

Research Article

Negotiating Knowledge and Application: The Lived Experiences of Social Studies Students in Theory-To-Practice Transitions

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Abstract:

This phenomenology examined the lived experiences of Social Studies students going through transition processes of theory to practice in the context of practicum and field engagement. The study was based on experiential, transformative, situated, and reflective approaches to learning and explored how students perceive times of dissonance, uncertainty, and affirmation in applying theoretical knowledge to real life circumstances. The nine majors in Social Studies were interviewed in semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was performed based on the descriptive phenomenology. Results indicated that theory-to-practice transitions occur as a reconstructive rather than a linear process and are defined by an ongoing negotiation between conceptual knowledge and situational realities. Dissonance served as an activator of the reflective meaning-making process whereas affirmation strengthened adaptive competence. Students redefined knowledge as dialogical and contextual, practice as relational and responsive and the self as an emerging professional identity. The paper emphasizes practicum as a transformational environment where the development in epistemology, development in the profession, and development in identity co-evolve as the result of reflective interaction.

Keywords: Theory-to-Practice transition, Phenomenology, Experiential Learning, Professional Identity, Social Studies Education

1. Introduction

Social Studies education is based on the traditions of theories that attempt to explain social structure, power relations, culture, governance, and human behavior. Classical traditions started by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim provide students with the conceptual services on the analysis of inequality, power, social solidarity, and institutional life. These models develop analytical profundity and critical awareness. Nevertheless, in the modern literature, it is believed that the real point of contention with regards to Social Studies instruction is not simply knowing how to master theoretical constructs but how to apply them to contextually informed and socially significant practice (Wen et al., 2025).

In Social Studies programs, theory to practice transition takes place in the form of fieldwork, internships, immersion in research, practicums, and community engagements. Such sites demand students to grapple with the insecurities of encountered social realities, where the mists of theory tend to confront the vagueness of context. Instead of merely implementing observed models, students should be able to be reflexive, exercise ethical judgment, be adaptable, and engage in dialogues (Frimpong et al., 2024). Theory and lived experience often bring about doubts and dissonance, and this is that professional competence is based on interpretive responsiveness, and not procedural simulation.

The process of reconstructing can be explained in terms of complementary learning. The Experiential Learning Theory (1984) by David A. Kolb theorizes learning as the interaction process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, as a cyclical process. Social Studies students participate in actual social experiences in the practicum settings, get to reflect on the actual experiences, re-examine the theoretical assumptions, and test new strategies. Such learning then becomes a process of reconstituting knowledge through interaction. In addition to experiential cycles, there are other epistemological change that befall students. The Transformative Learning Theory by Jack Mezirow (1991) outlines the manner in which disorienting dilemmas can trigger a perspective transformation. In situations in which theoretical expectations do not fit well into the context of practice, the students have no other choice but to scrutinize their beliefs about knowledge, authority and professional identity. Their interpretation of the theory transforms the fixed dogma to contextual praxis through the process of self-reflection and dialogue. This change can be seen through the social and contextual perspective of the Situated Learning Theory developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) that highlights that knowledge is built through the interaction within real communal communities of practices. Practicum settings place students in the context of sociocultural systems in which they learn their practices by interacting with mentors, peers, and community stakeholders. The process of professional identity formation occurs as the students bring meaning into these relational contexts.

In addition to this, Donald A. Schon (1983) emphasizes the role of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action in closing the gap between theory and practice. Reflection is the process by which the experience of encounter turns into an insightful experience. Even though the importance of experiential and work-integrated learning is emphasized in the literature on global scholarship, much

of it focuses on education, healthcare, business, and engineering (Ainiyah, 2025; Khuadthong et al., 2025). Concerns have comparatively received low attention to the subjective, meaning-making processes of Social Studies students who have to accomplish theory-practice transitions. Such an incidence is especially applicable in the Philippine context where Social Studies education has a significant role in equipping graduates to serve the people in terms of public service, policy-making, research, advocacy, and community development. Along with this relevance, the local scholarship has not fully investigated the issues of how Filipino Social Studies students inter-venture and perceive the combination of theoretical knowledge with community-based participation in the context of socio-cultural diversity and institutional limitations.

This gap can be filled by anchoring the study on experiential, transformative, situated, and reflective perspectives of learning by examining lived experiences of Social Studies students as they undergo the transition between theory-based learning and the practice-based form of engagement. Specifically, the study aims to: 1. Describe the essence of Social Studies students' lived experiences in navigating theory-to-practice transitions; 2. Analyze how students construct meaning from moments of dissonance, uncertainty, and affirmation encountered during the application of theoretical knowledge in lived contexts; 3. Examine how these experiences reshape students' understanding of knowledge, professional practice, and self-identity.

Focusing on the narratives of the students, this study can be used to improve the curriculum, perfect the pedagogy, and educate Social Studies through praxis. It promotes the idea that practicum experiences are not only spaces to legitimize theoretical knowledge but change spaces in which epistemological knowledge, professional abilities, and identity development develop through reflective engagement of the real-world social processes.

