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A METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING CREATIVE THINKING IN ENGINEERING STUDENTS BASED ON STEM TECHNOLOGIES

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Research Article

Keywords: Creative thinking, STEM education, Engineering pedagogy, Design thinking, Technology integration, Higher education, Innovation skills

Posted Date: April 9th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9337171/v1

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Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive methodology for developing creative thinking skills in engineering students through the integration of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) technologies. The research addresses the growing demand for innovative engineers capable of solving complex, interdisciplinary problems in an increasingly technology-driven world. A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative assessment of creative thinking abilities with qualitative analysis of student experiences. The methodology incorporates project-based learning, design thinking frameworks, and hands-on experimentation with emerging technologies including 3D printing, robotics, IoT systems, and computational modeling. Participants included 186 undergraduate engineering students enrolled in a semester-long interdisciplinary course. Creative thinking was measured using the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) and the Creative Engineering Design Assessment (CEDA). Results indicated statistically significant improvements in all dimensions of creative thinking, including fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Students demonstrated enhanced problem-solving capabilities and increased confidence in tackling open-ended design challenges. The findings suggest that intentional integration of STEM technologies within a structured pedagogical framework can effectively foster creative thinking competencies essential for future engineering practice. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on STEM education by providing empirical evidence for the efficacy of technology-enhanced approaches to creativity development in engineering education.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology and the increasing complexity of global challenges have fundamentally transformed the landscape of engineering practice. Modern engineers are no longer merely technical implementers but must serve as innovative problem-solvers capable of generating novel solutions to unprecedented challenges (National Academy of Engineering, 2024). This paradigm shift has placed creative thinking at the forefront of essential competencies for engineering graduates, prompting educators to reconsider traditional pedagogical approaches and embrace methods that actively cultivate innovation capabilities.

Creative thinking in engineering encompasses the ability to generate diverse ideas, approach problems from multiple perspectives, synthesize information across disciplines, and develop innovative solutions that are both technically feasible and socially valuable (Cropley, 2015). Research has consistently demonstrated that creativity is not merely an innate talent but a skill that can be developed through intentional educational interventions (Scott et al., 2004). However, traditional engineering education has often emphasized analytical and technical skills at the expense of creative development, resulting in graduates who may struggle with the open-ended, ambiguous challenges characteristic of real-world engineering practice.

The integration of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) technologies into educational practice offers promising opportunities for addressing this gap. STEM technologies, including 3D printing, robotics, Internet of Things (IoT) systems, computational modeling tools, and virtual reality environments, provide students with powerful platforms for experimentation, iteration, and innovation (Honey et al., 2014). These technologies enable rapid prototyping, facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration, and lower barriers to creative expression, making them potentially valuable tools for developing creative thinking competencies.

Despite growing interest in STEM education, there remains a need for empirically validated methodologies that effectively leverage these technologies to develop creative thinking in engineering students. While numerous studies have examined the impact of specific technologies or pedagogical approaches on student learning, comprehensive frameworks that integrate multiple STEM technologies within a coherent pedagogical structure are less common. Furthermore, the relationship between technology-enhanced learning experiences and the development of specific creative thinking dimensions requires further investigation.

This study addresses these gaps by presenting and evaluating a comprehensive methodology for developing creative thinking in engineering students through the integration of STEM technologies. The research is guided by the following objectives: (1) to design a pedagogical framework that integrates multiple STEM technologies within a structured approach to creative thinking development; (2) to implement this framework in an undergraduate engineering course; (3) to assess the impact of the methodology on students' creative thinking abilities; and (4) to identify factors that contribute to or inhibit the development of creative thinking in technology-enhanced learning environments.

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate educational context. As engineering challenges become increasingly complex and interdisciplinary, the ability to think creatively will be essential for addressing global issues such as climate change, sustainable development, healthcare innovation, and technological equity. By developing effective methodologies for cultivating creative thinking, engineering educators can better prepare students to contribute meaningfully to these critical challenges.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative measures of creative thinking with qualitative analysis of student experiences and perceptions. The mixed-methods approach was selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable outcomes and the underlying processes associated with the STEM-based creative thinking methodology (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative component utilized a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures, while the qualitative component incorporated phenomenological inquiry to explore students' lived experiences.

Participants

Participants were 186 undergraduate engineering students enrolled in an interdisciplinary design course at a large research university. The sample consisted of students from various engineering disciplines, including mechanical engineering (n=52), electrical engineering (n=48), computer engineering (n=41), and civil engineering (n=45). The gender distribution was 68% male and 32% female, reflecting the broader demographics of engineering education. Students ranged in age from 19 to 24 years (M=20.8, SD=1.2). Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Instructional Context

The methodology was implemented within a 15-week semester-long course titled "Innovation and Design in Engineering." The course was structured around a series of progressively complex design challenges that required students to apply STEM technologies in creative ways. The curriculum was organized into four thematic modules, each spanning approximately three to four weeks:

1. Foundations of Creative Engineering: Introduction to creative thinking concepts, design thinking methodology, and basic prototyping techniques using 3D printing technologies.

