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Promoting youths' skills acquisition through experiential learning theory in vocational education and training in South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – There is a global concern about the effectiveness of vocational education and training (VET) programmes in developing job-related skills and competencies for real-world environments for disadvantaged and unemployed youths. Experiential learning (EL) is a major component of VET programmes. This article aims to examine the effects of facilitating VET through EL theory to promote youths' skills acquisition. The study looks at the effects of material resources on the use of experiential learning theory (ELT), the types of EL and the contribution of ELT to VET programmes.

Design/methodology/approach – The research design mainly entails a qualitative research design and research method to allow the researcher to view the reality as is experienced from the inside out by the trainees and training centre managers on important data for a thorough understanding. The study participants were 512 young trainees who completed different training courses from the VET programmes and 24 centre managers in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa.

Findings – The findings reveal that the use of ELT in VET programmes helped the trainees to gain real-world skills, hence contributing to their empowerment in terms of work experience and competence for their future employment. Based on the findings, the study concludes that ELT is an effective instrument to promote VET programmes for disadvantaged and unemployed youths.

Practical implications – The practical and social implications of the findings are that, while disadvantaged youths cannot access and afford higher education, public and private sectors can remedy their situation by providing non-school-based technical and vocational training to help such youths enter the labour market. The findings will motivate the providers of skills development for unemployed youths to use ELT in designing course curricula, planning resources and directing teaching-learning approaches to help trainees to acquire skills and competencies to perform tasks close to real-world situations.

Social implications – The socio-economic implication of the article is that skills development plays an important role in poverty reduction. Investing in the skills development of citizens is vital to raise the incomes of poor groups and to reduce poverty (ILO, 2018). Although the causes of unemployment have also to do with economic factors in a country, skills development is an essential ingredient in developing capacities for labour market entry and increased income generation of a vulnerable group of people.

Originality/value – The article is significant because the study provides new insights into the use of ELT in VET programmes to improve their effectiveness in developing job-related skills and competencies for real-world environments for disadvantaged and unemployed youths. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by establishing a solid base for the evidence-informed practice of the effects of facilitating the VET programme through ELT to promote skills acquisition for the employment of unemployed and disadvantaged youths.

Keywords Experiential learning, Vocational education and training, Youth unemployment, Competence and skills, Skills development and mismatch, Technical and vocational education and training
Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Attracting young people to enrol in different forms of vocational education and training (VET) programmes has been linked to addressing their needs to enable their participation in the socio-economic life in their countries. The VET system has been an important instrument to integrate young people – specifically vulnerable or disadvantaged – into the labour market (Kersh and Huegler, 2019). In this regard, VET has the role of equipping young people with employable skills [1] (Papier, 2016) to succeed in the labour market. Nevertheless, the high rate of youth [2] unemployment (18–35 years old) has forced the providers of VET to use teaching and learning approaches that will help students to acquire real-world skills for immediate employment after graduating (Lantu *et al.*, 2022; Papier, 2016). So, to equip young people with real-world skills, the implementation of VET should focus on hands-on training with appropriate learning approaches.

To ensure that VET programmes help young people gain the required knowledge and skills for their future workplace, learning should occur in real-life and interactive environments. In this connection, experiential learning (EL) is a main ingredient of VET programmes. EL is an important contributor to empowering students with real-world skills for future employment (Huang and Jiang, 2021; Lantu *et al.*, 2022). This article examines the effects of facilitating VET through experiential learning theory (ELT) to promote youths' skills acquisition. It focusses on the unemployed and disadvantaged [3] youths who enrolled on non-school-based VET programmes.

Background of the study

The United Nations General Assembly recognised technical and VET programmes as significant instruments amongst others to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The operational target 4.4 of SDGs reads that, “By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship” (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). However, Milana *et al.* (2017) argue that the target lacks details about the learning approaches to achieve the technical and vocational skills for wage employment or entrepreneurship. In other words, target 4.4 concerns the outcomes in terms of skills acquisition leading to wage or self-employment of the young trainees. In a country, the providers of technical and vocational training programmes have a responsibility to use relevant learning methods to help unemployed youths to acquire employability skills.

Though skills shortages and skills mismatches are not new in the academic debates, their severity has increased in some countries along with the economic growth in recent years. For instance, many Asian countries have been suffering from a shortage of skilled workers (United Nations, 2020). In countries where youth unemployment is high due to the lack of employability skills and skills mismatch, VET programmes and skills development are used as a solution to the problem. The reason is that the training delivery and learning approaches are practice-oriented to develop job-related skills and directed to the real world of work (Eicker *et al.*, 2016; Lolwana, 2016). The Asian Development Bank (2009, p. 1) defines skills development as “the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the world of work - the practical competencies, know-how, and attitudes necessary to perform a trade or occupation in the labour market”. This definition suggests that VET is the source of skills acquisition.

