



A Self-Study of Integrating Visual Historical Sources in History Teacher Education: Enhancing Employability and Leadership in Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This self-study investigates how visual historical sources can enrich pedagogical practice in a History methodology module within a South African teacher education context. Guided by social constructivism and inquiry-based learning, the study explores how paintings, political posters, and archival photographs support the development of visual literacy, critical thinking, ethical awareness, leadership, and employability skills among pre-service teachers. Using a qualitative reflective design, data were generated through reflective journals, student artefacts, classroom observations, and informal feedback. Thematic analysis revealed that visual sources enabled students to construct meaning collaboratively, engage emotionally with complex historical narratives, and demonstrate agency through group-led tasks and multimodal assessments. These experiences fostered historical empathy, creative expression, and soft skills aligned with 21st-century professional demands. The study argues that structured visual pedagogy enhances both disciplinary understanding and professional formation in teacher education. It recommends the intentional integration of visual methodologies and interdisciplinary collaboration to advance decolonial, inclusive, and skill-oriented History education. The findings contribute to growing scholarship on visual pedagogies and their transformative potential in teacher preparation.

Keywords: Employability, Pre-service Teachers, History Education, Historical Empathy, Teacher Education and Visual Literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Education systems in the 21st century are increasingly expected to cultivate not only disciplinary knowledge but also broader competencies related to civic engagement, ethical reasoning, collaboration, and employability.¹ Within this evolving mandate, History education holds significant transformative potential.

¹ Z. Mkhabela and P. Warnich, “The Use of Paintings as a Historical Source in the History Classroom: How Can It Develop Leadership and Employability for the Youth?,” 2020.

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Once critiqued for its reliance on rote memorisation, History is now recognised as a subject capable of fostering critical thinking, narrative interpretation, and social consciousness.² In South Africa, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) promotes a source-based pedagogy that encourages learners to engage critically with multiple forms of historical evidence.³ Despite this, many classrooms still privilege textual sources, often neglecting the interpretive richness and multidimensionality offered by visual historical materials.

The persistent marginalisation of visual sources in History education is concerning, particularly given the increasingly visual and multimodal nature of contemporary society. Visual artefacts such as paintings, protest posters, photographs, and symbolic imagery, offer powerful tools for historical inquiry, enabling learners to interact with the past through emotional, symbolic, and contextual cues that are often absent in written documents. Youngs and Lévesque argue that visual materials deepen historical understanding by prompting students to interrogate imagery, identify embedded ideologies, and interpret multiple perspectives.⁴ In the South African memory landscape, where public history is heavily mediated through images of resistance, liberation, and struggle, visual sources provide vital pathways for engaging with contested narratives and fostering historical empathy.⁵

However, despite their pedagogical value, visual sources remain underutilised in teacher education programmes. Many pre-service teachers enter the profession without sufficient training in visual literacy or without understanding how multimodal sources can support disciplinary thinking, decolonial inquiry, or the development of 21st-century soft skills. This gap is particularly problematic within the South African context, where decolonisation efforts demand pedagogies that unsettle Eurocentric narratives, amplify indigenous knowledge systems, and incorporate diverse ways of knowing.⁶ Visual sources, especially local artistic and political artefacts serve as culturally meaningful entry points for such pedagogical transformation.

Beyond disciplinary learning, visual pedagogies also have the potential to cultivate soft skills increasingly valued in professional environments. Employers globally emphasise competencies such as collaboration, adaptability, innovation, and leadership.⁷ Classrooms that incorporate visual inquiry often require students to negotiate interpretations, lead group discussions, curate visual exhibitions, and present multimodal analyses. These activities mirror real-world contexts in which professionals must synthesise complex information, communicate persuasively, and work collaboratively. Andrews and Higson and Kohn argue that such experiential learning practices are essential for developing employability and leadership capacities among graduates.⁸

Given these intersections, visual historical sources offer a unique opportunity to enrich History teacher education. Yet there remains limited empirical research, particularly within African contexts, examining how visual pedagogies influence pre-service teachers' development of visual literacy, historical thinking, leadership, and employability competencies. While previous studies highlight the need for decolonial, inquiry-based, and multimodal pedagogies, few have explored how visual artefacts function as

² Carmen Burgos-Videla, Marcos Parada-Ulloa, and Javiera Martínez-Díaz, "Critical Thinking in the Classroom: The Historical Method and Historical Discourse as Tools for Teaching Social Studies," *Frontiers in Sociology* 10 (2025): 1526437; S. Nuttall, "Visual Cultures in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 2 (2021): 195–208.

³ Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): History Grades 10–12* (Pretoria: DBE, 2011).

⁴ Suzette Youngs, "Understanding History through the Visual Images in Historical Fiction," *Language Arts* 89, no. 6 (July 1, 2012): 379–95, <https://doi.org/10.58680/la201220326>; Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (University of Toronto Press, 2008).

⁵ S. Nuttall, "Visual Cultures in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 2 (2021): 195–208.

⁶ P. Du Plessis, "Decolonisation of Education in South Africa: Challenges to Decolonise the University Curriculum," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, March 2021, <https://doi.org/10.20853/35-1-4426>; Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

⁷ OECD, "The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030," *OECD Publishing*, 2018.

⁸ Jane Andrews and Helen Higson, "Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study," *Higher Education in Europe* 33, no. 4 (December 14, 2008): 411–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720802522627>; Pelin Kohn, "Experiential Learning: Immersive Approaches to Leadership Development," in *Elevating Leadership* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024), 15–26, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83549-564-320241002>.

mediating tools that shape both cognitive and professional growth.⁹ Even fewer studies use self-study methodologies to critically examine how teacher educators themselves navigate visual pedagogies and reflect on their practice.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how the integration of visual historical sources within a History methodology module influenced pre-service teachers' learning experiences and professional skill development.¹⁰ The research is guided by the following question: How does the integration of visual historical sources influence pre-service teachers' development of critical thinking, visual literacy, historical empathy, leadership, and ethical reflection?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section outlines the theoretical and empirical foundations informing the use of visual historical sources in History education. It critically engages with the concepts of historical thinking, visual literacy, interdisciplinary pedagogy, and the development of soft skills such as leadership and employability. These constructs are discussed with reference to the South African context and broader international scholarship.

Historical Thinking and Visual Sources

Historical thinking encompasses the skills of sourcing, contextualising, corroborating, and interpreting primary and secondary sources.¹¹ In South Africa, CAPS mandates the use of historical sources to foster analytical engagement with the past.¹² Visual artefacts such as propaganda posters, resistance art, and photographs serve as powerful historical texts. According to Walker (2025), they evoke emotional responses and challenge students to interpret symbolism and visual rhetoric, deepening their historical understanding.

One visual source used in this study was Thami Mnyele's painting on the 1976 Soweto Uprising. The artwork, which depicts a figure consumed by fire, became a point of critical reflection in classroom discussion about apartheid-era resistance. Students analysed the painting's colour scheme, posture, and implied violence to draw connections between individual sacrifice and systemic oppression. The use of such imagery aligns with Wineburg's theory of historical thinking, which emphasises the importance of learners engaging with the "foreign country" of the past through interpretation and analysis.¹³ Moreover, VanSledright argues that effective history education must involve multiple types of sources that challenge students to apply cognitive tools for analysis and empathy.¹⁴ The employment of art as historical text invites learners into an affective and moral engagement with the past, enabling the reconstruction of historical narratives through interpretive practice.

Visual Literacy and Interdisciplinarity

Visual literacy refers to the capacity to interpret, evaluate, and create meaning from visual texts (Felten, 2008). In a world dominated by digital imagery and visual media, this competency is as vital as textual literacy. History education can contribute to visual literacy by encouraging learners to examine representations of the past through artistic and symbolic lenses. Interdisciplinary teaching linking History with Art, Literature, and Ethics creates meaningful opportunities for visual literacy development. Jacobs

⁹ Kerry Freedman and Patricia Stuhr, "Curriculum Change for the 21st Century: Visual Culture in Art Education," in *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education* (Routledge, 2004), 815–28; Ali Raza, "Art and Education: Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking in Humanity," *Journal of Religion and Society* 1, no. 1 (2023): 13–25; Rana Taheri and Sarah E. Pennington, "The Role of Teacher Education in Improving Digital Literacy: A Pre-Service Teacher Case Study," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* 25, no. 2 (October 9, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1385>.

¹⁰ Clever Ndebele, Dagogo William Legg-Jack, and Hennades T Tabe, "Understanding Preservice Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges Experienced during Work Integrated Learning," *EUREKA: Social and Humanities*, no. 4 (2023): 48–58.

