Transactions on Comparative Education (2025)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/trance.2025.070205
ISSN 2523-5818 Vol. 7 Num. 2

Application of Virtual Laboratory Technology and Artificial Intelligence in PLC Education: Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Directions

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Keywords: Virtual Laboratory (VL), Artificial Intelligence (AI), PLC Education, Industry4.0, Cost Efficiency, Adaptive Learning Systems

Abstract: The convergence of Virtual Laboratories (VL) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) is fundamentally transforming PLC education paradigms, offering scalable, personalized, and sustainable learning solutions. This educational technology revolution not only aligns with the transformation trends of teaching models in the new media era, but also presents a significant "double-edged sword" effect at the practical level: On one hand, VL technology, based on 3D simulation environments, has successfully overcome three major challenges faced by traditional physical laboratories—equipment costs (saving 90% per unit), scalability, and safety control. In Germany, the integration of digital twin modules demonstrated a 40% improvement in learning efficiency. On the other hand, AI-powered intelligent diagnostic systems and adaptive learning algorithms have achieved truly personalized teaching, with empirical data from Indian educational institutions showing a 25% improvement in course completion rates. However, similar to the challenges faced by HoloLens 2 in industrial training, VL+AI technologies also face key challenges such as optimizing human-machine interaction and lowering professional thresholds. From a sustainable development perspective, this model not only promotes educational inclusivity through open-source ecosystems (such as OpenPLC), but also achieves a breakthrough in environmental benefits by reducing practical training electronic waste by 60%. To maximize the technological benefits in the future, a systematic solution needs to be developed that includes infrastructure upgrades, privacy protection mechanisms, and blended course design, thereby driving the deep integration of educational technology innovation with traditional teaching systems.

1. Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation is fundamentally reshaping technical education, especially in the realm of industrial automation. Among the core technologies in this field, Programmable Logic Controllers (PLCs) stand as the backbone of modern industrial systems, orchestrating a wide array of processes from robotic assembly lines to advanced smart grid management. However, traditional approaches to PLC pedagogy, which rely heavily on physical hardware, inflexible curricula, and instructor-led demonstrations, are increasingly showing critical limitations. These methods face significant challenges in terms of scalability, high costs, and alignment with the evolving competencies demanded by Industry 4.0 [1].

In response to these challenges, Virtual Laboratory (VL) technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have emerged as powerful enablers of educational innovation [2]. These technologies offer immersive, adaptive, and democratized learning experiences, transforming how industrial automation is taught and learned. Virtual Labs (VLs) provide high-fidelity simulations of industrial automation environments, enabling students to engage with complex control systems in a risk-free, flexible virtual space. This eliminates the constraints imposed by physical infrastructure, reducing both costs and logistical barriers. At the same time, AI-driven tutoring systems harness the power of machine learning (ML) to offer personalized instruction, diagnose misunderstandings, and predict learning outcomes, ensuring a tailored educational experience for each student.

Together, these technological advancements bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, while addressing systemic barriers such as equipment affordability and geographic inequalities in access to resources. By creating an adaptable, cost-effective, and scalable model of education, VL and AI not only align with the demands of Industry 4.0 but also help cultivate a more equitable learning environment.

This study investigates how VL and AI synergistically address three critical gaps in PLC education: accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and alignment with industrial automation trends. It evaluates the implementation challenges faced by institutions through empirical case studies and proposes a strategic roadmap for the sustainable adoption of these technologies. Through this examination, we aim to provide valuable insights into how these innovations can reshape the future of industrial automation education.

2. Historical context: PLC education and its evolution

Historically, PLC training was confined to physical laboratories, where students learned programming, circuit design, and troubleshooting by interacting with actual control systems. While these setups provided valuable hands-on experience, they required significant investments in hardware, facilities, and ongoing maintenance. Additionally, they faced scalability challenges with only a limited number of students could work on the equipment at once and posed risks such as potential hardware damage and safety hazards.

