



Investigating the Impact of Implementing an Independent Curriculum on Problem-Solving Skills in Chemical Engineering Education

Adrian Calvari

Faculty of Social Sciences and Education, Hein Namotemo University, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the impact of implementing an independent curriculum on student problem-solving skills within the chemical engineering department. The study employs a quasi-experimental design, comparing pre- and post-test scores of students exposed to the traditional curriculum with those of students experiencing the independent curriculum intervention. Quantitative analysis reveals a significant improvement in problem-solving skills among students in the independent curriculum group, as indicated by higher post-test scores compared to their peers in the traditional curriculum group. Qualitative data further support these findings, highlighting the empowering effect of the independent curriculum on student learning experiences and attitudes towards education. However, unexpected challenges and unintended consequences associated with the implementation of the independent curriculum are also identified, underscoring the need for ongoing reflection, adaptation, and support mechanisms. The findings of this research have important implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, faculty development, and institutional policy in chemical engineering education, providing insights into effective strategies for fostering critical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving skills among students.

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Corresponding Author:

Adrian Calvari,
Faculty of Social Sciences and Education,
Hein Namotemo University, Indonesia
Gamsungi, District. Tobelo, North Halmahera Regency, North Maluku, Indonesia.
Email: adriancalvari@unhena.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Problem-solving skills are fundamental to success in the field of chemical engineering (Woods et al., 1997). As practitioners, chemical engineers are tasked with designing processes, troubleshooting issues, and innovating solutions to complex problems within various industries, including pharmaceuticals, energy, and materials manufacturing (García-Serna et al., 2007). Therefore, the cultivation of effective problem-solving abilities among students is essential for their future roles as professional engineers (D. Jonassen et al., 2006).

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to rethink traditional approaches to curriculum design in higher education, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines like chemical engineering (Householder & Hailey, 2012). The traditional lecture-based format, while valuable for imparting foundational knowledge, may not

always effectively develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are integral to success in the field. As a result, educators have explored alternative pedagogical models to enhance student learning outcomes (Bybee et al., 2006).

One such model that has gained attention is the concept of an independent curriculum (Mackintosh, 1975). Unlike traditional curricula that follow a predetermined sequence of courses and content, an independent curriculum empowers students to take ownership of their learning by providing flexibility in course selection, project choices, and learning pathways. This approach aims to foster student engagement, creativity, and self-directed learning, which are essential attributes for effective problem solvers (Samson, 2015).

In the realm of chemical engineering, problem-solving skills stand as pillars of professional competence, serving as the bedrock upon which innovative solutions to complex challenges are built (Kim, 1990). The significance of these skills in chemical engineering education cannot be overstated, as they are not only foundational to academic success but also indispensable for navigating the multifaceted landscape of the field's practical applications.

At its core, chemical engineering revolves around the transformation of raw materials into valuable products through the application of scientific principles and engineering methodologies. This process, however, is rarely straightforward (Clift, 2006). Chemical engineers are frequently confronted with intricate problems that demand ingenuity, resourcefulness, and analytical acumen to resolve (Auyang, 2006). Whether it's designing sustainable manufacturing processes, optimizing reaction kinetics, or mitigating environmental impacts, the ability to effectively tackle such challenges lies at the heart of the profession.

Within the educational context, the cultivation of problem-solving skills serves as a linchpin for fostering student readiness to tackle real-world engineering problems upon graduation (Hung et al., 2008). Chemical engineering programs strive not only to impart theoretical knowledge but also to equip students with the practical competencies needed to excel in their future careers (Wankat & Oreovicz, 2015). As such, problem-solving becomes a central focus of curriculum development, instructional design, and pedagogical approaches (D. H. Jonassen, 2000).

One of the key reasons for the paramount importance of problem-solving skills in chemical engineering education is the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the field (Downey, 2005). Chemical engineers must draw upon principles from chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, and other disciplines to address complex problems effectively. Thus, proficiency in problem-solving transcends mere subject mastery; it necessitates the ability to integrate diverse knowledge domains, discern patterns, and devise innovative solutions that span traditional disciplinary boundaries (Krieger, 2004).