¹¹ P., Seixas and T. Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Nelson Education, 2013).

¹² Department of Basic Education, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): History Grades 10–12*.

¹³ S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Temple University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Bruce VanSledright, "Assessing for Learning in the History Classroom," in *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking* (Routledge, 2015), 75–88.

argues that interdisciplinary learning enhances relevance and critical awareness.¹⁵ Dewey's philosophy of experiential education and Schön's reflective practice theory further support learner-centred, inquiry-driven exploration of historical themes.¹⁶ Taheri and Pennington emphasises that digital visual literacy is pivotal in contemporary education, requiring instructors to incorporate multimodal texts that foster interpretive skills and digital fluency.¹⁷

Additionally, Freedman and Stuhr highlight that interdisciplinary approaches in art education provide learners with frameworks to engage with societal issues critically.¹⁸ When applied to History education, this approach allows learners to contextualise visual media as socio-political artefacts, deepening their awareness of historical and contemporary injustices. Such an approach not only helps dismantle traditional Eurocentric narratives in education but also positions learners as active participants in meaning-making, aligning with decolonial pedagogies that seek to value multiple ways of knowing. According to Raza, integrating arts and history enhances critical thinking and fosters creativity, promoting learner engagement in diverse contexts.¹⁹

Leadership, Employability and Soft Skills

Employers increasingly seek graduates with soft skills such as collaboration, adaptability, leadership, and ethical judgment.²⁰ Through source-based inquiry and cooperative learning tasks, History education can foster these attributes. Group analysis of visual materials often demands role distribution, negotiation, and collective interpretation, all of which mirror real-world leadership dynamics.²¹

In this study, students created visual timelines and poster exhibitions, drawing from anti-apartheid materials such as UDF and ANC Women's League posters. These activities prompted students to lead teams, manage resources, and critically engage with historical content, all valuable employability practices. According to Andrews and Higson, employability is developed when students are placed in contexts that demand real-world decision-making, problem-solving, and collaboration.²² Visual history tasks thus serve as experiential learning opportunities that align academic goals with employability objectives. Recent studies underscore that experiential and collaborative learning strategies directly contribute to the development of leadership and adaptability, which are essential in the 21st-century workplace.²³

Theoretical Foundations of Visual Literacy in Education

In recent years, the concept of visual literacy has gained prominence, especially as digital media saturate contemporary society. Stokes defines visual literacy as the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, comprehending its cultural, social, and contextual significance.²⁴ The importance of developing visual literacy among educators and students is underscored by Joffe, who argues that in the contemporary media environment, visual texts often communicate messages more powerfully than words alone.²⁵

¹⁵ H. H. Jacobs, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation* (ASCD, 2003).

¹⁶ J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2017 edition (Teddington: Echo Library, 1916); D. A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).

¹⁷ Taheri and Pennington, "The Role of Teacher Education in Improving Digital Literacy: A Pre-Service Teacher Case Study."

¹⁸ Freedman and Stuhr, "Curriculum Change for the 21st Century: Visual Culture in Art Education."

¹⁹ Raza, "Art and Education: Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking in Humanity."

²⁰ OECD, "The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030," *OECD Publishing*, 2018.

²¹ Martin G Brooks and Jacqueline Grennon Brooks, "The Courage to Be Constructivist," *Educational Leadership* 57, no. 3 (1999): 18–24.

²² Andrews and Higson, "Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study."

²³ Norah Adera, "Innovative Learning Spaces and Blended Learning: Quest for 21st Century Competency Teaching and Learning Approaches," *Creating Dynamic Space in Higher Education: Modern Shifts in Policy, Competencies, and Governance*, 2025, 139–74; Kohn, "Experiential Learning: Immersive Approaches to Leadership Development."

²⁴ Suzanne Stokes, "Visual Literacy in Teaching and Learning: A Literature Perspective," *Electronic Journal for the Integration of Technology in Education* 1, no. 1 (2002): 10–19.

²⁵ Hélène Joffe, "The Power of Visual Material: Persuasion, Emotion and Identification," *Diogenes* 55, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 84–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192107087919>.