In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, acquiring employable skills can reduce unemployment and poverty. Sub-Saharan African countries face challenges of youth unemployment due to economic factors and the lack of job-related skills enabling individuals to become employed in the informal sector at a low level (ILO, 2020; Eicker *et al.*, 2016). Skills development is a significant instrument for unemployed young people willing to enter the informal economy and raise their productivity and incomes (Akoojee, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

However, the delivery of skills development necessitates teaching and learning approaches that develop job-related skills and competencies for the real world of the workplace.

This article is part of a research project on non-school-based VET programmes offered to unemployed and disadvantaged youths in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, South Africa. According to the national and provincial labour market ([Statistics South Africa \[Stats SA\], 2021](#)), in KZN province, the unemployment rate amongst youth (15–34 years) is 55% compared to 21.5% amongst adults (35–64 years). The youth unemployment rate of KZN province is 48.7% ([Statistics South Africa \[Stats SA\], 2021](#)). In this connection, the non-school-based VET programmes consist of providing short courses to unemployed and disadvantaged youths to allow them to find jobs at entry skills levels. It is important to note that the programmes are accredited by the Sectoral Education and Training Authority (SETA), regulated by the Department of Higher Education and Training of South Africa.

Problem statement and study objectives

There is a global concern about the effectiveness of VET programmes in developing job-related skills and competencies for real-world environments for disadvantaged and unemployed youths. Studies point to the lack of practice of the skills in the form of school-based and workplace-based learning to help students gain experience ([Abdullah *et al.*, 2019](#); [Lolwana, 2016](#)). Some studies linked the lack of practical activities to the low-quality instructional materials in classrooms, lack of equipment in the workshops for carrying out practical work and involvement of external companies in workplace learning ([Bratti *et al.*, 2022](#); [Da Costa, 2016](#); [Lolwana, 2016](#)). As an element of ELT, practice means that students should try to improve skills by observing what they are doing wrong and creating strategies to do better, hence gaining skills. Therefore, this article examines the effects of facilitating VET through EL theory to promote youths' skills acquisition.

The objectives of this article are to determine:

- (1) The effects of material resources on the facilitation of VET through an EL approach for skills acquisition.
- (2) The types of school-based and workplace-based EL approaches used to help trainees practice skills.
- (3) The extent to which EL contributed to empowering trainees with real-world skills for future employment.

The article is significant because it provides new insights into the use of ELT in VET programmes to improve their effectiveness in developing job-related skills and competencies for real-world environments for disadvantaged and unemployed youths. The findings will motivate the providers of skills development for unemployed youths to use ELT in designing course curricula, planning resources and directing teaching-learning approaches to help trainees acquire skills and competencies to perform tasks close to real-work situations.

Experiential learning theory as a theoretical framework

The article utilises ELT to examine VET programmes for youths' skills acquisition. EL is learning by being involved in experience. [Kolb \(1984, p. 41\)](#) defines EL as a learning method that is based on "learning by doing, experiencing and reflecting". [Kolb \(1984, p. 41\)](#) further notes that ELT perceives learning as "the process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience". So, EL is a collection of teaching-learning strategies that empower students to become actively involved in practical activities through doing. The strategies

entail helping students to connect the learning from the real-world situation by applying the ideas, concepts and theories to the interactive setting (Greene, 2011). In connection with the present study, the argument is that by participating in real-life activities during skills development, young people can transform the knowledge learnt from the classroom and training manuals into their understanding.

The core characteristic of skills development is learning by doing, experiencing and reflecting. For the skills acquisition to happen, learning must be characterised by learning by doing or hands-on learning. Kolb (1984) developed the “experiential learning cycle” with four stages of learning which are relevant to the process of skills development. All four stages are important for active learning to happen, though there is no order for the starting of the stage of the cycle (Herod, 2012). Figure 1 presents four stages of ELT according to Kolb (1984, p. 41).

