



**Enhancing the
T-shaped learning
profile**

C. A. Sanchez et al.

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Enhancing the T-shaped learning profile when teaching hydrology using data, modeling, and visualization activities

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Abstract

Previous research has suggested that the use of more authentic learning activities can produce more robust and durable knowledge gains. This is consistent with calls within civil engineering education, specifically hydrology, that suggest that curricula should more often include professional perspective and data analysis skills to better develop the “T-shaped” knowledge profile of a professional hydrologist (i.e., professional breadth combined with technical depth). It was expected that the inclusion of a data driven simulation lab exercise that was contextualized within a real-world situation and more consistent with the job duties of a professional in the field, would provide enhanced learning and appreciation of job duties beyond more conventional paper-and-pencil exercises in a lower division undergraduate course. Results indicate that while students learned in both conditions, learning was enhanced for the data-driven simulation group in nearly every content area. This pattern of results suggests that the use of data-driven modeling and visualization activities can have a significant positive impact on instruction. This increase in learning likely facilitates the development of student perspective and conceptual mastery, enabling students to make better choices about their studies, while also better preparing them for work as a professional in the field.

1 Introduction

While there is a rising interest in and demand for civil engineering and hydrology education, some have suggested a widening gap between how students are instructed in hydrology, and the subsequent professional skill set required for a career as a hydrological engineer (Wagener et al., 2007). Recent research has shown a potential for great variability within the hydrological curriculum (Wagener et al., 2012). This variability includes differences in not only what conceptual material should be taught (Gleeson et al., 2012), but also how this material should be delivered pedagogically (Wagener,

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a solution (i.e., they do not know the solution initially), and that each student has explicit engagement with the pursuit of this solution, as such activities are often implemented in group settings (Smith et al., 2005). It has been argued that such authentic engagement fosters a more deep conceptual understanding of the material by “anchoring” the more abstract learning material or concepts to the more accessible authentic learning scenario (CTGV, 1992; Hake, 1998). Thus, the contextualization of the material within an actual scenario increases not only retrieval cues that the learner can use to more efficiently access factual knowledge, but also likely increases the durability of the knowledgebase, thereby creating a more flexible state of information that could be applied appropriately in multiple instances (Hansen, 2008; Smith and Van Doren, 2004).

Active engagement in the learning process has also been suggested as a means to increase interest in the topic to-be-learned (Paris and Turner, 1994; Scheifele, 1991), which might also address issues of motivation within students. Traditional lecture-based instruction that forces students to work towards normative educational goals in isolation is often cited as a major complaint of engineering students, and has measurable negative effects on motivation levels (Felder et al., 1998). More authentic, problem-based activity has been shown to produce an increase in student attitudes towards the content area in general (Watters and Ginns, 2000), offering an opportunity to offset such motivation issues. Importantly, this could not only increase motivation within the lesson itself, but also potentially affect the likelihood to continue with studies in a given domain. In other words, this motivation derived within a specific context could have a direct effect on overall interest in the major or field, as learners are better able to see how their own interests better align and apply to tangible problems.

However, efforts to adopt such authentic learning exercises within engineering education are often hampered by unclear learning objectives and assessment, logistical constraints, and the use of activities that do not necessarily optimize the learning experience (see Prince, 2004). For example, it is unclear about what degree of “authenticity” is required, and how does one assess learning from “field” activities relative to traditional instruction? For example, while PBL has been implemented successfully with

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electrical engineering students (Yadav et al., 2011), students who engaged with the PBL activity were compared to students who only had a lecture component, without the opportunity to engage in an equivalent control activity. As such, these studies cannot conclusively say that gains normally attributed to the instructional manipulation are due to the activity alone, and could reflect the influence of other factors (e.g., differences in time spent engaging with the material). Further, what is an appropriate “field activity” in an engineering discipline, and how should these efforts be categorized and defined? As such, while this call for authentic activity is often advocated and supported theoretically, unfortunately it is not often consistently practiced, and thus leads to fragmented research on the issue (Prince, 2004).