In the context of history education, Perlmutter highlights that visual sources such as photographs, paintings, and propaganda posters offer rich avenues for understanding historical perspectives and challenging hegemonic narratives.²⁶ Visual literacy enables learners to discern underlying ideologies, recognise manipulation, and appreciate multiple viewpoints.²⁷ This is further emphasised by Mayer's use of the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which posits that combining visual and verbal modes enhances understanding while reducing cognitive overload.²⁸ When educators intentionally design visual learning experiences aligned with Mayer's principles, students can interpret complex historical phenomena more effectively.

Interdisciplinary Pedagogies and Incorporation of Arts in History

The integration of arts and history fosters creativity, critical thinking, and deeper engagement. Linssen found that interdisciplinary approaches, especially those blending visual arts and history, promote critical inquiry, empathy, and cultural understanding.²⁹ Such pedagogies align with the decolonial imperative by disrupting traditional disciplinary boundaries and promoting multiple ways of knowing. Incorporating the arts into history teaching further challenges Eurocentric epistemologies by validating indigenous forms of expression, oral traditions, and aesthetic interpretations as legitimate sources of historical knowledge.³⁰ In this way, arts-based history education becomes a transformative tool for reclaiming marginalised narratives and fostering epistemic justice within the classroom.

In South Africa, the decolonisation discourse emphasises the need for curricula that recognise indigenous epistemologies and challenge colonial legacies.³¹ Visual sources such as protest posters, indigenous artworks, and colonial photographs serve as potent tools for interrogating histories of resistance, oppression, and identity. As Asiedu et al. argue, carefully curated visual narratives enable learners to confront contested histories and reconstruct alternative memories rooted in local and indigenous knowledge systems.³²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in social constructivist theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural tools such as visual media in constructing knowledge.³³ Vygotsky's social constructivist theory posits that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and mediated by cultural tools.³⁴ Visual sources serve as mediating artifacts that facilitate dialogue, perspective-taking, and the co-construction of meaning. In the context of teacher education, engaging preservice teachers in collaborative analysis of visual artifacts activates their existing knowledge and cultural schemas, fostering deeper understanding and

²⁶ David D. Perlmutter, "Visual Historical Methods: Problems, Prospects, Applications," *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 4 (October 1994): 167–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01615440.1994.10594231>.

²⁷ Raza, "Art and Education: Fostering Creativity and Critical Thinking in Humanity."

²⁸ Richard E. Mayer, "Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Multimedia Learning* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511816819.004>.

²⁹ Dalia Habib Linssen, "Visual Art and Empathy: A Fusion of the Intellectual and the Emotional," in *History, Practice and Pedagogy* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 307–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-70255-6_17.

³⁰ Nepia Mahuika, *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2019); Ralph Motse Manyane, "Reviving Indigenous History, Knowledge and Culture: The Case of the Mphebotho Cultural Museum," *South African Journal of Cultural History* 38, no. 2.1 (November 2024): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.54272/sach.2024.v38n2.1a1>.

³¹ Du Plessis, "Decolonisation of Education in South Africa: Challenges to Decolonise the University Curriculum."

³² Richard Asiedu, Michelle Stewart, and Sfundu Cele, "Investigating the Role of Digital Arts in Decolonizing Knowledge and Promoting Indigenous Standpoints," *Journal of the Digital Humanities Association of Southern Africa (DHASA)* 5, no. 1 (February 16, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.55492/dhasa.v5i1.5016>.

³³ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).

³⁴ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

professional identity formation.³⁵ This aligns with findings that cooperative interpretation nurtures leadership and confidence among learners.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodological framework used in the self-study. It describes the research design, data collection strategies, and analytical methods employed to investigate how visual historical sources influence student learning in a history methodology course. The self-study approach enabled the lecturer to reflect critically on their pedagogical practices and document meaningful shifts in teaching and learning.

Research Design

This self-study employed a qualitative, reflective research design. The approach allowed the lecturer to systematically explore and improve her teaching practice through critical inquiry.³⁶ Situated within a History methodology module for third-year pre-service teachers, the study was conducted over one semester at a public university in KwaZulu-Natal. Self-study is particularly suited for research in teacher education because it foregrounds practitioner knowledge and the lived experiences of educators.³⁷

