

Streamlining the Controls, Electronics and Automation Subjects in Manufacturing Engineering Programs

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Typical prototypes of manufacturing engineering programs are reviewed briefly in this paper. For the professionally oriented ones, the purpose of controls and electronics subjects is examined. It is recognised that these subjects introduce many technical concepts important for the manufacturing engineering graduates when they, for example, evaluate machine performance or communicate with other – primarily electronics – engineers. It is suggested, however, that far more tangible benefits could be derived from these long-established courses if they would be adapted to the needs of the present-day manufacturing engineers and streamlined to converge more prominently towards the automation course. The objective is to give to these subjects a more obvious purpose in the curriculum, and augment the employability of manufacturing engineers who may start their careers as technical specialists at the machine, workcentre or shopfloor levels of manufacturing organisations. Their ability to act as technology integrators at these levels would be enhanced significantly with a few critical topics linking the electronics, controls and automation domains. This would also accelerate their professional self-improvement and allow them to function more autonomously up to the factory level of their organisation.

Introduction

Both as a profession and as an engineering discipline, Manufacturing Engineering is growing rapidly in its breadth and scope. For instance, the rapid progress in computer-related technologies has “triggered an unprecedented metamorphosis and globalization of manufacturing during the last half of [the last] century [1].” These developments have “started to awaken us to the fact that, in actuality, manufacturing is not just a collection of various types of activities and processes but instead a system [2].”

In the past, it had sufficed for most manufacturing engineers to be ‘Technical Specialists’ functioning at the machine, workcentre, and/or shopfloor levels (see Figure 1). Today, manufacturing engineers are also expected to function as ‘Operations Integrators’ at the factory level and/or, even, ‘Manufacturing Strategists’ working at the enterprise or extended enterprise levels [3].

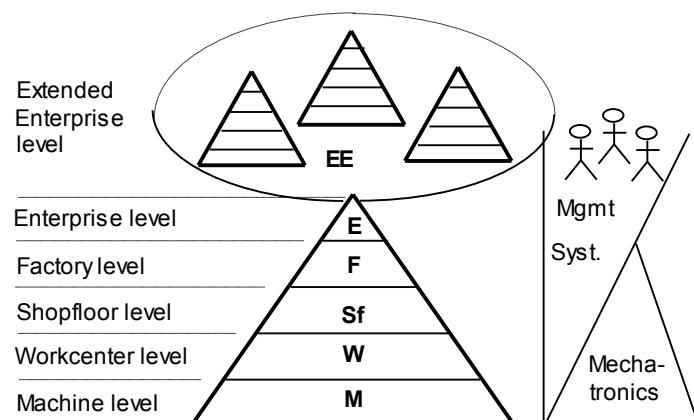


Figure 1: Modern manufacturing organization

Inevitably, the expanding disciplinary scope is subjecting manufacturing engineering education to “tensions” arising from the requirement to introduce “new topics, for example, logistics, legal aspects, financial, personnel and human factors...This need is in conflict with the diverse requirements for, *inter alia*, basic science and technology, design, environmental awareness, practical training *et cetera* [4].”

Often, while designing undergraduate manufacturing engineering programs, the tensions are exacerbated by societal limitations on program duration (usually, three or four years). Almost without exception, each curriculum development team is forced to be selective in its choice of topics. Thus, there is no single universally accepted prototype of undergraduate manufacturing engineering education. However, since *variety is the spice of life*, this should not be construed as an indictment of manufacturing education worldwide. Given the inherently dynamic nature of manufacturing engineering, it might be better to let manufacturing engineering education evolve in a Darwinian fashion—‘incremental evolution’, ‘mutation’, ‘survival of the fittest’—and the rest. However, the last notion requires that the evolution steps are periodically communicated and assessed with a view to positively influence curricular evolutionary steps elsewhere.

This paper summarizes the major evolutionary steps undergone by the undergraduate manufacturing engineering program at City University of Hong Kong along with a brief explanation of the environmental imperatives triggering each such step. An outline of the original profile of the program is available in [5]. Next, the pedagogical implications of the prevailing curricular choice is discussed with reference to one curricular component—the subject group addressing controls, electronics and automation.