There do also exist more specific pedagogical concerns regarding authentic learning within the area of hydrological engineering education (Gleeson et al., 2012). For example, there is little to no direct evidence that such activities are indeed effective at augmenting a hydrologist’s training, or even implemented with any kind of regularity for that matter (Ruddell and Wagener, 2015). What little evidence that does exist supporting the incorporation of student-centered activities into hydrology instruction is often anecdotal (e.g., Thompson et al., 2012), without any kind of quantitative or measurable change in performance outcomes. Pragmatic and logistical issues (e.g., faculty time and expertise, student computer skills), and the use of curriculum materials that become rapidly outdated, also stand as barriers to the adoption of a more discovery-based or student-centered approach within hydrology (Merwade and Ruddell, 2012; Ruddell and Wagener, 2015). Finally, hydrological instruction is also traditionally implemented using a teacher-centered approach (e.g., lectures) that lacks the opportunity for applied experience (Wagener et al., 2007). Thus, it appears critical to find new ways to achieve instructional goals that might incorporate this real world experience, and are capable of side-stepping these methodological and logistical issues. Fortunately, the emergence of rich and dynamic computer simulation techniques, which allow students to interact with real data in ways that are consistent and appropriate with the profession,

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in a mandatory lower-division undergraduate earth science context that is part of general curriculum studies. At this level the student enters the classroom with very little (if any) prior knowledge about hydrologic theory, hydrology models/methods, or the broad applications and societal issues involved with hydrological engineering. Evaluating the effects of such an intervention at this very early point provides an opportunity to examine the full effect of DMDGC implementation, avoiding issues of self-selection bias and prior contextual knowledge about the hydrology profession that might exist in upper division or graduate students in the field. In other words, in this student population we can observe the effect of DMDGC activities on a breadth of knowledge related to the field and its application, beyond just core theoretical concepts and applied computer modeling skills.

Students in the DMDGC condition were given a data-driven hydrology activity that focused on urbanization and flooding, while a control group was given a paper-pencil based laboratory activity of equivalent general learning outcomes and effort, but lacked the specific applied context and data-driven components of the DMDGC. The inclusion of this paper-based activity is a critical methodological feature, as it permits a more appropriate evaluation of the simulation activity against an activity that is likely equally effortful and time consuming from the student perspective. Thus, any subsequent learning gains are less likely to be attributed to other confounding factors, and must instead be more localized to the nature of the manipulation itself. It was hypothesized that students who were presented with the DMDGC learning activities would demonstrate a better understanding of theoretical and applied hydrology concepts related to flooding, as their interaction with the material would be contextualized and likewise permit a dynamic exploration of the data not otherwise possible without such simulation. Further, it was also hoped that students in the simulation condition would develop a better appreciation for the roles of hydrological engineers and hydrology organizations in managing and preventing flooding problems, as they themselves are engaging in a contextualized problem within a realistic community scenario that required the intervention of hydrologists.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and experimental design

One-hundred seven students ($N = 107$) enrolled in an Introductory Earth Science course (and corresponding laboratory sections) at a community college in the south-western United States were solicited for participation. Participants were evaluated both before and after a sub-unit within the course that focused on applying the Rational Method and a Synthetic Unit Hydrograph to estimate hydrographs and flooding for urban areas experiencing land use and climate change. Eighty-eight of these students successfully participated in both the pre and post assessments, an overall completion rate of 82%. These 88 participants were distributed among 2 different instructional conditions based on enrolled lab section: DMDGC modeling ($n = 52$; 79% participation rate), and paper-based activities ($n = 36$; 88% participation rate). All students shared the same single lecture instructor, and were thus given identical lecture content over a period of approximately two weeks of class.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Curricular materials

Both the DMDGC modules (Ruddell and Schiesser, 2012a, b) and the comparable paper laboratory (Lab 9 in Schiesser, 2008) were designed to be implemented in parallel with traditional lectures. In this unit, all students were given identical lectures (based on material covered in Schiesser, 2008) that covered the fundamentals of flood frequency, urbanization and land use change, flood risk, climate change effects on rainfall, and the roles and responsibilities of agencies that provide flood prediction and management services in the USA. In other words, the lecture component of the current design was identical for both laboratory groups, and the only instructional difference was whether the students received a DMDGC or paper laboratory module.