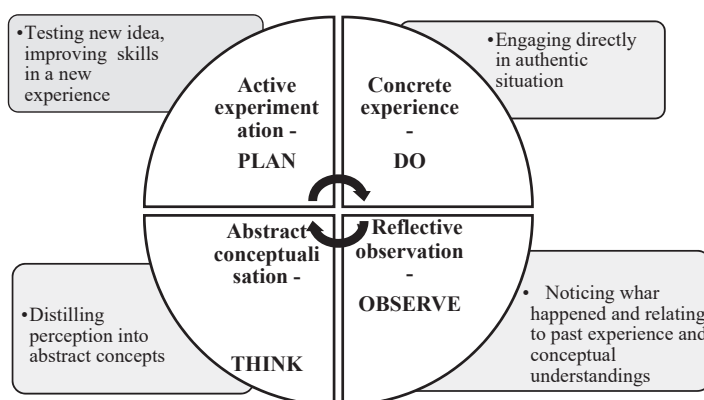
The Cycle of Experiential Learning (Figure 1) demonstrates that learning is a continuous process and does not stop after achieving outcomes. Dewey (in Kolb and Kolb, 2011, p. 43) argues that “to improve learning in education, the focus should be on engaging students in a process that improves their learning abilities”. Each stage of the EL Cycle is briefly explained below.

Concrete experience (CE): This stage entails exposing students to experience tangible matters. The stage consists of motivating students to participate in active learning instead of passively receiving information from a facilitator (Herod, 2012; Kolb, 1984). To acquire new knowledge and skills, they participate in real-life activities or actions while the facilitator or practical mentors guide them in the process of gaining concrete experience.

Reflective observation (RO): After the involvement in concrete experience, during this stage, students reflect on the experience to develop new skills or new ways of thinking (Kolb, 1984). The stage comprises thinking critically about the experience. The student thoroughly reflects on that experience (Kolb et al., 1999) by noticing what happened and relating to experience and conceptual understandings.

Abstract conceptualisation (AC): During this stage, students connect the experience to the theory or concepts learnt from textbooks or in the classroom (Kolb et al., 1999). The task is for the student to conceptualise a theory from what he/she observed during the experience.

Active experimentation (AE): This stage consists of applying the new knowledge and skills in real-life situations and new workplace conditions (Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 1999). To accomplish this stage, the student will test a theory or plan for an upcoming experience



Source(s): Figure courtesy of Kolb (1984)

Figure 1.
Kolb's cycle of
experiential learning

(Villarroel *et al.*, 2020). This means the focus is on the practical application and implication of the experience to the “ground” or reality. After explaining the stage of the EL Cycle, the next section briefly selected types of EL mostly used in skills development.

Types of experiential learning

By using EL, facilitators or lecturers enable students to participate in real-life activities to achieve their learning needs. In the context of VET, EL may take the forms of school-based learning and workplace-based learning (structured work experience). Some EL approaches that may occur in school or classroom are cooperative learning, role-playing, game-based learning, case-based learning, simulations, presentations, types of small-group work and workshop practicums (Huang and Jiang, 2021; Perini *et al.*, 2018). Based on the lesson objectives and outcomes, the lecturer uses a relevant type of EL approach. School-based (classroom-based) EL is not passive, but rather active and practical resulting in helping students to understand the content of knowledge and apply it in the world of work (Huang and Jiang, 2021; Villarroel *et al.*, 2020). In the context of VET programmes, school-based experiential approaches contribute to helping students to participate in practical activities by applying the theoretical knowledge learnt from textbooks to their real-life situations.

Workplace-based (field-based) learning helps students to familiarise themselves with the world of work within their field of skills training programme. In the context of this article, the examples of workplace-based learning are on-the-job training, workplace learning, internships, cooperative education, fieldwork, practicums, service-learning, project-based learning, team-based learning, situated learning and place-based learning (O’Shea, 2014). These types of EL have been used as a solution to the skills mismatch between skills development programmes and industries. In the same vein, workplace-based learning approaches foster the competencies and abilities of students to perform tasks in their future workplaces (Sam and Van der Sijde, 2014). Therefore, the argument from the above scholars suggests that workplace-based learning has a huge contribution to VET programmes because it helps students acquire job-related skills in the context in which they will be utilised in the workplace. Furthermore, it stresses the significant role that experience contributes to learning by doing.

The contribution of ELT to vocational education and training programmes

EL is a major component of skills development programmes. Butler *et al.* (2019) describe this link by stating that EL enables students to participate in a tangible experience, reproduce that experience and other evidence, cultivate theories in line with experiences and apply the acquired skills in a new work situation. A study conducted by Abdullah *et al.* (2019) in the context of Malesia revealed that the use of EL in VET empowered students to acquire skills. The results further showed that “learning outcomes have a practical influence on the student’s applying skills in a new environment” (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019, p. 8). These findings suggest that the application of ELT in VET yields good results in the process and outcome of learning, which are real-world skills.

In the context of skills development for youths, Lantu *et al.* (2022) assessed the role of ELT in improving entrepreneurial training programmes. The findings showed that the application of EL improved the effectiveness of the entrepreneurial training programmes by helping the students to start owning small businesses. EL improved the effectiveness of entrepreneurial skills training because the students experienced working in a real business setting (Lantu *et al.*, 2022). The students admitted that the programme effectively improved their entrepreneurial skills to start their businesses. The study concludes that the skills development programme also “prepared the students to enter the workplace and produce qualified human capital to meet industry needs” (Lantu *et al.*, 2022, p. 122).