Prototypes of Undergraduate Manufacturing Engineering Programs

Figure 2 lists a selection of prototypes of undergraduate manufacturing engineering programs. One classical prototype is ‘science-based’. This prototype recognizes that the purpose of undergraduate education is to support the long-term careers (spanning around forty years) of students. Hence, the emphasis is on scientific principles that have much longer life cycles than those of technologies and products. With this prototype, typically, courses focusing on basic sciences of particular interest to manufacturing engineers (e.g., materials science, solid mechanics, electronics, and control systems) are taught in the earlier years of the program. This is followed by a set of courses directed at a scientific understanding of manufacturing processes, and shopfloor level manufacturing planning and control so as to underpin courses focusing on manufacturing applications and problem solving in later years. This prototype is particularly successful when the student population as a whole is intellectually inclined and proficient.

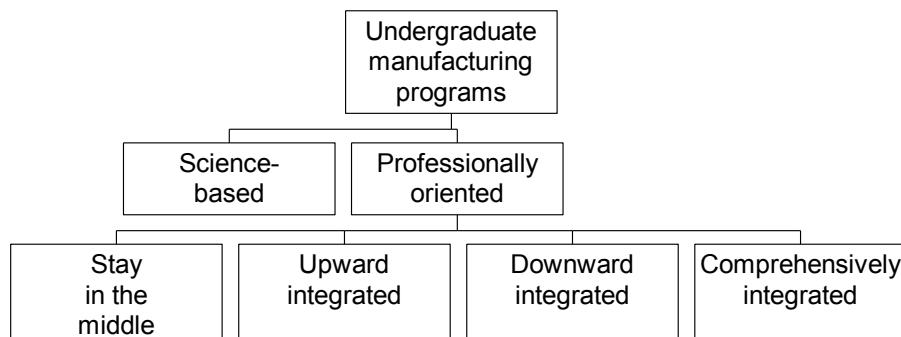


Figure 2: Prototypes of manufacturing programs

Another classical prototype is the professionally oriented one that places premium on the utility of the student soon after graduation to industry. Typically, this prototype trades some of the emphasis on scientific principles in favor of increased skills of application and integration. The prototype is often preferred in regions (e.g., the U.K. and Hong Kong) where, historically, engineering programs have strived to attain accreditation from local and/or international professional institutions. Less intellectually endowed students seem to thrive on such professionally oriented programs.

Classical professionally oriented programs focus on technological issues of importance in performing manufacturing engineering functions at the workcentre and shopfloor levels (and, to some extent, at the machine level) —see Figure 1. Initially, most professionally oriented programs ‘stayed in the middle’ around the shopfloor level issues (Sf) with some upward integration of factory level issues (F) and some downward integration of workcentre level (W) issues. However, the programs started diverging as pressures for broadening curricula mounted. Some followed the path of upward integration by progressively integrating issues of interest at higher levels (enterprise and extended enterprise levels). Such programs acquired a ‘managerial’ flavour. Others chose a downward integrative path focusing on technological issues at the workcentre and machine levels (W and M). Some were initially ambivalent and, hence, chose the ‘comprehensively integrated’ path.

While these diversifications are illustrated next in a form of a case study from Hong Kong, it is clear that each prototype must be monitored closely to assure continued validity of its purpose and direction. Improving such qualities for professionally oriented (except ‘upward integrated’) programs is the objective of the subsequent part of this paper.

Diversification Case Study from Hong Kong

The undergraduate manufacturing engineering program offered by City University of Hong Kong was launched in 1988. Around 1986, Hong Kong’s manufacturing sector was contributing some 24% of the territory’s GDP and employing over 30% of the domestic workforce. The sector had passed through the ‘productivity (P) era’ and was in the midst of ‘quality (Q) era’ [6]. Prior to the City University’s program, only two undergraduate manufacturing engineering programs were available in the territory—one adopting the ‘stay in the middle’ strategy, and the other the ‘upward integrated’ strategy. Both programs were of three years duration (following 13 years of schooling) and were professionally oriented in response to societal expectation that the graduates should be capable of being accredited by a professional institution (in particular, by the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers).

Having arrived relatively late on the scene, we recognized that future manufacturing engineers must work not just as “technical specialists” but also as “operations integrators” and “manufacturing strategists” [3]. Hence, we tried to differentiate our program by choosing the

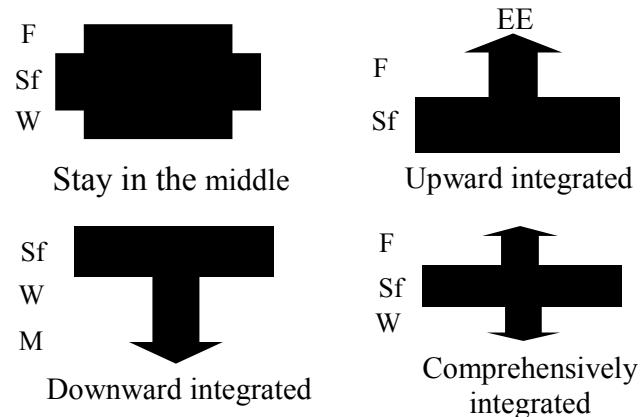


Figure 3: Professionally oriented

‘comprehensively integrated’ prototype. Several initiatives taken by us to sustain comprehensive integration are described in [5].