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of professional and scientific competence (Cap-Net, 2008; McIntosh and Taylor, 2013; Pathirana et al., 2012; Pinter et al., 2013; Uhlenbrook and de Jong, 2012) needed for a basic appreciation of the profession and the social impacts of flood hydrology.

Each of the eleven questions was evaluated relative to the appropriate learning outcomes on a four-point scale (0–3) as to the level of conceptual mastery indicated by the response, where 0 indicates no relevant response, 1 indicates a “Novice” level, 2 indicates an “Apprentice” level, and 3 indicates an “Expert” level. A rating of 3 approximates the level of conceptual mastery expected by a practicing hydrological professional. Some subquestions did not assess some learning outcomes; these irrelevant combinations are indicated in the Fig. 2 matrix in grey. Two hydrology educators independently coded the level of conceptual mastery indicated by student responses on the pretest assessment instrument, blind to condition, and indicated a high degree of inter-rater reliability across all nine learning outcomes (all ICCs > 0.91, $p < 0.01$). The post-assessments (which were again identical to the pre-assessments) were then coded by a single coder. Table 1 gives examples of conceptual mastery for each of the nine outcomes.

3 Results

To examine the effect of the DMDGC modules on the change in student knowledge in each of the nine outcomes, a simple 2-way ANCOVA was conducted between laboratory groups on the post-test scores for each outcome. Pretest scores for each measure were used as a covariate in every respective analysis, and all results were evaluated for significance at the level of $p < 0.05$. Descriptive statistics for each measure by group, and all F-statistics, are available in Table 2.

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3.1 Physical concepts of flooding

As is visible in Table 2, the use of a DMDGC module significantly improved performance in all 6 areas (#1–6) save (#4) Effect of Decadal LULC Change on Flooding. Participants who were given the opportunity to learn with the DMDGC modules were better able to not only understand the effects of urbanization and other physical causes of flooding, but also demonstrated better knowledge of maximum discharge rates and impacts of flood management. The lack of result for outcome (#4) Effect of Decadal LULC Change on Flooding was not entirely unexpected, as although this content topic was originally intended to be emphasized in the lecture and lab settings, unfortunately it was not able to be covered in depth due to time constraints. Thus, it is not surprising that this outcome showed little divergence between groups as students were not explicitly instructed in this topic. As such, this likely reflects a shortcoming in the overall content covered, rather than demonstrating a lack of theoretical effect.

3.2 Professional role of hydrologists

Consistent with the content results above, users of DMDGC modules also appear to have gained a better appreciation for the professional role of hydrologists and the field. Across all 3 sub-areas (#s 6–9), there was a significantly higher demonstration of expertise for the simulation group, above those simply using the paper-and-pencil activities. This suggests that not only does engaging in such authentic activity produce a measureable benefit in learning content, but this benefit also results in a better understanding of the professional duties within the field. This result is especially encouraging as it also could potentially indicate that such activities allow students to become better prepared for eventual careers in hydrological engineering, and thus provide a bridge between the content area and the application of knowledge.

In summary, when one considers the overall pattern of results it appears that the benefit for such dynamic simulation and visualization was not only limited to content knowledge areas such as rainfall intensity and flooding, but was also realized in re-

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Further, another interesting point is that it is likely such multiple effects were observed because the participants in this study were just beginning their education in the field of hydrology, so issues of contextualized knowledge or self-selection were likely minimized in this sample. In other words, because learners were lacking a well-defined representation of not only the knowledge of the field, but also the role of working professionals in the field, this training experience permitted them to gain greater insight into both the field and requisite application. This fact is even more encouraging as it suggests that such interventions, introduced early in the educational trajectory, can provide a more robust and complete learning experience at all levels. It is possible that such increases in depth and breadth of knowledge early on could translate into more success with the material, thus likely increasing the likelihood of learners persisting in the pursuit of education in this domain. It appears that working with authentic data increases the appreciation of a novice student for the importance of the hydrology profession and for the physical problems this profession addresses.