In the context of Sweden, [Gustavsson and Thunqvist \(2019\)](#) examined the role that ELT plays in VET in enabling students to utilise skills and knowledge to work. The findings revealed that during the training in the school workshops, the students faced content and work methods comprising contextualised “real-life” tasks. This is because the training was characterised by “intense interaction between the students and experienced vocational teachers, tools, and machines” ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, 2019, p. 90](#)). Workplace-based learning allowed students to practice skills in workplace conditions under the supervision of experienced teachers or mentors who helped them to apply skills in the real workplace and gain specific industrial experience ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, 2019](#)). The study concludes that the school-based environments of learning prepare the students for entrance into the workplaces, while workplace-based conditions “provide students with the opportunity to obtain specific industry knowledge and to engage in interactions in the workplace” ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, 2019, p. 997](#)).

Effects of material resources on the use of experiential learning theory

The above findings from [Gustavsson and Thunqvist \(2019\)](#) demonstrate that the availability of material resources has an impact on the application of ELT. In this context of Sweden, training equipment facilitates a learning interaction between the students and tools, machines and teachers ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, 2019](#)). The study reveals that facilities and equipment constituted enabling factors for students to gain work experience and specific industrial “know-how” during workplace-based learning ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, p. 92](#)). In other words, the existence of instructional equipment inside and outside schools or workshops helps teachers to use EL approaches.

However, other studies on the topic highlight some challenges facing institutions in implementing VET programmes through ELT ([Da Costa, 2016](#); [Lolwana, 2016](#); [Rudhumbu, 2021](#)). For instance, in Middle East countries, the [United Nations \(2020\)](#) noted two major challenges hindering the use of EL approaches, namely, an insufficient supply of equipment at training institutions (workshops, instructional tools and machines) and linkage with external stakeholders who could help students with workplace-based learning. The lack of material resources negatively impacted the use of EL methods to help the student to acquire skills and competencies. In the same Middle East countries, [UNICEF and International Labour Organisation \(2016\)](#) pointed out that the VET curricula in colleges were not effectively implemented due to the two challenges mentioned above. Very few colleges used EL approaches such as practicums, on-the-job training, situated learning, place-based learning, and workplace learning.

The insufficiency of training facilities and material resources are key challenges in promoting youths' skills acquisition through ELT in VET programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa ([Lolwana, 2016](#); [Da Costa, 2016](#)). The findings from a study conducted by [Rudhumbu \(2021\)](#) revealed that the training courses were mostly delivered by using lecturer-centred teaching strategies due to the lack of material resources, hence negatively impacting the use of ELT in VET programmes. In other words, there was very little use of innovative EL strategies.

Research methodology

The present article is qualitative in nature and research design mainly entails a qualitative research design and research method ([Fouché and Bartley, 2011](#); [Laverty, 2016](#); [Nieuwenhuis, 2012](#)) to allow the researcher to view the reality as is experienced from the inside out by the trainees and training centre managers on an important data for a thorough understanding. The reason for using qualitative research design is that the characteristic of ELT as the theoretical framework and the sources of the data required the use of a qualitative approach ([Creswell, 2014](#); [Ponce and Pagán-Maldonado, 2015](#)). However, the study used quantitative

research design as complementary to obtain numeric data on selected information such as the biographic profile of the trainees, training courses and trainees' views on material resources. Another reason was to make a comparison across these variables (Creswell, 2014; Rahman, 2017).

Participants and sampling method

The study participants were 512 young trainees who completed different training courses from the VET programmes and 24 centre managers in the KwaZulu-Natal province. These participants filled in the survey questionnaires for the quantitative component of the study. For the qualitative component of the study, the researcher selected 10 participants from the 512 young trainees for one-on-one interviews. He also selected seven participants from 24 centre managers for one-on-one interviews.

The above-mentioned research participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Following the view of Kumar (2011, p. 207), the researcher only selected "participants who are relevant to the topic, are best positioned to provide the needed information for the study and are willing to share it with the researcher". The researcher selected respondents more carefully to obtain more valid and reliable information (Zohrabi, 2013). So, a participant was selected if he/she met the selection criteria. For example, a young trainee was selected based on the following criteria:

- (1) Having completed the technical and vocational training programmes for youths;
- (2) Being wage or self-employed or unemployed;
- (3) Being 18–35 years old and willing to participate in the study.