However, by the early 1990s, several factors prompted us to abandon the comprehensive strategy. Firstly, we realized that such an extensive integration could not be effectively implemented within the program span of three years. Our students could not cope with a very large variety of courses. As a result, their learning tended to be sketchy. Secondly, much of Hong Kong’s manufacturing operations had started to migrate to the Chinese mainland in pursuit of lower land and labor costs. The notion of ‘made by Hong Kong’ started replacing that of ‘made in Hong Kong’. Thus, by year 2000, domestic employment in manufacturing shrunk to around 6%. This meant that Hong Kong needed a set of ‘upward integrated’ graduates to support its growing number of mainland-based operations. However, at the same time, domestic operations became progressively more technology- and design-oriented. Hence, Hong Kong also needed ‘downward integrated’ technical specialists.

Based on the above considerations we partitioned our program into three streams: Systems stream (S): upward integrated; Manufacturing Technology stream (M): stay in the middle; and Electronic/computer automated stream (E): downward integrated. Inevitably, these changes in our curricular structure prompted us to apply different pedagogic approaches to different streams of students.

Since we had already been operating a separate undergraduate programs in Mechatronic Engineering, our downward integrated E-stream soon acquired a distinctly mechatronic flavour [7]. According to IRDAC, the Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee of the European Community, the term ‘Mechatronics’ refers to “a synergistic combination of precision mechanics, engineering, electronic control and systems thinking in the design of products, and manufacturing processes [8].” Thus, the subject group related to Controls, Electronics and Automation forms the core of this stream’s curriculum. The rest of this paper will discuss some pedagogic approaches particularly suited while addressing this subject group in a professionally oriented program that is not ‘upward integrated’.

The Problem

Manufacturing engineers often conceptualise various end-attachments suitable for particular tasks they encounter. Attaching them to robots is not always feasible either in terms of the cost, prohibitive weight of the attachment, or range required. An example of one end-attachment used in assembly is shown in Figure 4.

Ability to design and build the motion system and complete the rest of machines such as that illustrated in Figure 5 (“the Task”) would represent a definite boost for the status, employability, and demand for fresh manufacturing-engineering graduates. After all, they received university training in the individual disciplines relevant to the Task (including electronics, mechanics, controls, programming, automation, and design), which should imply their ability to tackle the Task.

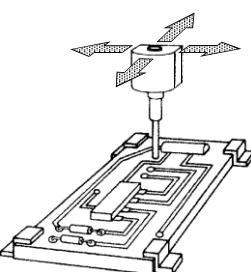


Figure 4: End-attachment

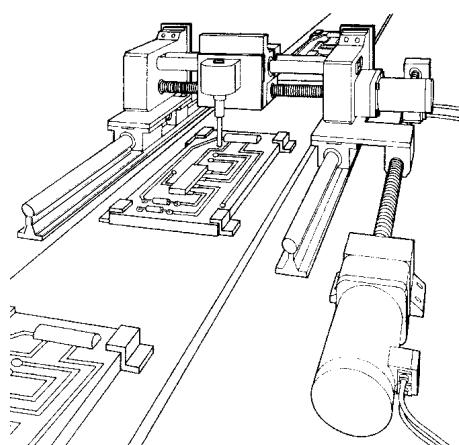


Figure 5: Assembly machine

In the experience of the authors, however, for the most part, manufacturing engineering graduates try to avoid having to face the not so tough challenges associated with the Task. They would rather see them delegated to their electronics and mechanical engineering colleagues. The recognition of, and demand for, manufacturing engineers are adversely affected in the process.