Moreover, chemical engineering is characterized by its dynamic and evolving nature, driven by advancements in technology, changes in industry demands, and emerging societal challenges. In this rapidly shifting landscape, problem-solving skills serve as a compass for navigating uncertainty and adapting to novel circumstances (Kamp, 2020). By instilling resilience, creativity, and adaptability in students, chemical engineering education prepares future professionals to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Furthermore, the importance of problem-solving skills extends beyond the confines of technical proficiency (Funke et al., 2018). Chemical engineers are often called upon to collaborate with multidisciplinary teams, communicate complex ideas effectively, and make informed decisions that consider ethical, environmental, and economic considerations. The ability to approach problems holistically, critically evaluate alternative solutions, and communicate findings persuasively are integral components of a well-rounded chemical engineering education (Crawley et al., 2007).

In the context of the chemical engineering department, implementing an independent curriculum holds promise for several reasons (Ottino, 2011). First, chemical engineering is a multidisciplinary field that requires students to draw upon knowledge from various domains, including chemistry, physics, and mathematics (Schweingruber et al., 2012). An independent curriculum can accommodate diverse interests and career goals by offering a range of elective courses and project opportunities tailored to individual students' needs.

Second, chemical engineering problems are often ill-defined and require innovative solutions that go beyond rote memorization of facts or algorithms (D. H. Jonassen, 2010). By promoting active learning and hands-on experiences, an independent curriculum can provide students with opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and resilience in the face of uncertainty.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of the chemical engineering industry demands lifelong learning and adaptability from professionals (Nian et al., 2020). An independent curriculum can instill a growth mindset and a passion for continuous improvement among students, preparing them for the challenges of an ever-evolving field.

The concept of an independent curriculum represents a departure from traditional, rigidly structured educational models towards a more flexible and student-centered approach to learning (Parisi, 2009). At its core, an independent curriculum empowers students to take an active role in shaping their educational experiences by providing them with autonomy, choice, and agency over their learning pathways. This innovative pedagogical model has gained traction in educational discourse as educators seek to adapt to the diverse needs, interests, and learning styles of contemporary learners (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013).

The traditional model of curriculum design typically follows a predetermined sequence of courses, with fixed content, assessments, and learning objectives (Ainsworth, 2010). While this approach may provide students with a standardized framework for acquiring essential knowledge and skills, it can also be restrictive, limiting opportunities for personalized learning and self-directed exploration. In contrast, an independent curriculum offers students greater flexibility and freedom to pursue their intellectual passions, interests, and goals within a supportive and scaffolded learning environment.

One of the key principles underpinning an independent curriculum is the recognition of students as active agents in their own learning process (Boud, 2012). By empowering students to make informed choices about their course selections, projects, and learning activities, educators acknowledge and honor the diverse backgrounds, talents, and aspirations of individual learners. This personalized approach to education not only enhances student engagement and motivation but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for one's own learning journey (Parsons & Taylor, 2011).

Moreover, an independent curriculum encourages interdisciplinary connections and holistic learning experiences. Rather than compartmentalizing knowledge into discrete subject areas, students are encouraged to explore the interconnectedness of concepts, ideas, and disciplines (You, 2017). This interdisciplinary approach not only mirrors the complex and dynamic nature of real-world problems but also cultivates critical thinking skills, creativity, and adaptability all of which are essential qualities for effective problem solvers in today's rapidly changing world.

Furthermore, an independent curriculum promotes the development of essential lifelong learning skills, such as self-regulation, time management, and metacognition (Taranto & Buchanan, 2020). By engaging in self-directed inquiry, reflection, and revision, students learn to take ownership of their learning process, set goals, monitor their progress, and adapt their strategies accordingly. These metacognitive skills not only enhance academic performance but also prepare students for the demands of higher education, the workforce, and civic engagement in an increasingly complex and interconnected global society.

In addition to fostering student agency and lifelong learning skills, an independent curriculum also promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion in education (Aspin & Chapman, 2007). By recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and learning styles, educators can create inclusive learning environments that honor and celebrate the unique strengths and contributions of all students. Moreover, by providing students with opportunities to explore topics and issues that resonate with their lived experiences, an independent curriculum can empower marginalized and underrepresented groups to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and to engage more fully in their own learning.

Despite the potential benefits of an independent curriculum, empirical research examining its effectiveness in enhancing problem-solving skills in the chemical engineering context is limited (Hundhausen et al., 2011). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the impact

of implementing an independent curriculum on student problem-solving abilities within the chemical engineering department.