Data collection and analysis

The researcher developed the data collection tools using a literature review, theoretical framework and research objectives. Firstly, for qualitative data collection methods, the researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 10 trainees to get their views on their experiences of teaching and learning approaches. He also interviewed seven centre managers to obtain detailed information on the facilitation method of their specific VET programmes to determine the elements of ELT to promote youths' skills acquisition. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants (Creswell, 2014; Lavery, 2016).

Secondly, in the context of the qualitative research method, the study also used site observations at the training centres and in the workshops to obtain reliable data for the research objectives. Field observations consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. During this type of data collection process, the researcher observed the trainees' practical activities in the workshops, and workplaces and examined the facilitation methods.

Thirdly, for quantitative data collection, the researcher used self-completion questionnaires. A survey questionnaire was a suitable method for this type of study because it allowed the researcher to collect data and get relevant answers for a specific set of questions (Creswell, 2014; Rahman, 2017). Two types of questionnaires were administered respectively to young trainees and training centre managers (Creswell, 2014). The survey questionnaires involved asking them about their opinions on the availability of material resources and their impact on facilitation methods and skills acquisition, and opinions about classroom-based and field-based learning approaches. The survey questionnaires entailed closed-ended questions in terms of binary with "yes or no" responses and multiple-choice questions which allowed the respondents to tick all answers that apply. Other questions contained a statement and a set of four categories: "strongly agree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", and "strongly disagree".

The analysis of qualitative data followed the principles of thematic analysis. The codes and themes allowed the researcher to understand the raw data by putting names into descriptions and interpretations. The researcher used Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) software to analyse the quantitative data. The analysis entailed into three categories, which are descriptive, associative and causative (Fouché and Bartley, 2011; Nieuwenhuis, 2012).

Ethical considerations

The researcher observed the principles of research ethics before and during the data collection process. An ethical approval letter was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the university prior to data collection.

Findings

Biographic profile of the trainees and the skills training courses studied

As mentioned in the introduction, the VET programmes targeted unemployed and disadvantaged young people who completed grade 12 without employability skills and could not secure admission at universities or TVET colleges because of low marks and the socio-economic conditions of their families. Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the biographic profile of the trainees and skills training courses studied.

Variables		Total sample N = 512		Gender			
				Male		Female	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Age cohort of trainees	18–24 years	65	12.7	20	3.9	45	8.8
	25–30 years	293	57.2	153	29.9	140	27.3
	31–35 years	84	16.4	65	12.7	19	3.7
	36–40 years	61	12	26	5	35	6.8
	41–45 years	9	1.8	1	0.2	8	1.6
	<i>Total</i>	<i>512</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>265</i>	<i>51.8</i>	<i>247</i>	<i>48.2</i>
Highest level of trainee's formal schooling	Grade 10	4	0.8	1	0.2	3	0.8
	Grade 11	15	2.9	1	0.2	15	2.7
	Matric Certificate (grade 12)	491	95.9	262	51.2	229	44.7
	Training college certificate	1	0.2	–	–	1	0.2
	Training college diploma	1	0.2	–	–	1	0.2
Employment status of the trainees before VET	Unemployed	395	77.2	197	38.5	198	38.7
	Part-time job	78	15.2	53	10.4	25	4.9
	Self-employed	3	0.6	1	0.2	2	0.4
	Housewife	18	3.5	5	1	13	2.5
	Child minder	6	1.2	4	0.8	2	0.4
	Grade 12 learner	8	1.6	0.8	4	4	0.8
	Other	4	0.8	1	0.2	3	0.6
Vocational training course	Construction and Carpentry	32	6.2	18	3.5	14	2.7
	ICT	89	17.4	40	7.8	48	9.4
	SMME	24	4.7	17	3.3	7	1.4
	Lifeguard skills	55	11.3	–	–	55	10.8
	Early child development	58	11.3	–	–	58	11.3
	Fire fighter	48	9.4	24	4.7	24	4.7
	Boilermaker and welding	50	9.8	23	4.5	27	5.3
	Upholstery	47	9.2	42	8.2	5	1
	Professional driving	58	11.3	50	9.8	8	1.6
	Motor mechanics	51	10	51	10	–	–

Source(s): Table by author

Table 1.
Biographic profile of
the trainees and the
skills training courses
studied

Table 1 reveals that there is a slight difference between the gender of the young trainee as male trainees entail 51.8% and females were 48.2%. This means that the VET providers took into consideration gender balance when admitting candidates to the programmes. The analysis of the age cohort shows that more than half (57.2%) of the trainees were between 25 and 30 years old. In this case, male trainees comprised 29.9% while females comprised 27.3%. The age range of 18–24 years constitutes 12.7% and for 31–35 years formed 16.4%. These findings imply that the vast majority of participants (86.3%) in VET programmes were young people between 18 and 35 years old. In addition, most of the male and female trainees (95.9%) equally completed secondary education with a Grade 12 certificate (General Certificate of Education) as the highest level of formal schooling.