While the said Task might appear complex because the end-attachment must reach any point in the given plane with high accuracy, it is accomplished easily through integration of commercially available modules of the type shown in Figure 6. Complete with a motor, brake, lead-screw, slides, and sensors, a module like this (Figure 6), provides support, actuation, and position and velocity feedback for the load (end-attachment) along the cross-wise direction in Figure 5. It can be purchased pre-assembled, of custom length and from a range of capacities. Combining two or three of these to achieve motion in a given plane or space is a simple task indeed. Controlling such motion is also simple with commercially available motion-controllers. These controllers come with software dedicated for controlling motion along multiple degrees of freedom. They auto-tune themselves for the optimum performance along each axis with respect to the design requirements, can correct for many mechanical problems such as the lack of orthogonality between pairs of axes, static deflections, transmission backlash, etc. Some electronic interfacing is also needed to complete the overall system. This is often needed even if all machines are to be purchased ready-made rather than built in-house (functioning at the shopfloor level).

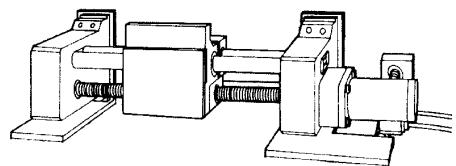


Figure 6: Design Modularity

While a desire to cooperate with engineers from other disciplines on larger projects is certainly to be encouraged, the inability to tackle the problem autonomously may translate into a lost job opportunity and may be, sooner or later, taken for what it is: inability. Moreover, following any cooperative endeavour on the Task reported to the management, the manufacturing engineer may receive an inappropriate recognition because the power and sophistication of the off-the-shelf motion controller can be made to attract undue attention if the completed machine functions satisfactorily; otherwise, shortcomings of the end-attachment (the manufacturing engineer's responsibility) are easily noticed.

Contradiction?

While methods for equipment control used in manufacturing have changed immensely over the last three decades, manufacturing education in this domain has not kept up with the developments. Changes in the syllabus for the controls course, for example, largely reflect the advancement of the discipline itself (such as the introduction of the state-space system description some time ago) or the improvement of the user-friendliness in doing the same old things more conveniently with the aid of computerized packages (such as plotting the root-locus using MATLAB[®] software). Details of the control theory (Routh's stability criterion, Cauchy's theorem and root-locus come to mind) are often taught under the 'pretence' of providing deep knowledge in the domain of controls, this domain being the stepping-stone to unmanned operations. However, the course on automation as it stands at present could precede the one on controls without loss of continuity. It could similarly precede the electronics course that is often dominated by material that has had a diminished significance already for some 20 odd years. The connection between the electronics, controls and automation courses is usually not made obvious to the students and their integration and complementarity are incomplete at best.

To include or not to include

The said theoretical details from the domain of controls, for example, are not the deep domain knowledge needed to complete the design of the device shown in Figure 5. Insistence on those details has a negative effect as it detracts from the key controls concepts and students often pass the controls course without true intuitive understanding and cause-effect visualisation of terms such as the derivative control, integral control, or bandwidth; terms that must be understood well in order to make full use of motion controllers. To clarify this point by analogy, while a deep intuitive understanding and visualization of stresses is required to properly execute a finite element method (FEM) of stress analysis, one does not have to know the analytic solution of stresses in a curved plate with holes as that is precisely what FEM will calculate if applied properly – which reinforces the need for deep understanding of the basics.

Even if the fresh graduate successfully applies say the root-locus technique, what purpose does this accomplish? (S)he cannot complete the assembly machine because (s)he fears even to look at all the electronic interconnections such as the PWM (pulse width modulation), PFM (pulse frequency modulation) or analog inputs of the servo amplifier. Not to mention that (s)he could not carryout the root-locus technique precisely because (s)he does not know how to connect the system and therefore does not have the transfer function. The knowledge required to overcome this vicious circle is relatively simple, quite interesting (students would enjoy this material infinitely more than the root-locus technique) and it could be shared between modified electronics, controls and automation courses. The situation would then be avoided where a manufacturing engineering graduate, with a general purpose controller (rather than motion controller) at his disposal, does not even know where to start, let alone attempt to write a simple control program that includes the derivative and integral actions for driving a load along a linear slide.

In the authors' opinion, the worst consequence of unadjusted syllabi is the confusion created in the mind of a fresh graduate. Faced with an equipment design task, (s)he is likely to check her/his university notes. (S)he will quickly realize the need for a mathematical model of the system whether (s)he chooses Routh's or Nyquist stability criterium. However, probably very few practising manufacturing engineers have ever written a mathematical model of a system under their responsibility and then calculated, as trained at the university, the required controller parameters that assure the desired performance. To begin with, in the case of some pick and place mechanism, for example,

- (i) real-world motion systems commonly include non-linear influences (friction, hysteresis, stiction...)
- (ii) multiple axes have to be controlled, each with respect to a number of variables (position, velocity, acceleration...) simultaneously, in the presence of strong cross-coupling between at least some of these, and
- (iii) the moment of inertia reflected onto the motor shaft varies with the load position, meaning that the system is not one with constant parameters.