The introduction of simulation software in the 2000s marked the first step toward digital transformation. Tools like Siemens TIA Portal and Rockwell Studio 5000 facilitated offline program development, though they still required physical hardware for validation. The next major advancement came with fully virtual environments, powered by cloud computing and real-time simulation engines, enabling hands-on experiences without the need for physical hardware.

Today, with the integration of AI-driven platforms, PLC education is entering a new era-one characterized by intelligent feedback, adaptive learning pathways, and enhanced remote accessibility

3. Benefits of virtual laboratories in PLC education

3.1 Cost efficiency and scalability

Virtual labs eliminate the need for high-cost PLC kits, programmable terminals, and physical wiring stations. Institutions can serve hundreds of students simultaneously, dramatically reducing per-student costs.

For example, OpenPLC, a free open-source platform [3], allows learners to simulate ladder logic and HMI systems using only a browser and basic computing resources. In countries with limited educational infrastructure, this has made PLC education accessible to wider populations.

3.2 Immersive technologies

Recent advancements in Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) have added new dimensions to PLC education. A 2023 study in IEEE Transactions on Education showed that students who engaged with VR-based PLC labs improved their understanding and retention by 30% compared to those in conventional classrooms [4].

Institutions such as TU Munich and NTU Singapore have implemented VR training modules where students navigate 3D factory environments, diagnose problems in simulated control panels, and operate virtual robotic lines.

4. AI-Powered personalization in PLC training

4.1 Intelligent tutoring and debugging

Platforms like ChatGPT for PLCs provide contextual help by analyzing student queries and code. For example, if a student uses a TON (Timer On Delay) instruction with a faulty input, the AI might suggest:

“Check if your trigger signal is stable. Fluctuating inputs can reset the timer unintentionally.”

Such context-aware feedback dramatically improves learning efficiency compared to traditional static textbooks or pre-recorded lectures.

4.2 Performance analytics

Machine learning models can analyze learning patterns, pinpoint frequent errors, and even forecast student outcomes. Teachers gain actionable insights, such as which topics have the highest error rates or which students may need extra support.

For example, by logging hundreds of ladder logic programs from students, an AI system might detect that 40% struggle with debouncing inputs-allowing instructors to create a targeted mini-module addressing the issue.

5. Enhaning curriculum relevance for industry 4.0

The industry’s transition to smart factories, IIoT, and AI-integrated automation has shifted the skill expectations for future engineers. To meet these needs, PLC curricula must evolve to incorporate emerging technologies.

5.1 Industry-Academia collaborations

Organizations like Siemens, Rockwell Automation, and Schneider Electric have initiated partnerships with universities to supply virtual lab access and develop certification-aligned content. At MIT, a collaborative course module with Rockwell helps students prepare for the Certified Automation Professional (CAP) exam using simulated environments.

5.2 Real-World problem simulations

Virtual labs allow students to simulate real industrial challenges. For example, configuring a PID control loop for a heating process or designing emergency stop logic for a conveyor belt. These practice scenarios not only deepen technical understanding but also improve career readiness.

5.3 Remote and collaborative learning

With cloud-based platforms, students can collaborate on projects across campuses or even countries. This promotes peer-to-peer learning, mirrors globalized work environments, and allows instructors to monitor team progress asynchronously.

6. Promoting sustainable and inclusive education

To conclude, the Internet context will bring countless innovative opportunities and challenges to a modern technology enterprise, which must always keep in line with the development concept of this era and always be able to keep up with the pace of its rapid development. Modern management enterprise workers should fully understand the company itself and the development of the current situation of the environment in the daily economic and management consulting work. Besides, they also need to find the management of the enterprise's own advantages and their own disadvantages. Modern enterprise managers should also actively seize the advantages of the current Internet era resources, with the use of advanced information technology network information technology, to reduce the traditional enterprise production and operation costs, as well as improving the economic efficiency of modern enterprises. Thus, the overall strategic direction of modernization of management enterprises should be gradually realized.