It is interesting to know the employment status of the trainees before the interventions of skills development to establish the impact of the skills development programmes. Table 1 above reveals that most of the trainees (77.2%) were unemployed, and there is an almost equal distribution between unemployed males (38.5%) and females (38.7%). Only 15.2% of participants had part-time jobs before enrolling on the VET programmes. The findings suggest that their unemployment status motivated them to acquire job-related skills for jobs either in the formal or informal sector. As Table 1 shows, the training courses entailed construction, plastering, carpentry, end-user computer (ICT), small medium and micro-enterprises, lifeguard skills, firefighter, upholstery, Early Child Development, motor mechanics, boilermaker, welding and fitter.

The effects of material resources on the facilitation of VET through EL approaches

As discussed in the literature review section, material resources and facilities for conducting practical work create conducive factors for using EL in VET programmes. This sub-section analyses trainees' views on the availability of instructional aids and materials in classrooms, workshop equipment and facilities for conducting practical work. In the survey questionnaire, young trainees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement regarding the availability of material resources at their respective training centres. Table 2 presents trainees' views on instructional aids, equipment and facilities.

The analysis of responses in Table 2 shows that most trainees disagreed or strongly disagreed that their training centres had low-quality instructional aids and materials in classrooms (77.3%) and lacked the equipment required for practical work (83.7%). Most of them also disagreed or strongly disagreed that their respective centres had low-quality materials and equipment in the workshop (96.4%) and lacked facilities for carrying out practical work (93.1%). However, it is significant to note a few numbers of trainees who agreed with the statements (0.2%) and 2%, 3.1% and 4.5% of trainees who remained neutral

Table 2.
Trainees' views on instructional aids, equipment and facilities

Material resources (N = 512)	Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
There are low-quality instructional aids and materials in classrooms	1	0.2	105	20.5	10	2	295	57.6	101	19.7
There is a lack of equipment required for practical work	1	0.2	66	12.9	16	3.1	332	64.8	97	18.9
There are low-quality materials and equipment in the workshop	1	0.2	13	2.5	4	0.8	397	77.5	97	18.9
There is a lack of facilities for carrying out practical work	1	0.2	10	2	32	4.5	378	73.8	99	19.3

Source(s): Table by author

on the statements. Their responses infer that some centres did not have sufficient materials and equipment for classroom sessions and workshops. Nevertheless, most VET centres had sufficient instructional aids and materials for classroom-based EL. In addition, they had enough equipment in the workshop required for practical work, which facilitated the use of EL approaches. The availability of material resources suggests that it helped trainees to go through the stages of the ELT cycle (see Figure 1 – CE, RO, AC and AE) and create knowledge through the interaction between trainees, equipment, machines and trainers inside and outside schools or workshops.

During one-on-one interviews, trainees confirmed the above results presented in Table 2. Referring to her training centre, a trainee (L401) reported the availability of equipment required for practical work as follows:

The training programme was more practical than theoretical. Relevant materials were in our classroom and workshop for simulation activities. Yes, there were sufficient tools given to every trainee to facilitate the practical training sessions.

Another trainee (M161) who studied diesel mechanics said:

I cannot complain about instructional materials and workshops. There were new equipment and tools for mechanical training like what I am using here in this company. It was a fair preparation for me because all that I learnt at my training centre came into practice in the real world of work.

During site observation in each training centre, the researcher was given access to view the quality instructional aids and materials in classrooms, equipment in the workshop and facilities for carrying out practical work. The analysis of the above quotes and data from site observations suggests that the existence of material resources played a significant role in helping the trainees to engage directly in the authentic situation (Concrete experience). Data from both interviews and site observations indicate that school-based learning (whether in classrooms or workshops) was effective due to a sufficient supply of materials and equipment like those found in the workplace. The inference from the above findings is that material resources had effects on the facilitation of VET through EL approaches because they enabled trainees to acquire knowledge and skills as their learning experience involved tangible matters.

Types of school-based and workplace-based experiential learning used for skills acquisition

This sub-section focuses on examining the school-based and workplace-based learning that prepared the trainees for a career in the world of work. The findings presented in this sub-section were collected from trainees and centre managers using semi-structured interviews, including workshop observations. The first trainee (M162) reported his learning experience by saying:

We were spending more hours in the workshops than in classrooms. That is where I gained a lot of experience. Yes, the practice of technical skills during training at my training centre and workplace prepared me for the world of work in my future job.

