

Improving Construction Education Pedagogy in South Africa

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Abstract

Globally, improving teaching and learning practices in higher education remains a priority because of the critical role graduates play in economic growth and industry development. However, there is limited empirical evidence on pedagogical strategies that effectively enhance undergraduate learning experiences in construction education, particularly within the South African Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) context. This study investigated the pedagogical strategies perceived as most effective for improving teaching and learning in construction-related disciplines at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. A quantitative research approach was adopted, using a structured questionnaire administered to 97 participants. Data were analysed using Mean Item Score (MIS) analysis to evaluate and rank the effectiveness of the identified pedagogical strategies. The findings showed that all evaluated strategies achieved mean scores above 3.50, indicating positive perceptions of their effectiveness in enhancing teaching and learning. The five highest-ranked strategies were providing students with opportunities to ask questions (MIS = 4.56), using student questions and responses to facilitate collective learning (MIS = 4.39), ensuring fairness in assessment and marking (MIS = 4.38), providing assessment plans with clearly defined deadlines (MIS = 4.26), and encouraging students to develop a deeper interest in the subject matter (MIS = 4.23). The findings highlight the importance of interactive learning, transparent assessment practices, and student-centred pedagogical approaches in strengthening construction education. The study contributes context-specific evidence to the construction education literature and offers practical insights to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes in the AEC sector.

Keywords: Construction, Education, Learning, Pedagogical approaches, Teaching.

1. Introduction

The higher education landscape has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades, driven by changing societal needs, technological advancements, and rising demands for graduate employability (Bennett, 2019). Consequently, traditional lecturer-centred approaches, in which lecturers are regarded as the primary source of knowledge and students as passive recipients, have gradually been replaced by student-centred learning environments that emphasise active engagement, collaboration, critical thinking, and knowledge construction (Hou, Lai and Wu, 2023; Loyens and Rikers, 2011). This shift is largely influenced by constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process through which students develop understanding by connecting new information to prior knowledge and experiences (Bayram-Jacobs and Hayırsever, 2016). Student-centred pedagogy is commonly associated with participatory, democratic, inquiry-based, and exploratory teaching approaches that encourage learners to actively participate in the learning process rather than passively receive information (Tabulawa, 2003; Tang, 2023). In such learning environments, students assume greater

responsibility for their learning, while lecturers facilitate learning through guidance, support, and the creation of meaningful learning experiences. According to O'Neil and McMahon (2015) and Harris and Cullen (2010), Lecturer-centred and student-centred pedagogies represent two contrasting educational paradigms. In lecturer-centred environments, authority and decision-making are primarily concentrated in the lecturer, whereas in student-centred environments, learners have greater autonomy, participation, and influence over their educational experiences (Tang, 2023). In student-centred learning, students are encouraged to take an active role in the learning process by engaging with materials, collaborating with peers, and interacting with instructors to construct knowledge and deepen understanding. Ideally, student-centred learning empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning by shaping aspects of their experiences, identifying learning needs, and actively participating in determining their learning pathways. This approach promotes critical thinking, independent learning, problem-solving skills, and meaningful engagement with the subject matter.

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The growing emphasis on student-centred learning reflects broader concerns regarding the preparedness of university graduates for contemporary professional environments. Employers increasingly seek graduates who possess not only disciplinary knowledge but also critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and lifelong learning skills (Bennett, 2019). These competencies are particularly important within the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) sector, where professionals must operate in multidisciplinary environments characterised by rapid technological change, complex project requirements, and evolving industry expectations. As a result, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to adopt pedagogical approaches that effectively support the development of these competencies and enhance student learning outcomes (Chan et al., 2017). Although student-centred pedagogies have been widely explored across higher education, empirical research has yet to examine the pedagogical strategies that most effectively enhance teaching and learning in construction education in South Africa. Existing studies have largely focused on general higher education or engineering education contexts, with comparatively little attention given to the unique learning requirements and educational challenges associated with construction-related disciplines (McCord et al 2023).

Despite growing interest in improving higher education pedagogy, there is limited evidence regarding the pedagogical strategies that students perceive as most effective within the South African Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) context. Addressing this gap is important for enhancing teaching effectiveness and graduate preparedness. This study investigates and ranks the pedagogical strategies perceived as most effective for improving teaching and learning within the AEC discipline at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa, with the aim of providing practical recommendations for strengthening construction education pedagogy and student learning outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Constructivist learning theory is a dominant framework underpinning contemporary higher education pedagogy. Unlike traditional transmission-based approaches, constructivism views learning as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction, reflection, and experience, rather than passively receiving information from instructors (Bada, 2015). From this perspective, students actively participate in knowledge creation, while educators facilitate learning through guidance and the design of meaningful learning experiences (Tang, 2023). As a result, effective teaching is increasingly measured by its ability to promote student engagement, critical thinking, and knowledge construction. The application

of constructivist principles has received significant attention within Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) education due to growing industry demand for graduates capable of solving complex problems, collaborating across disciplines, and adapting to technological change. Gier (2008) and Hamid and Dossick (2016) argue that AEC educators should facilitate experiential learning opportunities that enable students to develop knowledge through practice and reflection, rather than relying solely on theoretical instruction. While active learning approaches are widely recognised as beneficial, their implementation and effectiveness within AEC programmes, particularly in developing countries, remain underexplored.