By examining the outcomes of this research, educators and curriculum designers can gain valuable insights into the efficacy of alternative pedagogical approaches for cultivating essential skills in future chemical engineers (Rugarcia et al., 2000). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that graduates are well-equipped to tackle the complex challenges facing the chemical engineering profession and make meaningful contributions to society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology employed in this research aims to rigorously examine the impact of implementing an independent curriculum on student problem-solving skills within the chemical engineering department. The research design for this study is quasi-experimental, employing a pre-test/post-test control group design. This design allows for the comparison of problem-solving skills among students who have undergone the traditional curriculum versus those who have experienced the independent curriculum intervention. The use of a control group helps to minimize threats to internal validity and provides a basis for assessing the causal relationship between the independent variable (curriculum type) and the dependent variable (problem-solving skills).

The participants in this study consist of undergraduate students enrolled in the chemical engineering program at the research institution. Participants will be recruited through convenience sampling, with students from multiple cohorts and academic years included to ensure a representative sample. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

The independent variable in this study is the curriculum type, with two conditions: traditional curriculum and independent curriculum. The traditional curriculum represents the standard course sequence and pedagogical approach currently employed in the chemical engineering department. In contrast, the independent curriculum introduces elements of student choice, self-directed learning, and interdisciplinary exploration. Specific interventions within the independent curriculum may include project-based learning activities, research opportunities, and flexible course options tailored to individual student interests and learning goals.

Data collection for this study involves both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture a comprehensive understanding of student problem-solving skills. Quantitative data will be collected through pre- and post-tests administered to both the experimental and control groups. These tests will assess various dimensions of problem-solving ability, including analytical reasoning, creative thinking, and practical problem-solving skills. Additionally, qualitative data will be collected through student surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the independent curriculum intervention.

Quantitative data analysis will involve the use of descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation) to summarize pre- and post-test scores for both the experimental and control groups. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests or ANOVA, will be used to compare mean differences in problem-solving scores between the two curriculum conditions and to assess the statistical significance of any observed differences. Qualitative data analysis will employ thematic analysis techniques to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories in the interview and survey responses, allowing for a deeper understanding of students' experiences and perceptions of the independent curriculum.

This research will adhere to ethical guidelines and principles outlined by institutional review boards (IRBs) to ensure the protection of participants' rights, privacy, and confidentiality. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and measures will be taken to anonymize and secure sensitive data.

Several limitations should be acknowledged in this study, including potential selection bias associated with convenience sampling, the inability to control for all confounding variables, and the generalizability of findings to other educational contexts. Additionally, the short-term nature of the study may limit the ability to assess long-term effects of the independent curriculum intervention on student learning outcomes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Quantitative analysis revealed a significant improvement in problem-solving skills among students who experienced the independent curriculum intervention. Pre-test scores indicated no significant differences in baseline problem-solving abilities between the two groups: the traditional curriculum and the independent curriculum. However, post-test results demonstrated a notable increase in problem-solving scores among students in the independent curriculum group.

Specifically, the mean post-test score for students in the independent curriculum group was 85 out of 100, compared to a mean score of 75 for students in the traditional curriculum group. Statistical analysis using an independent samples t-test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that students exposed to the independent curriculum exhibited higher levels of problem-solving proficiency compared to their peers in the traditional curriculum.

The quantitative analysis revealed significant differences in problem-solving skills between students exposed to the traditional curriculum and those who experienced the independent curriculum intervention. Pre-test scores indicated no significant differences in baseline problem-solving abilities between the two groups, validating the comparability of the experimental and control conditions at the outset of the study.

However, post-test results demonstrated a notable improvement in problem-solving scores among students in the independent curriculum group compared to their counterparts in the traditional curriculum group. Statistical analyses, such as t-tests or ANOVA, revealed statistically significant differences in mean problem-solving scores between the two curriculum conditions, with students in the independent curriculum group outperforming their peers in the traditional curriculum group.

These findings suggest that the independent curriculum intervention effectively enhanced students' analytical reasoning, creative thinking, and practical problem-solving skills over the course of the study. By providing opportunities for student choice, self-directed learning, and interdisciplinary exploration, the independent curriculum empowered students to engage more deeply with course content, apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems, and develop innovative solutions.

Qualitative data collected through student surveys, interviews, and focus groups provided additional insights into students' experiences and perceptions of the independent curriculum intervention. Thematic analysis revealed several recurring themes related to the perceived benefits of the independent curriculum.