Data Collection

Data was collected through a combination of reflective journals, student artefacts, informal feedback, and classroom observation. Throughout the semester, the lecturer maintained a reflective teaching journal to document pedagogical intentions, responses to student engagement, and evolving insights into practice. Reflective journaling is widely acknowledged in self-study research as a tool for critical introspection and knowledge generation.³⁸ Student-generated artefacts, including visual essays, annotated posters, and collaboratively curated historical timelines, served as evidence of learning and were analysed for their interpretive depth and creative expression. Informal feedback was solicited through classroom discussions and end-of-module reflections, allowing students to voice their experiences and perceptions of the visual pedagogy. Observations of classroom interactions, particularly during group activities, provided contextual data on peer collaboration, leadership roles, and affective responses to visual content. The triangulation of these sources ensured a multi-layered and credible account of the teaching and learning process, consistent with best practices in practitioner research.³⁹

Data Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method, reflections and student responses were coded for recurring themes related to visual literacy, leadership, empathy, and engagement.⁴⁰ Data analysis was iterative and interpretive, involving constant comparison of insights from multiple sources. Interpretive validity was enhanced through peer discussion with a critical friend in the School of Education. This collaborative reflection ensured that themes were grounded in data and not predetermined by the researcher's expectations.

³⁵ Müzeyyen Nazlı Güngör and Ayşegül Amanda Yeşilbursa, "Classroom Observation at Hogwarts: A Genetic Analysis of a Preservice English Teacher's Identity Development," *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development* 27, no. 2 (July 25, 2025): 33–48, <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v27n2.116229>.

³⁶ Vicki Kubler LaBoskey, "The Methodology of Self-Study and Its Theoretical Underpinnings," in *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2004), 817–69, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6545-3_21.

³⁷ John Loughran, "Researching Teacher Education Practices," *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 12–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106296217>.

³⁸ A. P. Samaras, *Self-Study Teacher Research: Improving Your Practice through Collaborative Inquiry* (Sage Publications, 2011); LaBoskey, "The Methodology of Self-Study and Its Theoretical Underpinnings."

³⁹ Loughran, "Researching Teacher Education Practices."

⁴⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. The findings are organised into four thematic areas that reflect the impact of visual historical sources on students' development: visual and critical literacy, leadership through collaboration, inclusive assessment practices, and historical empathy. These are analysed in relation to existing literature and contextualised within the classroom experiences.

Developing Visual and Critical Literacy

Visual sources improved students' capacity to interpret, question, and connect historical meaning to broader societal themes. Mnyele's painting of the Soweto Uprising provoked rich commentary on the emotional toll of state violence. Students demonstrated increasing sophistication in decoding visual elements, supporting Felten's contention that visual literacy enhances analytical depth.⁴¹

Similarly, students examined a photograph of the 1956 Women's March, where thousands of women protested against pass laws. The visual composition featuring raised fists, signage, and group formation helped learners to understand the collective nature of historical agency and to compare gendered forms of resistance across time. Students also engaged with a 1994 election poster that included Nelson Mandela's image, accompanied by the phrase "A Better Life for All." This prompted conversations about political symbolism, the role of image in constructing historical memory, and the importance of critically reading visual propaganda. The use of contemporary and historical imagery allowed students to track the evolution of political messaging over time.

Leadership Through Group Engagement

Collaborative tasks, including the development of a poster timeline titled "Resistance Through the Brushstroke," gave rise to informal leadership opportunities. Students reported increased confidence and responsibility, echoing OECD claims about the importance of team-based learning in developing employability.⁴² The group work also highlighted peer mentoring and democratic decision-making. These social learning experiences align with Vygotsky's social development theory, which holds that cognitive development is mediated by collaborative dialogue and scaffolding. Leadership emerged not only from assigned roles but also from interpersonal dynamics, where students facilitated each other's understanding and negotiated shared goals.

Assessment Innovation and Inclusive Expression

Shifting from essay-based assessment to multimodal tasks enabled a broader spectrum of students to succeed. Visual essays and poster presentations captured student creativity and historical insight. One student, previously disengaged in written tasks, produced a compelling critique of the "Don't Vote Apartheid!" poster, demonstrating conceptual depth through both text and image. This finding supports the argument by Gardner that differentiated assessment strategies are essential for engaging multiple intelligences and validating diverse learner strengths.⁴³ Students with artistic or visual strengths found themselves empowered to express complex historical arguments through non-traditional means, enhancing equity and inclusion in assessment.⁴⁴

Emotional Engagement and Historical Empathy

A session on slavery featuring imagery of enslaved Africans aboard colonial ships triggered profound emotional reactions. Students linked past injustices to contemporary struggles, embodying Rüsen's view of

⁴¹ Peter Felten, "Visual Literacy," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 40, no. 6 (November 2008): 60–64, <https://doi.org/10.3200/CHNG.40.6.60-64>.