2. Intelligent Systems Design: Exploration of robotics and IoT systems for creating interactive solutions to real-world problems.

3. Computational Innovation: Application of computational modeling, simulation, and data analysis tools for design optimization and prediction.

4. Integrated Capstone Project: Synthesis of learned skills in a comprehensive design project addressing a complex, open-ended challenge.

STEM Technology Integration

The methodology intentionally integrated multiple STEM technologies to provide students with diverse platforms for creative expression. Table 1 summarizes the technologies employed and their pedagogical purposes.

Table 1: STEM Technologies Integrated in the Methodology

Technology	Applications	Creative Thinking Focus
3D Printing	Rapid prototyping, iterative design, custom component fabrication	Elaboration, idea materialization
Robotics Kits	Interactive system design, automation solutions	Flexibility, systems thinking
IoT Platforms	Connected device development, data collection systems	Interdisciplinary integration
Computational Modeling	Simulation, optimization, predictive analysis	Originality, analytical creativity
VR/AR Tools	Immersive design review, spatial visualization	Perspective shifting, elaboration

Pedagogical Framework

The methodology was grounded in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active knowledge construction through experience and reflection (Piaget, 1970). The pedagogical approach incorporated several complementary frameworks:

Design Thinking: Students engaged in the five-stage design thinking process (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test) as a structured approach to creative problem-solving (Brown, 2008). This framework provided scaffolding for creative thinking while maintaining focus on human-centered outcomes.

Project-Based Learning: All learning activities were organized around authentic, open-ended projects that required students to apply knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts (Krajcik & Shin, 2014). Projects were designed to have multiple viable solutions, encouraging divergent thinking and creative exploration. Collaborative Learning: Students worked in diverse teams throughout the course, fostering the exchange of perspectives and collaborative creativity (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Team composition was intentionally varied to maximize cognitive diversity.

Data Collection

Creative thinking was assessed using multiple instruments to capture different dimensions of this complex construct:

Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT): The figural form of the TTCT was administered at the beginning and end of the semester to assess four dimensions of creative thinking: fluency (number of ideas), flexibility (variety of categories), originality (uniqueness of ideas), and elaboration (detail and refinement) (Torrance, 2008). The TTCT is one of the most widely used and validated measures of creative thinking, with extensive normative data and established reliability.

Creative Engineering Design Assessment (CEDA): A rubric-based assessment tool specifically designed to evaluate creative performance in engineering design tasks (Charyton & Merrill, 2009). The CEDA

assesses creativity across six dimensions: problem definition, idea generation, design diversity, design quality, idea integration, and final design. Student design projects were evaluated by two independent raters using this instrument.

Qualitative Data: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 24 students (stratified by gender and discipline) to explore their experiences with the methodology. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Additionally, student design journals and reflective writing assignments provided rich contextual data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores on the TTCT dimensions. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d. Inter-rater reliability for CEDA assessments was evaluated using Cohen's kappa. Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo software, with themes identified through iterative coding and constant comparison.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Analysis of TTCT scores revealed statistically significant improvements across all four dimensions of creative thinking. Table 2 presents the pre-test and post-test means, standard deviations, and results of paired-samples t-tests.

Table 2: Pre-test and Post-test TTCT Scores (N=186)

Dimension	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Fluency	18.4 (4.2)	24.7 (5.1)	12.8	<0.001	0.78
Flexibility	12.3 (3.1)	18.9 (4.2)	15.2	<0.001	0.89
Originality	8.7 (2.8)	14.2 (3.5)	14.6	<0.001	0.82
Elaboration	15.2 (3.9)	21.3 (4.6)	13.1	<0.001	0.81

As shown in Table 2, students demonstrated significant gains in all dimensions of creative thinking. The largest improvements were observed in flexibility (Cohen's d=0.89) and originality (Cohen's d=0.82), suggesting that the methodology was particularly effective in helping students generate diverse and unique ideas. The effect sizes for all dimensions exceeded Cohen's (1988) threshold for large effects (d=0.80), indicating meaningful practical significance.