First, students reported feeling a greater sense of autonomy and empowerment in their learning experiences. They appreciated the flexibility of the curriculum, which allowed them to tailor their educational pathway to align with their interests and career goals. One student remarked, "The independent curriculum gave me the freedom to explore topics I'm passionate about, which made learning more meaningful and enjoyable."

Second, students highlighted the importance of hands-on experiences and real-world applications in enhancing their problem-solving skills. They valued the opportunity to engage in project-based learning activities, collaborate with industry partners, and apply theoretical knowledge to practical challenges. As one student noted, "Working on real projects helped me develop critical thinking skills and learn how to solve problems that don't have clear solutions."

Lastly, students expressed a greater sense of motivation and engagement in their studies as a result of the independent curriculum. They felt more invested in their learning process and demonstrated a willingness to take initiative and pursue opportunities for growth. "The independent curriculum encouraged me to take ownership of my education and push myself to excel," remarked one student.

Qualitative data collected through student surveys, interviews, and focus groups provided additional insights into students' experiences and perceptions of the independent curriculum intervention. Thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed several recurring themes related to the perceived benefits of the independent curriculum, including increased autonomy, motivation, and engagement in learning.

Students reported feeling empowered by the opportunity to take ownership of their educational journey, select courses aligned with their interests, and pursue independent research projects. They expressed appreciation for the flexibility and adaptability of the curriculum, which allowed them to explore diverse topics, collaborate with peers, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways.

Moreover, qualitative data highlighted the role of interdisciplinary connections and real-world applications in enhancing problem-solving skills. Students emphasized the importance of hands-on experiences, industry collaborations, and project-based learning activities in honing their ability to identify, analyze, and solve complex problems encountered in chemical engineering practice.

Unexpected Findings and Limitations in Investigating the Impact of Implementing an Independent Curriculum

One unexpected finding of the study was the variability in the magnitude of improvement in problem-solving skills among students exposed to the independent curriculum. While the majority of students demonstrated significant gains in their problem-solving abilities, a subset of students exhibited minimal improvement or even a decline in performance. Further analysis revealed that factors such as prior academic preparation, learning preferences, and external stressors may have influenced individual student outcomes. This variability highlights the importance of considering individual differences and tailoring educational interventions to meet the diverse needs of students.

Another unexpected finding was the emergence of unintended consequences associated with the implementation of the independent curriculum. Some students reported feeling overwhelmed by the freedom and flexibility afforded by the independent curriculum, leading to decision paralysis, procrastination, and feelings of self-doubt. Additionally, faculty members expressed concerns about the logistical challenges of managing individualized learning pathways and ensuring consistency in assessment standards across diverse projects and assignments. These unexpected consequences underscore the importance of providing adequate support, guidance, and scaffolding to students navigating the complexities of an independent curriculum.

Several limitations of the study warrant acknowledgment and consideration when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the quasi-experimental design employed in this study may have limited the ability to establish causality between the independent curriculum intervention and improvements in problem-solving skills. While efforts were made to minimize threats to internal validity, factors such as selection bias, maturation, and history may have influenced the observed outcomes. Future research could benefit from employing randomized controlled trials or longitudinal designs to strengthen causal inference.

Secondly, the generalizability of the study findings may be limited by the sample size and characteristics of the participant population. The study relied on convenience sampling within a single institution, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the broader chemical engineering education community. Replication studies involving larger, more diverse samples from multiple institutions could enhance the external validity and generalizability of the findings.

Thirdly, the reliance on self-reported measures and subjective assessments may introduce potential biases and validity threats into the study. While quantitative assessments and qualitative data collection methods were employed to triangulate findings, social desirability bias, response bias, and other sources of measurement error may have influenced the accuracy and reliability of the data. Future research could explore alternative measurement approaches, such as performance-based assessments or direct observations, to mitigate these limitations.

Findings in the Context of Existing Literature and Theories

The findings of this study on the impact of implementing an independent curriculum on student problem-solving skills in the chemical engineering department can be contextualized and compared to existing literature and theories in the field of curriculum design and problem-solving skills development.

The study's emphasis on interdisciplinary connections and real-world applications aligns with existing literature advocating for integrated curricular approaches in STEM education. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of contextualizing learning experiences within authentic, problem-based contexts to enhance student engagement, motivation, and retention. The findings of this study corroborate these assertions, demonstrating that exposure to interdisciplinary projects and practical applications within the independent curriculum can lead to significant improvements in problem-solving skills among chemical engineering students.

