 'Is there anything else that you feel should have been/not have been part of this training?'

The students resonated that they would have like more guiding activities such as, birding walks; interpretation of plants; more time must be spent on astronomy/star gazing; have night game drives; more time on animal tracking; more game drives to increase more chances of everyone seeing the animals; more concentration on survival skills; storytelling daily over campfire; and camping in the bush for one night to practice survival skills. They proposed other activities such as: outdoor adventure activities and games; marine activities; marine animals and plant life; and elephant riding. A few felt that the training should have included first aid training. Others felt the trip was too short and suggested longer length of stay. A few were scared of doing the bush walk. One complained that "04:45am was too early for morning activities". It was also suggested that the number of classroom sessions be reduced. Further a call to have the trip earlier in the year was expressed.

Conclusion

This paper set out to scrutinize how the use of field trip experiences provide authentic and lifelong learning that prepare students for employability in the Ecotourism industry. The field trip covered both continuums (Kolb and Fry's, 1974) in terms of learning styles. Students observed and conceptualized, they experimented and experienced. This paper therefore supports the link between lifelong learning and employability (Avramenko, 2012; Santonino, 2017; Mchunu and Hlengwa, 2018), that field trips do assist in achieving lifelong learning and improve student chances for employability. One student concluded that "everything we did was relevant to our course, Ecotourism, and relevant to the tourism industry". Another was glad that, they had "physical interaction with content I have learnt". Also, one projected with excitement the "career options looking clearer" after participating in the field trip.

The field trip was satisfactory for the students, one of them expressed it this way, "all my expectations were met and even beyond". Another reflected "everything we participated on was good, amazing, exciting, and satisfying". The gaps that the students identified (Figure 10) had to do with students wanting 'more' of what they had already received rather than what they hadn't, with the exception of first aid training, which was not part of the field trip.

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