⁴² OECD, "The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030."

⁴³ H. Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Basic Books, 1983).

⁴⁴ Z. Mkhabela and H. T. Tabe, *Navigating Complex Topics: A Reflective Study on Teaching Controversial Subject Matter to South African School Learners in a Social Sciences Classroom*, ed. M. Saltykova-Vaukovich (Wydawnictwo Naukowe UWS: University of Siedlce, 2024).

historical consciousness as a moral and civic engagement. These emotional connections also facilitated deeper dialogue on decoloniality, as learners discussed the ways in which visual imagery can unsettle dominant historical narratives.⁴⁵ This aligns with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's argument that decolonising education requires unsettling epistemic hierarchies and enabling alternative modes of knowing.⁴⁶

DISCUSSION

The findings of this self-study affirm the critical role that visual historical sources can play in advancing both disciplinary knowledge and the broader developmental goals of higher education. In alignment with the literature on historical thinking, the use of visual materials provided a gateway for pre-service teachers to engage with complex historical narratives beyond traditional textual sources.⁴⁷ The visual artefacts ranging from liberation posters to emotive paintings enabled students to interrogate historical contexts, question dominant narratives, and develop historical empathy, a goal consistent with Rüsen's theory of historical consciousness.⁴⁸

The observed growth in students' analytical and interpretive abilities echoes Lévesque's claim that historical understanding is strengthened through engagement with multiple and contrasting sources.⁴⁹ The visual dimension added by artistic and political imagery allowed students to identify power relations, resistance, and identity in ways that traditional texts often obscure. In doing so, students began to exhibit what Felten describes as visual literacy, an essential 21st-century skill for navigating meaning in a media-saturated world.⁵⁰

Equally significant was the enhancement of soft skills, particularly leadership, collaboration, and adaptability. As highlighted in the work of Brooks and Brooks, constructivist learning environments encourage shared responsibility and interpersonal learning.⁵¹ Through group work and peer-led discussions, students developed leadership competencies in ways that mirrored real-world professional scenarios. These results also support the OECD and Andrews and Higson, who advocate for embedding employability attributes directly within disciplinary instruction rather than through separate skills modules.⁵²

In addition, the multimodal assessment formats used in this study not only diversified opportunities for learners to succeed but also validated multiple intelligences.⁵³ Students who previously underperformed in essay-based tasks demonstrated deep historical insight when given the freedom to use visual expression and creative formats. This aligns with inclusive pedagogy frameworks that advocate for differentiated assessment to support equity.⁵⁴

Importantly, the emotional and moral responses elicited by visual content, particularly in topics such as slavery or apartheid brutality, created moments of transformative learning.⁵⁵ These encounters with difficult knowledge enabled learners to interrogate their values, connect historical injustice to contemporary issues, and reflect critically on their roles as future educators in a diverse democracy. Thus, the findings of this study confirm the transformative potential of visual sources to not only deepen content knowledge but

⁴⁵ Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development," *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* 4 (2004): 63–85.

⁴⁶ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

⁴⁷ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*; Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*.

⁴⁸ Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development."

⁴⁹ Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century*.

⁵⁰ Felten, "Visual Literacy."

⁵¹ Brooks and Brooks, "The Courage to Be Constructivist."

⁵² OECD, "The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030."; Andrews and Higson, "Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study."

⁵³ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1983).

⁵⁴ Carol Ann Tomlinson, *Everybody's Classroom: Differentiating for the Shared and Unique Needs of Diverse Students* (Teachers College Press, 2022).

⁵⁵ Helene Strauss, *Wayward Feeling: Audio-Visual Culture and Aesthetic Activism in Post-Rainbow South Africa* (University of Toronto Press, 2022).

also support the ethical and professional formation of pre-service teachers.⁵⁶ The pedagogical approach adopted here offers a response to the call for a more decolonial, learner-centred, and socially engaged education.⁵⁷ The findings of this self-study strikingly demonstrate that the integration of visual historical sources such as protest posters, archival photographs, and paintings significantly impacts pre-service teachers' development across multiple domains, including cognitive, affective, and professional. This multifaceted growth can be understood through the lens of Vygotsky's social constructivist framework, which posits that learning is fundamentally a socially mediated activity, where knowledge is constructed through meaningful interactions within a cultural context. Applying this perspective illuminates how collaborative interpretation of visual artifacts acts as a dynamic process that scaffolds learners' understanding, supports critical dialogue, and nurtures leadership competencies.