A second trainee (Prof. 04) reported as follows:

Theoretical training in the classroom was very relevant because it focussed on job activities in the workplace. The practical component of the skills training was done in a transport company of the trucks. The company's mentors provided us with practical training in a real-world environment.

A third trainee who studied ICT (IT 202) explained her training experience as follows:

My work at this clinic is to capture patient data in the computer system. Our training was much more practical and orientated to our future jobs to capture data in the clinic.

A fourth trainee (L402) also described the training approach used by her VET centre by saying:

While on the skills training programme, we became automatically interns by signing an internship contract with the municipality. The mechanism was that the vocational training itself was like an internship programme and the trainees were considered as interns for two years. After the internship programme, we were considered to have two years of work experience in the industry.

The analysis of these four quotes reveals that the VET centres used different types of EL to help trainees acquire skills. They range from school-related to workplace-related learning approaches. During classroom observation, the researcher noted that trainees were learning through simulations, small-group work and workshop practicums. Further analysis is presented in the next paragraphs together with centre managers' responses. Interview responses from centre managers focus on workplace-based learning to foster the effectiveness of VET programmes.

During the interview, an EMA3 manager described the role of partner companies and local businesses in promoting youths' skills acquisition through EL by saying:

Our vocational training programmes are run as work-based training to facilitate young people getting jobs after graduating. That is why we have signed partnerships with local stakeholders who are also prospective employers. We designed together curricula, and they agree to help trainees participate in work-based learning in their companies by providing mentorship and temporary employment to the trainees during the period of the training.

A second EMA 2 manager explained the EL process as follows:

Our partnership with local companies such as maritime companies and others fostered the effectiveness of the skills training programmes. We place trainees in partner companies for work-based training. The partner companies provide workplace learning and mentorship to the trainees.

A third training manager (M 701/1) whose company also provides work-based learning said:

Our company provides both theoretical and work-based training. We also work in partnership with other companies dealing with the same skills. In case we do not have enough space for work-placement learning, we refer the trainees to other companies.

The analysis of the above quotes from trainees and managers suggests that the methods of facilitating courses focussed more on practical than theoretical components of VET. There was a strong integration between school-based learning and workplace-based learning in the real world of work. Data from interviews and site observations confirmed that most of the EL process happened in the workshops and companies where trainees were placed to gain work experience. As quotes above indicate, partnerships with companies and local businesses facilitated the implementation of VET through EL by providing proper mentorship and coaching during in-service training or micro-placement.

The types of school-based learning (including classroom-based) were simulations, small-group work and workshop practicums. The workplace-based learning consisted of internships, on-the-job training, micro-placement and practicums in companies. Both types of EL helped the trainees acquire skills and knowledge in their respective training courses. These findings correspond to the stages of *concrete experience (CE)* and *reflective observation (RO)* of ELT where the learning process was active by involving tangible matters. These findings also correspond to the stage of *abstract conceptualisation (AC)* where trainees had enough time to link the experience to the theory or concepts learnt in the classroom.

The contribution of experiential learning in empowering trainees with real-world skills

To determine the contribution of EL in improving skills acquisition, the trainees were asked to explain how the practice of skills during school-based and workplace-based learning prepared them for their future employment. The first participant (L403) explained his view as follows:

Yes, the practice of skills at my training centre prepared me for the world of work. Our training in ICT concerned data capturing in hospitals or health clinics. As I am working in this health clinic, the tasks are easy for me because our skills training was more practical and linked to our future jobs in data capturing.

A second participant (Prof. 06) explained her experience by saying:

During our skills training, I learnt practical things related to our future jobs. Most training sessions happened in the workshops and workplaces where I gained much experience. Yes, the training prepared me to obtain this job.

A third trainee (M152) who studied auto mechanical said:

In this job, I am using all the technical skills and knowledge I gained from my training centre. I was employed by this company after passing my trade test. My skills training enabled me to secure this position as a qualified auto mechanic.

The analysis of the above quotes suggests that EL contributed to the empowerment of trainees with real-world skills. As it is highlighted in the interview quotes, the use of EL approaches allowed trainers to link training tasks to industries or the workplace. Without generalising, the evidence from the quotes indicates that trainees acquired skills and abilities required in their future employment. The responses from the trainees suggest that the training centre managers and trainers had a clear understanding of the relevant skills required in the labour market. The evidence from the quotes further demonstrates that there is a close match between skills supply and skills demand. Furthermore, responses from the managers (EMA2, EMA3 and M701/1 above) suggest the VET centres conducted training needs assessment together with external stakeholders to determine the types of skills needed in the labour market.