5 Conclusions

For the fundamentally place-based geosciences such as hydrology, the integration of concepts will inevitably require exposure to real-world contexts and data. The results of this study demonstrate that computerized learning content can effectively bring the “real world” into the classroom and make it accessible, especially in the case of students at lower levels and across the general curriculum. The findings of this paper also indicate that it is possible to deliver this type of content in a localized place-based context, and to realize learning gains on both physical and professional learning outcomes without introducing a great deal of complexity in the way of computer modeling and programming. A simple spreadsheet, combined with readily available online hydrological data, is sufficient in this case. In other words, these computerized techniques afford instructors the opportunity to have their students engage in realistic and authentic problem-based activities without the need to manage other logistical constraints often

encountered with field research (i.e., transportation, materials, etc.). It is our hope that the positive findings of this study encourage investment in development of high-quality DMDGC learning materials, and the wider adoption of place-based DMDGC learning materials across the civil engineering curriculum. Implementing such learning experiences into the curriculum will ideally create more enriching experiences for student learners, and hopefully also develop more well-rounded and skilled practicing hydrologists.

While the current study focused on lower-division students, in future work it would also be of interest to expand this program longitudinally throughout the curriculum to identify how best to deliver DMDGC content at all levels of the hydrology curriculum to maximize its effectiveness. Efforts are currently ongoing to do exactly this, and also expand the application of DMDGC content to hydrological concepts beyond flooding and urbanization.

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Table 1. Pre/post assessment instrument with model “expert” answers.

Question	Model answer
(1a) Compare Hillsdale, 2000 with Hillsdale, 2012: write a description of the effects of impervious cover and urbanization as the City has expanded.	As the city has expanded over time, open areas that produce relatively little runoff are being replaced with urban areas that are impervious to rainfall and therefore produce more runoff.
(1b) Complete a hydrograph analysis on the axes below by doing the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Draw the flood hydrograph for an extreme rainfall event at the Hillsdale stream gage in 2000 before urban development expands; label this curve “H2000”. – Draw the flood hydrograph for an extreme rainfall event at the Hillsdale stream gage in 2012 after urban development expands; label this curve “H2012”. 	
(2) List at least two policies or practices that water managers can pursue to reduce the damage caused by flood events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Reducing urbanization (b) Reducing impervious area upstream (c) Enhancing retention of stormwater onsite (d) Reducing development in the floodplain (e) Building levees
(3) What US Federal agency is the primary provider of streamflow and surface water resource data?	The USGS is the best answer, but NOAA is a good second choice.
(4) What US Federal agency is the primary provider of rainfall and weather data?	NOAA is the best answer, but the USGS is a good second choice.

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Table 1. Continued.