CEDA assessments of student design projects revealed similar patterns. Mean creativity scores increased from 2.8 (SD=0.6) at the beginning of the semester to 3.9 (SD=0.5) at the end, representing a statistically significant improvement ($t(185)=15.3$, $p<0.001$, $d=1.12$). Inter-rater reliability was excellent (Cohen's kappa=0.87), indicating consistent evaluation.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed several key themes related to students' experiences with the STEM-based creative thinking methodology:

Theme 1: Technology as a Catalyst for Creative Expression

Students consistently described STEM technologies as enabling tools that lowered barriers to creative expression. One mechanical engineering student noted: "Having access to 3D printers and rapid prototyping tools meant I could try out ideas quickly. If something didn't work, I could iterate immediately instead of waiting weeks for parts." This theme suggests that the immediacy and accessibility of modern fabrication technologies support iterative, exploratory approaches to design.

Theme 2: Interdisciplinary Thinking

Many students reported that working with diverse technologies helped them make connections across disciplinary boundaries. A computer engineering student explained: "I started seeing how software, electronics, and mechanical systems all work together. It's not just about coding or just about circuits anymore." This interdisciplinary perspective was identified as a key enabler of creative problem-solving.

Theme 3: Overcoming Fear of Failure

Students described a shift in their relationship with failure, viewing it as a learning opportunity rather than a setback. The rapid prototyping capabilities of STEM technologies appeared to facilitate this shift by making iteration less costly. As one student reflected: "When you can print a new version in a few hours, failure doesn't feel so permanent. You learn and move on."

Theme 4: Collaborative Creativity

Working in diverse teams was identified as a significant factor in creative development. Students valued the exchange of perspectives and the challenge of integrating different approaches. However, some students noted that effective collaboration required intentional facilitation and that not all team experiences were equally productive.

Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges were identified during implementation. Technical difficulties with equipment occasionally disrupted project timelines, and some students reported feeling overwhelmed by the learning curve associated with multiple new technologies. Time constraints were frequently mentioned

as a limiting factor, with students expressing desire for more time to explore and iterate. Additionally, assessment of creative thinking remains inherently challenging, and the instruments used may not capture all relevant dimensions of creativity in engineering contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the efficacy of a comprehensive STEM-based methodology in developing creative thinking among engineering students. The significant improvements observed across all dimensions of creative thinking suggest that intentional integration of technology within a structured pedagogical framework can effectively cultivate innovation competencies. These results align with and extend prior research on technology-enhanced learning and creativity development.

Implications for Engineering Education

The study offers several important implications for engineering educators seeking to develop creative thinking in their students. First, the results suggest that access to diverse STEM technologies can serve as a powerful enabler of creative expression. However, technology alone is insufficient; the pedagogical framework within which technologies are deployed appears to be equally important. The integration of design thinking, project-based learning, and collaborative approaches provided essential structure and scaffolding for creative development.

Second, the findings highlight the value of rapid prototyping capabilities in supporting iterative, exploratory approaches to design. The ability to quickly materialize ideas and test solutions appears to lower psychological barriers to creative risk-taking and facilitate learning from failure. Engineering programs should consider investing in accessible fabrication facilities and integrating rapid prototyping into design curricula.

Third, the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives emerged as a key theme. Modern engineering challenges rarely respect disciplinary boundaries, and the ability to synthesize knowledge across domains appears to enhance creative problem-solving. Curricular structures that bring together students from different engineering disciplines may support this interdisciplinary thinking.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of creativity development in engineering contexts. The findings support constructivist perspectives on learning, demonstrating that active engagement with meaningful problems and technologies can facilitate the construction of creative thinking competencies. The study also extends design thinking theory by demonstrating its applicability in technology-rich educational environments and its relationship to measurable creative thinking outcomes.

The identification of technology as a catalyst for creative expression adds nuance to existing theories of creativity support. While prior research has examined individual technologies or tools, this study demonstrates the value of providing students with a diverse technological toolkit, enabling them to select appropriate tools for specific creative challenges.

Comparison with Prior Research

The magnitude of creative thinking improvements observed in this study (effect sizes ranging from 0.78 to 0.89) is consistent with or exceeds those reported in prior meta-analyses of creativity training programs. Scott et al. (2004) reported an average effect size of 0.60 for creativity training programs, suggesting that the STEM-based methodology employed in this study may be particularly effective. The specific focus on engineering contexts and the integration of multiple technologies may contribute to this enhanced effectiveness.

The qualitative findings regarding technology-enabled iteration and reduced fear of failure align with research on rapid prototyping and design cognition (Yang, 2005). The theme of interdisciplinary thinking resonates with literature on convergent disciplines and innovation (National Research Council, 2014). These consistencies suggest that the findings are grounded in established theoretical frameworks while extending them to new contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The quasi-experimental design, necessitated by practical constraints, limits causal inference. While the pre-test/post-test design controls for individual differences, the absence of a control group means that alternative explanations for observed improvements cannot be entirely ruled out. Future research should employ randomized controlled designs to strengthen causal claims.

The sample was drawn from a single institution, potentially limiting generalizability. Replication at other institutions with diverse student populations would strengthen the evidence base. Additionally, the 15-week duration of the study limits understanding of long-term retention of creative thinking skills. Follow-up studies examining persistence of gains over time would be valuable.