All these aspects are prohibitive for the direct application of the theory of *linear* control of *single-input-single-output* systems with *constant parameters* that manufacturing engineers were trained for at the university and that the root-locus technique is valid for.

In the experience of the author, insisting on the details of this control theory has an added disadvantage in that the students' intuitive understanding of the most fundamental concepts is clouded to the point that disappointingly few alumni can recall almost any. A preferred

alternative for manufacturing engineering students may be to insist that deep understanding of only the basic fundamentals is gained. Then, introduce the more intuitive concepts such as fuzzy control, without going into the mathematical foundation of fuzzy logic. Both have to be computer-implemented fully with the actual programming code analysed in order to open the door for further explorations upon graduation.

Use commercially available motion controllers in the automation course and the students will quickly realise that they have been empowered to solve virtually any automation task. They may focus fully on the task itself, rather than on how to control motors to achieve that task, the latter now being delegated to the routines embedded in the controller. A discussion here about auto-tuning of the controller parameters (P,I,D...) would reinforce the notion that the pieces of the curriculum actually fit together. Interfacing still remains a problem (typically of the encoder and servo-amplifier) and should perhaps be the prime focus of the electronics course specifically designed for manufacturing engineering students.

Much of the circuit theory and almost everything about transistors (except in switching circuits) that has been entrenched in the electronics syllabi for many years would have to be replaced by the black-box approach to the common integrated circuits (operational amplifiers, logic gates, servo controllers with PWM/PFM outputs...). This high level approach would be supplemented by details on selected topics such as switch de-bouncing, impedance matching, voltage level conversion and similar interfacing problems. Such details are not easy to master on one's own and, if not addressed in the classroom, are likely to become an impenetrable barrier to a manufacturing engineer's hands-on, life-long learning endeavour in technology integration.

Overall, the traditional boundaries between electronics, controls and automation subjects should become blurred, with the emphasis shifting from mechanics towards electronics and computing to reflect the historical transfer of automation functions from mechanical to electronics and software domains as evident by the fading out of the Geneva mechanism used to generate indexing motion of the turntables. The result would be a more mechatronic flavoured content of most engineering courses including those on design. Just sending the students to the electronics department for an additional electronics course would not achieve the objective.

A possible alternative

The majority of teaching staff in manufacturing engineering departments probably feel rather uncomfortable with electronics subjects. Hence, instead of intertwining electronics into core engineering subjects, it is often considered easier to send the students to the electronics department for an additional course or two on basic electronics. The students would get there much detail about the material they may not be in position to apply upon graduation, but will still not know how to complete the design of Figure 5.

A solution seems to be for the current versions of the electronics, controls and automation courses to be redesigned thoroughly into three automation courses. Such thorough integration would assure that the problem of drain characteristics of field effect transistors being available with insufficient precision for their graphical performance-analysis with small signal amplitudes, gets a low priority level when deciding what to include in the manufacturing engineers' curriculum – similarly for the root-locus technique from the controls domain. After all, much of manufacturing engineering is about integration, and assuring that the syllabi are well integrated with a specific aim in mind should therefore not be too much to expect from professors of manufacturing engineering.

Conclusion

Major prototypes of undergraduate manufacturing engineering programs are science based and professionally oriented ones. The varieties of the professionally oriented program include the “upward integrated”, “downward integrated”, “comprehensively integrated” and “stay in the middle” prototypes. For the latter three, the downward integrated in particular, the need to give to the controls and electronics subjects a better sense of purpose and direction is suggested. It is recognised that these courses make manufacturing engineering students familiar with the present-day all-important technical concepts of system transient response, phase shift, bandwidth and frequency-dependent performance. It is suggested, however, that the benefits the graduates derive from this group of long-established courses could be far greater than is commonly the case if the respective syllabi would be better integrated with a clear convergence towards the automation course. As it stands at present, the order in which these three courses are taught is irrelevant. Crucial links between them are largely missing. For the electronics and controls subjects, the sense of purpose and direction in the curriculum are not made sufficiently clear to the students and the true mechatronic character is absent. As a result, the manufacturing engineering graduates’ ability for self-improvement in the domain of technology integration is hindered, thus lowering their status and diminishing their employability. Consequently, their career progression towards the (extended) enterprise level of the manufacturing organization may be delayed.

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