2. Research Design

The applied research design in this study was a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experience of Social Studies students in theory-to-practice transitions. Phenomenology can be applied in cases where the objective of the study is to learn how individuals perceive and construct meaning of a common phenomenon with reference to their experiences. Instead of testing something or quantifying variables, the purpose of the phenomenological inquiry is to outline the nature of the experience as it is perceived by the participants (Sundler et al., 2019).

This design was appropriate in that the researcher was able to explore how theoretical knowledge is made sense of, negotiated and rebuilt within real educational situations by looking at how students reflected on their practicum and field experience. Semi-structured interviews were used since it provides the research with a chance to have the participants elaborate their meanings with the research objectives remaining within reach. The use of interviews is generally accepted as an appropriate data collection method in a phenomenological research since it offers a detailed account of subjective experience (Tanwir et al., 2020).

2.1 Respondents of the Study

Those included in the study were students who completed or were taking their practicum or field study courses based on their Social Studies majors during the academic year 20252026 of the Baao Community College. The method used was purposive sampling to make sure that the participants were of direct and relevant experience on the phenomenon being studied.

To aim at creating rich and reflective accounts, phenomenological studies usually utilize participants who have an empirical experience of the phenomenon (Tanwir et al., 2020). Nine (9) people were interviewed, which permitted bravery of exploration and offered manageable data analysis fitting to the criteria of phenomenological research. The sample was deemed adequate enough to achieve thematic saturation where patterns and meanings repeated across narratives.\

2.2 Research Instrument

The present study employed semi-structured interview guide as the main data collection instrument to solicit rich and reflective narratives of theory-to-practice shift of the students. The guide was created in accordance with the objectives of the research and included open-ended questions which required participants to narrate their experiences of transition, tell about the moments of bewilderment, difficulty, or confirmation, and discuss the ways in which the given experience influenced their knowledge, professional practice, and self-identity. The semi-structured format was selected because it is flexible and in-depth, which suits the phenomenological inquiry since it provided the ability to probe and clarify without switching focus (Tanwir et al., 2020). The instrument was also subjected to professional confirmation by the two faculty members of qualitative research and teacher education to provide credibility and clarity, as well as slight changes were made to make the instrument more refined and understandable.

2.3 Data Gathering and Analysis

The thematic analysis was done based on descriptive phenomenology to determine the essence of the lived experiences of students. It included a series of repeated and intensive reading of the transcripts, identification and coding of meaningful statements concerning theory-to-practice transitions, and grouping of similar units of meaning into thematic groups. Synthesizing these categories into the broad themes that reflected both the textual (what) and structural (how) aspects of the phenomenon was then compatible with the phenomenological analysis (Sundler et al., 2019). The process is coherent with systematic phenomenological methods, which place special focus on the precise definition of meaning units and before validation of interpretations (The

Systematic Procedure of the Phenomenological Approach, 2025). Bracket researcher assumptions were bracketed with the help of reflexive journaling throughout the analytic process and transparency and rigor was achieved in its interpretation.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section the findings are introduced and explained and they shed light on the nature of lived experience of Social Studies students when they pass across theory-to-practice transitions. The themes exposing how students made sense of dissonance, uncertainty and affirmation in practice and how these experiences eventually transformed their intuition of knowledge, professional practice, and self-identity can be seen as a result of their encounters.

3.1 Essence of Social Studies Students Lived Experiences in Navigating Theory-to-Practice Transitions

The experiences of Social Studies students that were examined in terms of their interactions with theory-to-practice transitions prove that the process is much more complicated than simple implementation of what was learned in the classroom. Instead of applying theories in a systematic fashion, students explained their experience of constant negotiation between the theoretical knowledge and practical situations. Their practicum experiences revealed the shortcoming of the prescriptive approach and forced them to reformulate theory based on experience.

A participant said, *"I assumed that my practicum would be step-by-step theory but the community setting reality made me rethink my teachings and interaction"*. Another one replied, *"I heard that theory makes me see the possibilities, I still need to change what I do at the moment according to the needs and reaction of students."* Likewise one of the third respondents told how they strategized their action based on what we learned in classes, but in the given situation what actually worked was otherwise and the latter made him re-evaluate his assumptions.

These discourses illustrate that theory was not abandoned but it was dialogical. Students also found that abstract principles are viewed as interpretive lenses and not prescriptive. This result is similar to other studies suggesting that practicum experiences tend to expose disparities between university training and classroom uncertainty. Pre-service teachers according to Yin (2019) viewed coursework as a core but inadequate preparation to meet the dynamic and relationship challenges of the real-life teaching cases. Similarly, empirical research based on the transformative learning theory demonstrates that practicum generates disorienting dilemmas that destabilize the assumptions considered normal and stimulate deeper learning (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the experiences mirror closely the experiential cycle of learning as put down by Kolb (1984). Students had tangible experiences that disrupted the expectations, contemplated the disparities between theory and practice, revised their conceptual knowledge, and tested modified strategies. The learning process was, therefore, a recursive process and not a process of simply transferring knowledge.

After all, what they have lived is reinterpretation. Theory only made sense when it had to be adapted contextually. Practice was neither an endpoint nor a location of epistemic negotiation but such that professional learning takes place within systems of authentic activity and not in disengaged academic space.