Question	Model answer
(5) What US Federal agency is the primary regulator and provider of flood control services?	US Army Corps of Engineers is the correct answer.
(6a) What kind of information are these hydrologists able to provide about the future risk, frequency, severity, or damages of flood events at your location, and what tools and knowledge make it possible to provide this information?	The hydrologists can use models to estimate the frequency and severity of floods at our location, based on assumptions about land cover change and urban development that control runoff and imperviousness, and simulations of future climate change that controls the frequency, intensity, and duration of future rainfall events.
(6b) What questions should you ask in the meeting?	<p>(a) In your expert opinion, is this a good place to build a 50 year factory project?</p> <p>(b) If we build, what actions should we take when we build the factory to prevent flood damage?</p> <p>(c) Can you provide us with adequate warning of imminent floods so we can take action to prevent damage?</p> <p>(d) How could floods impact transportation, power, and other needs of our factory?</p> <p>(e) What kind of insurance do we need, and can we save money on the premiums by taking actions to prevent damage?</p>
(6c) What might happen to Compumarket if the company does not consider hydrologic risk in its business plans?	A flood could destroy the factory, or shut down operations for a significant period of time, costing the business a large amount of money in direct losses and lost sales and reputation. Insurance would cover some of the direct losses but could not compensate the business for all the impacts.
(7) Explain the importance of streamflow and rainfall gages for flood management.	Hydrologists need streamflow and rainfall data in order to forecast the severity of current flood events downstream of a rainfall, and to develop accurate flood models to predict the impacts of flooding.
(8) What is a mathematical flood model, and why is it important?	Mathematical models of floods allow us to predict the intensity and frequency of flooding in a given location, so that we can take steps to prevent damage from floods at that location, such as a city.

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Table 2. Examples of conceptual mastery for each of nine outcomes.

Outcome: physical concepts of flooding	Examples
1. Effects of urbanization and impervious cover on flooding	– If urbanization decreases infiltration of rainwater, it may increase flooding
2. Physical causes of flood frequency and intensity	– Higher rainfall duration and intensity combined with high soil moisture and imperviousness
3. Conceptual vocabulary applied in context	– The peak of the flood hydrograph exceeds the channel's discharge capacity
4. Effect of decadal LULC change on flooding	– Permanent conversion of wetlands and forests to farm field and cities can contribute to flooding
5. Maximum discharge rates determine flooding (hydrographs)	– Higher discharge causes a higher flood peak, which can spill into floodplains causing flooding
6. Impacts of flood management	– Stormwater detention basins can reduce peak discharges and reduce flooding
Outcome: professional role of hydrologists	
7. Agency roles and responsibilities	– The US Geological Survey monitors stream flows during floods
8. Value of geoscience knowledge	– Climate change can alter the frequency and intensity of rainfall, possibly increasing flooding
9. Utility of mathematical flood models	– A detailed hydrology model can predict the effect of land use and climate change on flooding



Table 3. Descriptive and inferential statistics for all analyses.

Dependent Measure	PP Posttest ^a		DMDGC Posttest ^a		<i>F</i> value ^b		Effect size (η_p^2)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Group	Covariate	Group	Covariate
1. Effects of Urbanization and Impervious Cover on Flooding	1.55	0.42	2.12	0.42	37.19 ^d	14.47 ^d	0.30	0.15
2. Physical Causes of Flood Frequency and Intensity	2.11	0.45	2.37	0.43	7.05 ^c	21.94 ^d	0.08	0.21
3. Conceptual Vocabulary Applied in Context	1.81	0.41	2.15	0.42	14.11 ^d	29.95 ^d	0.14	0.26
4. Effect of Decadal LULC Change on Flooding	2.33	0.93	2.28	0.93	0.06	0.77	0	0.01
5. Maximum Discharge Rates Determine Flooding	1.98	0.66	2.32	0.68	5.15 ^c	9.27 ^d	0.06	0.10
6. Impacts of Flood Management	2.11	0.44	2.34	0.43	5.70 ^c	23.34 ^d	0.06	0.22
7. Agency Roles and Responsibilities	1.73	0.41	2.14	0.40	21.86 ^d	35.09 ^d	0.21	0.29
8. Value of Geoscience Knowledge	1.82	0.41	2.18	0.40	16.01 ^d	28.50 ^d	0.16	0.25
9. Utility of Mathematical Flood Models	1.81	0.44	2.16	0.43	13.85 ^d	22.49 ^d	0.14	0.21

PP-Paper and Pencil Group, DMDGC-Data and Modeling Driven Geoscience Cybereducation Group.

^a adjusted based on covariate analysis.

^b $df = (1, 85)$; critical F value for $p < 0.05$ is $F > 3.95$.

^c $p < 0.05$.