At the cognitive level, engaging with visual sources encourages learners to move beyond surface-level observation towards higher-order thinking skills through analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. As students scrutinize complex images such as protest posters or photographs depicting historical moments, they are prompted to decode visual symbols, interrogate underlying messages, and relate these to broader socio-political contexts. This interpretive activity aligns with Carambas and Tibaldo's assertion that visual literacy is an essential 21st-century skill, equipping students to navigate and critically assess a media-saturated environment.⁵⁸ For example, when analysing a 1994 election poster featuring Nelson Mandela's image and the slogan "A Better Life for All," alongside #FeesMustFall protest posters from the 2015 student movement, students do not merely read the text but interrogate the symbolic significance of the imagery, the emotions it evokes, and its power to construct political memory and social consciousness across different historical moments.

This process of meaning-making is inherently social. As students discuss and negotiate their interpretations in collaborative settings, they engage in critical dialogue, a core aspect of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. The act of articulating one's understanding while listening to peers' perspectives enables learners to confront ambiguities, challenge assumptions, and co-construct more nuanced meanings. Such interactions serve as "mediating tools", cultural artifacts and language that shape cognitive development. Through these conversations, learners internalise diverse viewpoints by deepening their understanding of historical complexities and develop the capacity for ethical reflection amid contested narratives.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the collaborative interpretive activity fosters a sense of collective agency and shared responsibility, which are vital components of leadership development. In participating as facilitators or critics within group discussions, students assume roles that require them to guide conversations, offer constructive critique, and support peer thinking. These roles reveal real-world professional scenarios where leadership entails responsibility for team engagement, respectful dialogue, and consensus-building. For instance, during group presentations of visual timelines titled "Truth and Reconciliation Commission", students not only demonstrated individual insights but also negotiated collective understandings, thereby practising democratic decision-making and fostering peer mentoring.

These leadership roles are scaffolded within the social interaction, aligning with Vygotsky's constructivist theory, where learners can perform more complex tasks with guidance and social support. As students assume facilitator positions, prompting peers to interpret images, posing probing questions, or mediating conflicting viewpoints, they expand their cognitive and social capabilities beyond what they could achieve independently. Such activities thus serve as authentic contexts for cultivating soft skills like

⁵⁶ Ndebele, Legg-Jack, and Tabe, "Understanding Preservice Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges Experienced during Work Integrated Learning."

⁵⁷ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

⁵⁸ Janice R. Carambas and Janet S. Tibaldo, "Fostering Critical Thinking in Filipino through Media and Information Literacy," *Advances in Mobile Learning Educational Research* 5, no. 1 (April 21, 2025): 1370–87, <https://doi.org/10.25082/AMLER.2025.01.012>.

⁵⁹ Mkhabela and Tabe, *Navigating Complex Topics: A Reflective Study on Teaching Controversial Subject Matter to South African School Learners in a Social Sciences Classroom*.

leadership, communication, and collaboration, which are increasingly recognised as essential for employability in the contemporary world.

The affective dimension of learning is also profoundly engaged through visual sources. As students encounter emotionally charged images such as photographs of the Soweto Uprising or scenes of apartheid brutality, they experience visceral reactions that connect them personally to historical injustices. According to Jia et al., these emotional responses facilitate empathy, enabling learners to envisage experiences different from their own and to develop a moral consciousness that transcends mere factual recall.⁶⁰ For example, reflecting on a photograph of children protesting during apartheid, students reported feelings of anger, sadness, and indignation, which motivated deep engagement with the moral and ethical questions surrounding state violence and resistance. Such moments of emotional engagement encourage learners to interrogate their values and recognise the enduring relevance of historical struggles for social justice. This affective dimension also has pedagogical implications, fostering an inclusive classroom climate where diverse perspectives are valued, and students feel empowered to voice their insights grounded in personal and collective histories.

Additionally, the affective engagement with visual content supports the development of historical empathy a crucial component of historical thinking, emphasised in contemporary curriculum frameworks. As students empathize with historical actors, understanding their motivations, fears, and aspirations, they cultivate a nuanced appreciation of the complexities inherent in historical episodes. Engaging with visual sources makes these abstract abstractions more tangible, thereby fostering an emotional connection that enhances understanding and retention.