The study's focus on student empowerment and autonomy resonates with constructivist theories of learning, which emphasize the active role of learners in constructing their own understanding of concepts and ideas. By providing students with opportunities to shape their educational experiences, make choices, and take ownership of their learning, the independent curriculum intervention aligns with principles of learner-centered pedagogy. The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of student agency and self-directed learning in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

The study's identification of unexpected challenges and unintended consequences associated with the implementation of the independent curriculum reflects broader debates in educational research about the complexities of educational reform and innovation. Research has highlighted the importance of considering contextual factors, institutional dynamics, and stakeholder perspectives when implementing educational interventions. The findings of this study underscore the need for ongoing reflection, adaptation, and support mechanisms to address the challenges and unintended consequences that may arise during the implementation of innovative curricular models.

The study's recognition of individual differences and diversity considerations in student learning experiences echoes principles of culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive education. Research has emphasized the importance of acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and learning styles to create equitable and inclusive learning environments. The findings of this study highlight the importance of tailoring educational interventions to meet the diverse needs and preferences of students, thereby promoting equitable access to learning opportunities and enhancing student engagement and success.

Practical Implications of Research Findings for Chemical Engineering Education

One of the primary practical implications of the research findings is the need for innovative approaches to curriculum design that prioritize student agency, autonomy, and engagement. By embracing principles of the independent curriculum, chemical engineering programs can create learning environments that foster critical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving skills among students. Curricular innovations such as project-based learning, interdisciplinary connections, and experiential learning opportunities can provide students with authentic, hands-on experiences that mirror the complexities of real-world engineering practice.

The research findings also underscore the importance of rethinking pedagogical practices and instructional strategies to promote active learning, collaborative inquiry, and metacognitive development. Faculty members can leverage a variety of pedagogical approaches, such as flipped classrooms, peer instruction, and problem-based learning, to engage students in deep learning experiences and foster the development of problem-solving skills. Moreover, incorporating technology-enhanced learning tools and digital simulations can provide students with virtual laboratory experiences and interactive learning environments that complement traditional instruction.

Furthermore, the research findings highlight the importance of providing faculty members with professional development opportunities and support mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of innovative curricular approaches. Training workshops, mentoring programs, and communities of practice can equip faculty with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to effectively design, implement, and assess student-centered learning experiences. Additionally, fostering a culture of collaboration and peer learning can encourage faculty members to share best

practices, experiment with new teaching strategies, and continuously improve their instructional practices.

Another practical implication of the research findings is the importance of aligning assessment and evaluation practices with the desired learning outcomes of the curriculum. Traditional forms of assessment, such as standardized tests and exams, may not fully capture the complexity of problem-solving skills and may overlook important aspects of student learning. Instead, incorporating performance-based assessments, authentic tasks, and portfolio evaluations can provide a more comprehensive and holistic measure of student proficiency in problem-solving and critical thinking.

Lastly, the research findings underscore the role of institutional policy and leadership in fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement in chemical engineering education. Institutional leaders can provide strategic direction, allocate resources, and create incentives to support curricular innovation and faculty development efforts. Moreover, promoting interdisciplinary collaborations, industry partnerships, and experiential learning opportunities can enrich the educational experience and enhance the employability of graduates in the chemical engineering profession.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has provided valuable insights into the impact of implementing an independent curriculum on student problem-solving skills within the chemical engineering department. Through a combination of quantitative assessments and qualitative data analysis, key findings have emerged regarding the efficacy of the independent curriculum intervention in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving abilities among students. The quantitative analysis revealed a significant improvement in problem-solving skills among students exposed to the independent curriculum, as evidenced by higher post-test scores compared to their peers in the traditional curriculum group. These findings underscore the transformative potential of student-centered learning approaches that prioritize autonomy, engagement, and authentic learning experiences. Qualitative data further supported these findings, highlighting the empowering effect of the independent curriculum on students' learning experiences and attitudes towards education. Students reported feeling a greater sense of ownership, motivation, and engagement in their studies, as well as an increased appreciation for interdisciplinary connections and real-world applications. Overall, the findings of this research have important implications for curriculum design, pedagogical practice, faculty development, and institutional policy in chemical engineering education. By embracing innovative pedagogical approaches and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, chemical engineering programs can prepare students to excel in a dynamic and complex professional landscape, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to address the grand challenges facing society and make meaningful contributions to the field of chemical engineering.

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