^d $p < 0.01$.

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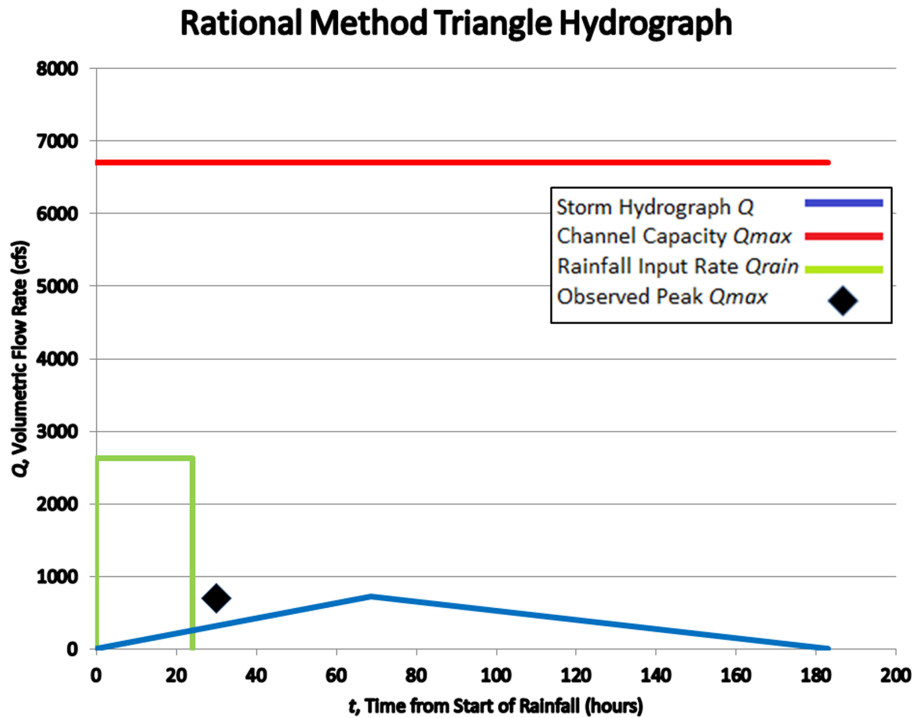



Figure 1. Illustration of the visualization produced by the DMDGC module. The Rational Method and a triangular Synthetic Unit Hydrograph are applied to model a rainstorm’s streamflow hydrograph based on a rainfall input and watershed parameters, and this is visually compared with a calculated flow channel capacity to determine whether a flood will occur during a specified design storm event. The model can be calibrated such that the timing and magnitude of the observed flood peak (black diamond) matches the modeled streamflow hydrograph (blue triangle) Adapted with permission from Ruddell and Schiesser (2012).



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		Pre/Post Assessment Instrument Sub-Question Number										
		1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6a	6b	6c	7	8
Physical Concept Outcomes	1 Effects of Urbanization and Impervious Cover on Flooding	2	3	2				3	3	1	1	3
	2 Physical Causes of Flood Frequency and Intensity	2	3	2				3	2	2	2	3
	3 Conceptual Vocabulary Applied in Context	2	3	2	2	1	0	3	2	2	2	3
	4 Effect of Decadal LULC Change on Flooding		3									
	5 Maximum Discharge Rates Determine Flooding (hydrographs)		3								3	3
	6 Impacts of Flood Management	2	3	2				3	2	2	3	1
Professional Role Outcomes	7 Agency Roles & Responsibilities			2	2	1	0	3	2	2	2	3
	8 Value of Geoscience Knowledge	2		2	2	1	0	3	2	2	3	3
	9 Utility of Mathematical Flood Models	2	3		2	1	0	3	2	1	3	3

Figure 2. Example of a completed assessment matrix mapping learning outcome rubrics to instrument question responses. This example student gave relevant responses to all questions (i.e. no “0” ratings), and the matrix generally indicates an “Apprentice” level of conceptual mastery.

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