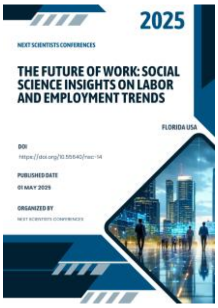

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DESIGN ENGINEERING COMPETENCE

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Abstract. Rapid advances in digital technologies are transforming engineering practice and reshaping the competences required of contemporary design engineers. This study investigates how digitally mediated tools, environments and pedagogies contribute to the formation of design-engineering competence among undergraduate students. The findings show that immersive digital ecosystems integrating cloud-based computer-aided design (CAD), simulation, additive manufacturing and data-driven feedback accelerate the acquisition of holistic design skills, enhance collaborative problem solving and promote reflective decision-making. The article concludes with recommendations for curriculum designers seeking to align educational outcomes with the demands of Industry 5.0.

Keywords: - Digital technologies; design-engineering competence; computer-aided design; engineering education; Industry 5.0.

INTRODUCTION

Design engineering occupies a pivotal position at the intersection of creative ideation and technical realisation. Historically, competence in this domain was cultivated through apprenticeship-style studios and analogue drafting, where tacit knowledge gradually ossified into professional routines. Over the past three decades, however, the proliferation of digital technologies—from parametric CAD systems to generative design algorithms—has reconfigured the epistemic foundations of engineering design, challenging educators to rethink how competences are developed and assessed [1].

Within the broader discourse on digital transformation, two complementary trends have shaped the design-engineering landscape. First, the integration of cyber-physical systems has blurred the boundary between virtual prototypes and physical artefacts; additive manufacturing, for instance, enables near-instant materialisation of digital models, tightening feedback loops and encouraging iterative experimentation [2]. Second, the rise of data-centric engineering, underpinned by cloud computing and artificial intelligence, has introduced predictive analytics and automated optimisation into everyday design cycles [3]. These shifts necessitate a reconceptualisation of competence that encompasses not only technical proficiency but also adaptive expertise, collaborative literacy and ethical awareness.

Despite growing agreement on the need for digitally enriched curricula, empirical evidence concerning the specific mechanisms through which digital technologies foster design-engineering competence remains fragmented. Several studies report improved modelling accuracy and reduced development time when students employ advanced CAD platforms [4]; others note positive effects on creativity and systems thinking following exposure to generative algorithms [5]. Yet most investigations isolate single technologies or focus on performance metrics divorced from deeper cognitive and social processes. This study therefore addresses

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the question: How do integrated digital technologies collectively influence the development of design-engineering competence in higher education?

The ecosystem for the EG featured four interconnected components. A cloud-native CAD environment provided real-time collaborative modelling; a simulation module offered finite-element and computational-fluid-dynamics analysis; a generative-design engine suggested topology-optimised geometries; and an additive-manufacturing station enabled rapid prototyping. All components fed data into a learning analytics dashboard accessible to students and instructors, visualising design iterations, error frequencies and material usage.

Forty-eight students voluntarily participated, evenly split between the two cohorts. Prior academic performance and baseline digital literacy, measured by a pre-intervention survey, showed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$), ensuring comparability.

Both groups tackled the same capstone project: designing a portable water-filtration device for use in remote areas. The CG attended weekly three-hour sessions focused on sequential CAD tutorials, manual stress calculations and reports. The EG experienced studio-style workshops where modelling, simulation and prototyping occurred iteratively within the digital ecosystem. Instructor guidance emphasised reflective dialogue, encouraging students to justify design decisions in light of simulation feedback and generative-design suggestions.

Competence development was assessed along four dimensions—conceptual, procedural, strategic and socio-communicative—derived from the European Engineering Education Reference Framework [6]. Instruments included a knowledge test, rubric-based artefact evaluation, trace-data analytics and semi-structured interviews. The knowledge test addressed principles of digital product development and was administered pre- and post-intervention. Artefacts (final prototypes and documentation) were reviewed by an external panel of three industry engineers. Trace data captured timestamps, version histories and simulation iterations. Interviews explored learner perceptions of technology affordances and challenges.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 29. Independent-samples t-tests compared post-test scores, while ANCOVA controlled for baseline differences. Artefact ratings, expressed as composite scores out of 100, were subjected to Mann–Whitney U tests due to non-normal distribution. Trace-data variables, such as mean iteration depth, were normalised and correlated with artefact quality using Spearman's rho. Qualitative transcripts underwent thematic coding in NVivo, with inter-coder agreement exceeding 0.82.

Interview narratives highlighted three salient themes. First, digital tools expanded the perceptual horizon of design problems by visualising stress distributions and flow patterns in real time, enabling rapid hypothesis testing. Second, the generative-design algorithm was perceived as an ideation catalyst that provoked reconsideration of conventional geometries, though some students reported initial confusion when algorithmic suggestions conflicted with intuition. Third, the shared cloud workspace fostered a culture of transparency, making design rationale visible and stimulating peer feedback.

The evidence indicates that digitally integrated environments can significantly enhance the multifaceted competence required of design engineers. The cognitive benefits stem from offloading routine calculations to simulation modules, thereby freeing attentional resources for strategically framing problems and evaluating broader design implications. This finding aligns with the theory of distributed cognition, which posits that cognitive processes are amplified when artefacts effectively externalise internal reasoning [7].

Furthermore, the positive relationship between iteration depth and artefact quality corroborates literatures on experiential learning, suggesting that rapid prototyping cycles facilitate convergence toward robust solutions. Unlike conventional CAD laboratories, the ecosystem coupled analytical feedback with physical instantiation via additive manufacturing, shortening the reflective feedback loop. Notably, students situated algorithmic outputs within a critical discourse rather than accepting them unconditionally, signaling emergent algorithmic literacy as an integral sub-competence.

The socio-communicative dimension also benefited from digital transparency. When file histories and simulation logs became collective resources, collaboration shifted from task division to joint knowledge construction. Such practices echo the epistemic cultures of professional engineering firms, where integrated product-data management systems anchor decision-making [8].

Limitations include the single-institution context, the moderate sample size and potential instructor bias despite efforts to standardise teaching across groups. Longitudinal research is warranted to examine retention of competences and their transferability to workplace settings.

Digital technologies, when orchestrated as interconnected cognitive and social amplifiers, substantially enrich the development of design-engineering competence. By merging real-time simulation, generative algorithms and rapid prototyping within a collaborative cloud infrastructure, educators can cultivate adaptive expertise and innovation-oriented mindsets essential for Industry 5.0. Strategic curriculum design should embed reflective scaffolds, promote algorithmic literacy and ensure equitable access to advanced tools. Policymakers and accreditation bodies are encouraged to update competency frameworks to acknowledge the transformative role of digital ecosystems in engineering education.

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