Experiential and collaborative learning have consistently been identified as effective strategies for improving student engagement and knowledge retention. Russell et al. (2014) found that case-based learning enhances students' understanding of real-world problems and professional practice. Similarly, Shenton et al. (2014) and Mathews (2013b) reported that team projects, online discussion platforms, and knowledge-sharing activities strengthen peer learning and classroom interaction. Collectively, these studies suggest that collaborative learning environments promote deeper learning than passive instructional approaches. However, most of this evidence originates outside South African construction education, limiting its contextual relevance. Despite increasing criticism, traditional lecturer-centred approaches remain prevalent in many educational settings. Conventional methods such as lectures, note-taking, and rote memorisation position students as passive recipients of knowledge and may limit the development of higher-order cognitive skills (Luo and Mojica Cabico, 2018). In AEC education, these approaches have traditionally focused on developing explicit knowledge through manuals, technical instruction, and standard operating procedures (Khuzaimah and Hassan, 2012; Hartless et al., 2020). Although explicit knowledge is important, Hartless et al. (2020) argue that tacit knowledge acquired through practical experience is equally essential for industry readiness, highlighting a key limitation of traditional pedagogies.

The integration of educational technologies has been proposed as a means of addressing these shortcomings. Studies have shown that technology-enhanced learning can improve student engagement, understanding, and academic performance when effectively integrated with traditional teaching methods (D'Souza et al., 2013; Turan et al., 2018; Tayeh et al., 2020; Patil et al., 2020). However, technology alone does not guarantee improved learning outcomes, as its effectiveness depends on how it supports active learning and student engagement. While existing studies support student-centred and technology-enhanced pedagogies, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the pedagogical

strategies most valued by students within South African AEC programmes. Therefore, this study investigates and ranks the pedagogical strategies perceived as most effective for improving teaching and learning within the AEC discipline at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa.

3. Research Methodology

This study began with a review of academic literature on pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning within the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) discipline. Insights from the literature informed the development of a structured questionnaire to investigate the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies in the AEC context. A quantitative research design was adopted, as the study aimed to systematically collect and analyse students' perceptions of various pedagogical strategies. Quantitative approaches are widely used in educational and social science research to measure attitudes, perceptions, and experiences across a defined population and to facilitate statistical analysis of collected data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The target population comprised 149 students enrolled in the Construction Studies programme at the Durban

University of Technology, South Africa. A purposive sampling strategy was used because the selected participants had direct experience of the teaching and learning practices under investigation. The questionnaire was administered electronically via Google Forms and distributed to the target population. A total of 97 valid responses were received, representing a response rate of 65.1%. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Before the main survey, a pilot study was conducted to assess the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor revisions to improve the instrument's validity and reliability. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the research purpose before completing the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data were analysed using the Mean Score (MS) technique to determine the relative importance of the identified pedagogical strategies. The measurement instrument's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.947, indicating excellent internal consistency and confirming the data's reliability. The identified pedagogical strategies were subsequently ranked by mean score to determine the most effective approaches for enhancing teaching and learning in the AEC discipline. Although Mean Score analysis was appropriate for achieving the study objective of ranking pedagogical strategies, reliance on descriptive statistics and purposive sampling may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future studies should consider broader sampling approaches and more advanced statistical analyses.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Among the 97 participating students, 50 were female, and 47 were male. The age distribution shows that 20.6% of respondents were within the 16–18 age bracket, while 79.4% were between 19 and 23 years old. This distribution reflects the typical age profile of students enrolled in Level 1 and Level 2 of the Construction Studies programme at Durban University of Technology (DUT).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Gender	Freq	percent
Male	47	48.5
Female	50	51.5
Age		
16-18	20	20.6
19-23	77	79.4
Total	97	100

Source: (Author, 2026)

University of Technology, Midlands Campus, South Africa. A purposive sampling strategy was used because the selected participants had direct experience of the teaching and learning practices under investigation. The questionnaire was administered electronically via Google Forms and distributed to the target population. A total of 97 valid responses were received, representing a response rate of 65.1%. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Before the main survey, a pilot study was conducted to assess the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items. Feedback from the pilot study led to minor revisions to improve the instrument's validity and reliability. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the research purpose before completing the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, and no personally identifiable information was collected. The data were analysed using the Mean Score (MS) technique to determine the relative importance of the identified pedagogical strategies. The

Table 2 in Appendix 1 presents the mean scores (MS) of the variables used to evaluate strategies for improving construction pedagogy, ranked from highest to seventh. The results indicate that giving students the opportunity to ask questions recorded the highest mean score (MS = 4.56), ranking first among the evaluated strategies. This is followed by using students' questions and answers to facilitate collective learning (MS = 4.39), which ranked second. Fairness in the awarding of marks ranked third with a mean score of 4.38, while providing an assessment plan with clearly defined due dates ranked fourth (MS = 4.26). Furthermore, encouraging students' interest in learning more about the subject ranked fifth with a mean score of 4.23. Explaining the relevance of the subject to the work environment ranked sixth with a mean score of 4.15, and the educator demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject area ranked seventh with a mean score of 4.12.

The findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the influence of lecturers' attitudes and classroom practices on effective teaching and learning.

For example, Westbrook et al. (2023) and Nkambwe and Essilfie (2022) found that lecturers who use interactive pedagogical approaches are more likely to create engaging learning environments that encourage active student participation. The high ranking of strategies such as providing opportunities for students to ask questions, facilitating collective learning through discussion, and ensuring fairness in assessment indicates that students value learning environments characterised by openness, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement. These findings support the work of Braund et al. (2013) and Chisholm and Wildeman (2013), who emphasised the importance of learner-centred approaches in improving student engagement and educational outcomes. Similarly, the findings align with those of Epstein and Yuthas (2012) and Han and Wang (2010), who highlighted the value of constructive feedback, active participation, and supportive learning environments in enhancing student learning. Within the AEC discipline, these findings are particularly important because graduates are expected to develop not only technical knowledge but also communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills essential to professional practice (Butt, 2024). Strategies that encourage questioning, discussion, and active engagement help students develop these competencies and deepen their understanding of complex construction-related concepts. Therefore, the findings suggest that effective AEC pedagogy should extend beyond content delivery and focus on creating interactive learning environments that prepare students for the collaborative and dynamic nature of the construction industry.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This study aimed to find effective ways for enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, specifically within the AEC field. The findings indicate that all proposed strategies achieved mean scores above 3.5, suggesting that respondents consider them effective for improving pedagogical practice. Therefore, the results

underscore the importance of interactive, transparent, and well-structured teaching practices, including encouraging students to ask questions, using classroom dialogue to support collective learning, ensuring fairness in assessment, providing clear assessment plans, and linking course content to real-world work environments. From a practical perspective, the study revealed that lecturers can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes by adopting these strategies in their daily teaching. Creating opportunities for student participation, maintaining fairness and clarity in assessment processes, and demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject can foster a more supportive learning environment and enhance the overall quality of instruction in AEC programmes. This finding adds to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the pedagogical strategies most valued by students in the South African AEC context. While the findings support established student-centred learning principles, they offer context-specific insights that can inform pedagogical practice and curriculum development in construction education. However, a limitation of this study is the use of purposive sampling within a single Construction Studies programme at Durban University of Technology. Consequently, the findings may not be fully generalisable to other institutions or disciplines. Future studies should use larger, multi-institutional samples and probability-based sampling techniques. Nevertheless, the strong internal consistency of the responses and the consistently high ratings across all strategies lend credibility to the findings. Future studies should broaden their scope by including a larger, more diverse sample of students and educators across different higher education institutions and AEC programmes. Such research would provide further evidence of the relevance of these strategies and support their wider application to improve teaching and learning in higher education.

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Appendix 1

Table 2: The strategies for improving construction education pedagogy

Code	Variables	Mean score	Std D	Rank
CETL 9	Gives students the opportunity to ask questions	4.56	0.957	1
CETL 10	Uses students' questions and answers to help everyone learn	4.39	0.974	2
CETL 25	Fairness in awarding of marks.	4.38	1.103	3
CETL 19	Provides an assessment plan with due dates	4.26	1.034	4
CETL 7	Makes me want to learn more about the subject	4.23	1.036	5
CETL 6	Explains the relevance of this subject to the work environment	4.15	1.121	6
CETL 14	Educator enthusiastic about this subject area	4.12	0.982	7
CETL 21	Provides feedback within 10 working days or as set out in the study guide	4.12	1.023	7
CETL 23	Provides learning materials that help me learn	4.09	1.081	8
CETL 18	Provides clear guidelines for assessments	4.08	1.106	9

Code	Variables	Mean score	Std D	Rank
CETL 22	Provides useful feedback to help me learn	4.07	1.028	10
CETL 2	Keeps to the time allocated for the class	4.05	1.045	11
CETL 3	A thorough explanation of how the sections of the subject are linked together	4.03	1.075	12
CETL 8	Uses a style of questioning that encourages me to respond	4.02	1.181	13
CETL 24	Provides useful sources of information for reference	4.01	1.046	14
CETL 13	Educator approachable	4.01	1.094	14
CETL 5	Uses several methods of teaching to help me	4	1.19	15
CETL 12	Uses visual aids to help me learn	3.95	1.112	16
CETL 20	Uses several methods of assessment	3.94	1.116	17
CETL 4	Communicates clearly and audibly	3.92	1.196	18
CETL 1	Effective and efficient preparation for class and learning period	3.88	0.938	19
CETL 16	Educator available in consultation times outside of class	3.8	1.151	20
CETL 11	Shows me how to improve the way I learn	3.78	1.135	21
CETL 15	Gives me the opportunity to work as a member of a group or pair	3.77	1.203	22
CETL 17	Educators inform me where to get help, for example, at student counselling.	3.71	1.172	23

Source: (Author, 2026)