Future research should also explore the relative contributions of different methodological components. Which specific technologies or pedagogical approaches contribute most to creative thinking development? How can the methodology be adapted for different engineering disciplines or educational contexts? These questions warrant continued investigation.

Conclusion

This study presents and evaluates a comprehensive methodology for developing creative thinking in engineering students through the integration of STEM technologies. The findings demonstrate statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in all dimensions of creative thinking,

including fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Qualitative analysis revealed that students experienced STEM technologies as catalysts for creative expression, enabling rapid iteration, interdisciplinary thinking, and reduced fear of failure.

The methodology contributes to engineering education practice by providing a replicable framework that integrates multiple STEM technologies within a coherent pedagogical structure. The combination of design thinking, project-based learning, and collaborative approaches appears to create conditions conducive to creative development. The findings suggest that engineering educators can effectively cultivate creative thinking competencies through intentional curriculum design that leverages modern technological capabilities.

As engineering practice continues to evolve in response to technological change and global challenges, the ability to think creatively will only grow in importance. This research provides evidence that educational interventions can develop these essential capabilities, preparing students to contribute meaningfully to the complex problems they will face as practicing engineers. The methodology presented here offers one promising approach to this important educational challenge, and continued research in this area will further refine our understanding of how best to cultivate creative thinking in future generations of engineers.

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Figures

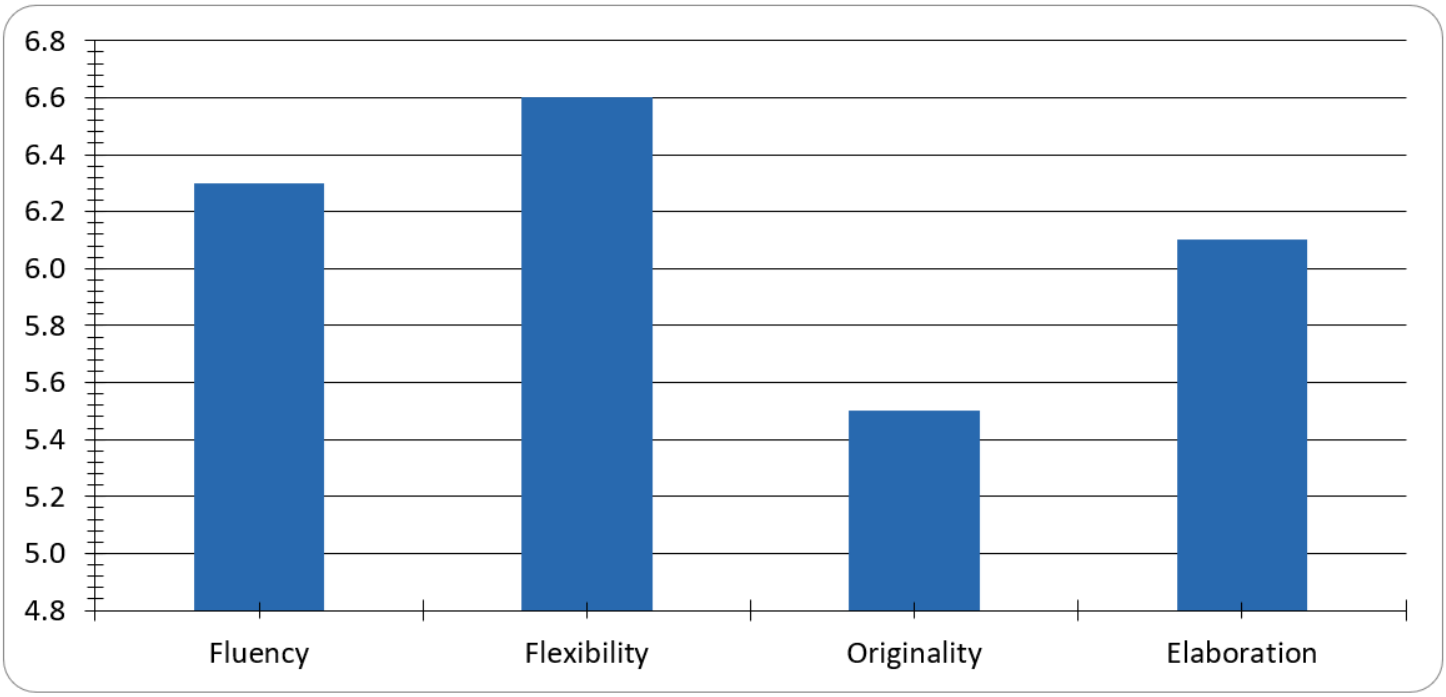


Figure 1

Mean Improvement in Creative Thinking Dimensions