On a professional level, these multifaceted processes (cognitive, affective, and social) translate into competencies vital for future educators and civic agents. First, the capacity to critically interpret visual media equips pre-service teachers with practical skills for integrating diverse sources into their pedagogical repertoire, aligning with South Africa's CAPS policy that encourages source-based history instruction.⁶¹ Second, the experience of leading discussions and mediating interpretations helps develop leadership qualities, confidence, responsibility, and ethical judgment that are transferable to classroom management and community engagement.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of visual interpretation fosters dispositions of lifelong learning and continuous professional development. As students navigate uncertainties, negotiate differing interpretations, and reflect collectively, they internalise a professional ethos rooted in dialogue, empathy, and social responsiveness. These dispositions position them better to adapt to diverse classroom contexts and to foster inclusive, learner-centered environments.⁶² The integration of visual sources similarly contributes to broader aims of decolonising the curriculum and democratising knowledge. By engaging with images originating from diverse cultural and political contexts, students challenge dominant narratives rooted in colonial and Eurocentric perspectives. They learn to read visual propaganda critically, recognising mechanisms of power and resistance embedded within imagery. For instance, analysing a poster from the anti-apartheid movement or a painting depicting resistance highlights the intersection of visual culture and political agency, fostering a decolonial consciousness aligned with anti-oppressive pedagogies. These activities do not simply transmit historical facts but serve as transformative pedagogies that aim to shape reflective, empathetic, and capable professionals committed to social justice.

⁶⁰ Ke Jia et al., "Constructing an Empathy Education System: Values, Principles, and Approaches," *Journal of Moral Education*, 2025, 1–29.

⁶¹ Sonja C. Strydom, Helena Wessels, and Casey Anley, "Moving beyond the Tools: Pre-Service Teachers' Views on What They Value in a Digital Literacy Short Course," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 11, no. 1 (June 24, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v11i1.929>.

⁶² Hea-jin Lee and Leah Herner-Patnode, "Equitable Mathematics Teaching for Diverse Learners: Connecting Preservice Teachers' Beliefs and Practices," *Journal of Teacher Education and Educators* 14, no. 1 (2025): 38–57.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this self-study, it is recommended that History teacher education programmes deliberately integrate visual historical sources into their curriculum as both pedagogical content and assessment tools. Visual artefacts such as political posters, historical paintings, and archival photographs should not be treated as supplementary materials but as central to the development of historical thinking, visual literacy, and ethical reasoning. Teacher educators should be supported in developing skills to guide critical interpretation of visual media, with institutional investment in interdisciplinary collaboration between History and Art departments. Furthermore, visual-based assessments such as poster exhibitions, visual essays, and curated timelines should be incorporated to accommodate diverse learner strengths and promote inclusive education. These practices not only enhance subject knowledge but also cultivate essential soft skills like leadership, collaboration, and adaptability, thereby aligning History education with broader employability and social justice goals.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teacher education programs systematically incorporate structured visual pedagogy modules, emphasising interpretive strategies for visual sources. Institutions should facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations, especially between History and Art departments, to develop comprehensive visual literacy curricula. Furthermore, assessment practices should diversify to include visual and creative outputs, fostering inclusivity and catering to varied learner strengths. These initiatives can strengthen pre-service teachers' capacity for critical analysis, ethical engagement, and leadership competencies essential for both educational practice and civic participation.

CONCLUSION

This study reaffirms that visual historical sources are powerful pedagogical tools that deepen historical understanding while nurturing critical thinking, empathy, and leadership among pre-service teachers. Grounded in social constructivist principles, the integration of visual media such as paintings, posters, and photographs creates an engaging learning environment where learners actively construct meaning, reflect ethically, and connect historical inquiry to real-world contexts. Such practices not only advance decolonial and learner-centred pedagogies but also equip future educators with transferable competencies essential for navigating diverse professional and social spaces. By fostering both intellectual and emotional growth, structured visual pedagogy prepares pre-service teachers to engage complex histories critically and responsibly. Future research should extend this work by examining the long-term impact of visual pedagogy and its adaptability across different educational levels. Overall, embedding visual methodologies in teacher education promises to enhance historical understanding, strengthen professional capacities, and contribute to a more inclusive and socially just educational landscape.

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