Discussions of findings

The availability of material resources for school-based learning helped trainees to go through the stages of the ELT cycle and create knowledge. These findings concur with those in [Gustavsson and Thunqvist's \(2019\)](#) study in Sweden where the facilities and equipment enabled students to gain work experience. However, in the context of Africa, studies conducted by [Papier \(2016\)](#) and [Rudhumbu \(2021\)](#) reveal that the lack of materials, and equipment in the workshops was the main challenge to implement EL in the VET colleges. The present findings suggest that school-based learning (whether in classrooms or workshops) was effective in helping trainees gain skills because of a sufficient supply of materials and equipment like those found in the workplace.

The use of a type of school-based or workplace-based EL to help trainees acquire practical skills depended on the training course a trainee studied and its purpose. The types of school-based learning were simulations, small-group work and workshop practicums. As a result, this practice-oriented method (whether in classrooms or workshops) might have empowered the trainees to gain the skills and abilities required in the labour market ([Gustavsson and Thunqvist, 2019](#)). The present findings differ from those reported in the previous studies on VET ([Bratti et.al. 2022](#); [Da Costa, 2016](#); [Lolwana, 2016](#)) that the skills training programmes were not effective because the learning approaches were theory-based.

However, in the present study, the learning process was active by involving tangible matters in the workshops and on projects (concrete experience) also involving reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation.

Depending on the training course, workplace-based learning entailed internships, on-the-job training micro-placement and practicums in companies. These types of EL helped the trainees acquire skills and knowledge in their respective training courses. The findings suggest that the types of EL helped the trainees to develop their abilities to apply the acquired skills and knowledge in real-world conditions (Huang and Jiang, 2021). During workplace-based learning, the trainees familiarised themselves with the career within their field of training. As found in other studies (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019; Sam and Van der Sijde, 2014), workplace-based learning approaches developed the skills and abilities of the trainees to perform tasks in their future workplaces. Based on the findings above, these types of EL not only enable trainees to acquire job-related skills but also facilitate a smooth transition from school to employment.

Trainees' views suggest that EL contributed to their empowerment in terms of real-world skills for future employment. The workplace-based learning under the guidance of experienced mentors was highly important because it helped them to gain specific real-world skills. These findings support the argument of Akoojee (2019) and Drewery *et al.* (2020) that learning approaches using workshops, on-the-job training and workplace-based learning contribute to the acquisition of job-related skills. Similarly, a study by Abdullah *et al.* (2019) proved that the use of ELT in VET programmes enabled trainees to gain marketability for their income-generating.

Conclusions

EL is a major component of skills development programmes. This article attempts to examine the effects of facilitating VET through EL theory to promote youths' skills acquisition. Firstly, the availability of material resources for school-based learning enhanced the use of EL as trainees were able to acquire knowledge and skills through their involvement in tangible matters. Secondly, there was a strong integration between school-based learning and workplace-based learning in the real world of work. The EL process mostly occurred in the workshops and companies where trainees were placed to gain work experience.

Thirdly, the use of ELT in VET programmes helped the trainees to gain real-world skills, hence contributing to their empowerment in terms of work experience and competence for their future employment. Based on the findings, the study concludes that ELT is an effective instrument to promote VET programmes for disadvantaged and unemployed youths. The use of EL appears to be a solution to the skills mismatch between skills development programmes and industries. Its application in VET is useful in helping a smooth school-to-work transition for the trainees because it fosters the competencies and abilities of trainees to perform activities like those in their future workplaces.

Contribution of the article and practical implications for the society

This article contributes to the body of knowledge by establishing a solid base for the evidence-informed practice of the effects of facilitating the VET programme through ELT to promote skills acquisition for the employment of unemployed and disadvantaged youths. The socio-economic implication of the article is that skills development plays an important role in poverty reduction. Investing in the skills development of citizens is vital to raise the incomes of poor groups and to reduce poverty (ILO, 2018). Although the causes of unemployment have also to do with economic factors in a country, skills development is an essential ingredient in developing capacities for labour market entry and increased income

generation of a vulnerable group of people. As mentioned earlier, the public and private sectors should attract young people to acquire skills from VET programmes to address their needs to participate in the socio-economic life in their countries.

Notes

1. *Employable skills*: Employability skills refer to possessing the right skill set to meet the demand of the labour market. It is a requirement for individual persons to successfully enter the labour market on completion of their studies.
2. *Youth*: In South Africa and according to the National Youth Commission Act, No. 19 of 1996, "youth" refers to persons between the ages of 14 and 35.
3. *Disadvantaged youth*: This concept refers to young people who completed grade 12 without employability skills and could not enrol at universities or TVET colleges afterwards due to the socio-economic conditions of their families.

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