3.2 Making Sense of Dissonance, Uncertainty, and Affirmation in Practice NOT

As students transitioned from theoretical preparation to lived application, moments of dissonance and uncertainty emerged as central features of their experience. However, rather than paralyzing them, these tensions became catalysts for reflective meaning-making. Students described uncertainty not as evidence of incompetence but as a developmental turning point.

One participant admitted, *"At first I felt like I failed when lesson plans didn't go as expected, but my mentor helped me reflect on why it happened and what I learned."* Another shared, *"I doubted myself when students asked questions I wasn't prepared for; later I realized that uncertainty itself is part of learning."* A third reflected, *"When a strategy worked well, it confirmed that theory can be helpful, but only if I adapt it to students' needs."*

These reflections illustrate how students navigated cognitive and emotional tensions through structured reflection, mentorship, and dialogue. Schön's (1983) concept of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action is particularly relevant here: students learned to think critically while teaching and afterward, transforming experience into insight. Reflective processes allowed them to reinterpret perceived "failures" as opportunities for professional growth.

Research further supports this pattern. Mwamakula (2020) highlights how reflective journaling and mentor feedback strengthen professional identity formation by enabling student teachers to articulate pedagogical reasoning and emotional responses. Likewise, Archer-Kuhn et al. (2020) explain that transformative learning occurs when learners critically examine assumptions in response to disorienting experiences. In this study, dissonance functioned as productive tension — a site where theory was interrogated, refined, and internalized more deeply.

Importantly, affirmation also played a significant role. When strategies aligned successfully with theoretical principles, students experienced renewed confidence. Yet even affirmation was contextualized: success was attributed not to rigid adherence to theory, but to thoughtful adaptation. In this way, students developed epistemic humility — recognizing that knowledge is powerful but must remain responsive to context.

Thus, uncertainty and affirmation together facilitated adaptive expertise. Students learned not to suppress discomfort but to interpret

it as part of professional maturation, supported by reflective structures and relational guidance.

3.3 Making Sense of Dissonance, Uncertainty, and Affirmation in Practice. Reshaping Understanding of Knowledge, Practice, and Self NOT

Through repeated cycles of adaptation and reflection, students' experiences reshaped their understanding of knowledge, practice, and selfhood. Initially, many perceived knowledge as authoritative content to be mastered and transmitted. However, lived practice destabilized this assumption and revealed knowledge as contextual, negotiated, and evolving.

One student articulated this shift clearly: *"I no longer see theory as fixed answers but as perspectives that help me inquire and adapt while teaching."* Another stated, *"I used to think practice was just doing what theory said — now I understand it's about negotiating and responding to real learners."* A third expressed identity transformation directly: *"This experience changed how I see myself — I feel more like a beginner professional than just a student memorising theories."*

These reflections suggest a profound epistemological and identity transformation. Knowledge was reconceptualized from static truth to interpretive framework. Practice evolved from technical implementation to relational negotiation. The self, shifted from passive recipient of information to emerging professional agent.

Such transformations align with research on teacher identity (re)construction during practicum. Kaya (2023) found that pre-service teachers move from imagined professional identities to emergent ones through engagement with real classroom challenges. Similarly, Velasco (2019) demonstrated that reflective engagement during practicum supports integration of personal beliefs, pedagogical theory, and lived experience, fostering professional identity consolidation.

Transformative learning theory further explains that identity evolves in "third spaces" where prior assumptions encounter lived contradictions, prompting critical reassessment and reconstruction. In this study, theory-to-practice transitions functioned precisely as such spaces. Students were no longer merely students of Social Studies; they were becoming Social Studies practitioners.

Consequently, these experiences reshaped understanding on three interconnected levels. Knowledge became contextual and dialogical. Practice became adaptive and relational. The self, became reflexive and professionally situated. Professional identity and disciplinary knowledge co-developed through cycles of action and reflection, reinforcing Kolb's (1984) assertion that learning is a holistic process integrating cognition, experience, and identity.

4. Conclusion

The results of this research confirm that the theory-to-practice-transitions of Social Studies students are not linear knowledge sharing processes but active and reconstitutive ones. The students who were involved in unceasing negotiation between theoretical frameworks and contextual realities found that theory does not provide prescript but acts as an interpretive system that needs to be adapted. The aspects of dissonance and uncertainty became important developmental shifts that triggered critical inquiry and epistemological consciousness. By engaging in cycles of both action and reflections, learners turned the perceived challenges into learning opportunities, which showed that professional competence is built through contextual responsiveness and not procedural imitation.

Additionally, the research indicates that practicum experiences serve as transformational spaces in which the knowledge, practice, and identity develop together. Students conceptualized knowledge as dialogical and transformative, practice as relational and adaptive as well as self as professionally situated and reflexive. These results point to the need to integrate structured reflection, mentoring and hands-on experiences into the Social Studies program. Finally, professional development in Social Studies education is achieved not only by mastering theory but reflective engagement within the real-life social situations that develop adaptive knowledge and new professional identity.

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