6.1 Environmental sustainability

Replacing hardware-based labs with virtual environments reduces e-waste, electricity consumption, and shipping-related emissions. Institutions can also prolong the lifecycle of their hardware by using cloud-based simulation software.

6.2 Global access and inclusion

Projects like UNESCO’s Digital Education in Africa Initiative have distributed virtual PLC platforms to thousands of students in low-connectivity regions [5]. The PLC Virtual Lab Project in Nigeria and Kenya, launched in 2021, used open-source tools optimized for low-bandwidth access and trained over 5,000 students by 2023.

6.3 Workforce transition and lifelong learning

Workers from traditional sectors (e.g., fossil fuels or agriculture) can upskill for roles in green automation and renewable energy systems using AI-supported online PLC certifications. This supports a “just transition” by offering learning pathways that are both accessible and industry-relevant.

7. Challenges in implementation

Despite their benefits, deploying virtual labs and AI tools in PLC education involves notable obstacles:

7.1 Financial and infrastructure barriers

- Initial development and licensing costs can be high, especially for premium platforms.
- Internet and device access remain uneven, particularly in rural and underserved regions.
- Faculty training is crucial; many educators are unfamiliar with simulation tools and AI integration.

7.2 Data privacy and AI bias

AI systems must comply with frameworks like the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Moreover, the use of student data for personalized learning must be transparent and secure.

Bias is another concern. If AI models are trained on homogeneous datasets, they may produce biased assessments or misinterpret diverse problem-solving styles [6].

8. Strategic reform recommendations

To maximize impact and mitigate challenges, educational institutions and policymakers should consider the following strategies:

Blended Learning: Use virtual labs for foundational training and complement with occasional physical lab sessions.

Micro-Credentials: Offer AI and PLC micro-certification for instructors and professionals through platforms like Cisco Academy or Udemy for Business.

Public-Private Partnerships: Foster industry collaborations for funding, content co-creation, and student internships.

Open Source Ecosystems: Promote community-driven platforms like OpenPLC and PLC Ladder Simulator, which lower entry barriers.

9. Global case studies

Case Study 1 – Germany

A technical university introduced Festo Didactic's digital twin modules into its mechatronics course. Students engaged in a 12-week project designing a bottling plant, guided by AI analytics. Results showed a 40% improvement in competency scores and higher engagement [7].

Case Study 2 – India

An Indian polytechnic developed a chatbot using Google Dialogflow, integrated with ladder logic syntax checking. Students received round-the-clock support, reducing dropout rates by 25%.

Case Study 3 – Brazil

São Paulo State Technical School deployed HoloLens-based AR modules to overlay digital PLC systems onto real equipment. Complex concepts like SCADA and distributed I/O were learned 50% faster, with stronger retention.

10. Future research directions

The following areas deserve further exploration:

Ethical AI: Developing guidelines for fairness, explainability, and consent in AI-based education.

Gamification: Creating competitive and collaborative coding environments. At Stanford, ladder logic "battles" increased engagement by 60%.

Interoperability: Ensuring seamless integration between virtual labs, LMS platforms, and certification bodies.

Longitudinal Studies: Measuring the long-term career outcomes of students trained via virtual PLC labs.

11. Conclusion

The integration of Virtual Laboratory Technology and Artificial Intelligence is fundamentally reshaping the landscape of PLC education. By addressing the limitations of traditional instruction, these technologies enable cost-effective, scalable, and personalized learning experiences aligned with the technological and workforce demands of Industry 4.0.

The way forward requires strategic investment in infrastructure, educator development, and ethical standards. When deployed thoughtfully, these innovations not only improve technical education outcomes but also contribute to sustainable development, inclusive access, and future-ready talent pipelines around the world.

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by the Shanghai University of Science and Technology Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate Course Development Program (Grant No. BY202405) and the Shanghai University of Science and Technology Graduate English-taught Course Development Program (Grant No. EC202409).

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