

# Experiences and Trends in Control Education: A HiOA/USN Perspective

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**Abstract:** Global trends in higher education including e-learning, massive open online courses, and new teaching methods have positively affected control education. Control course contents have evolved due to changes in industrial practices and increasing availability of affordable computer hardware and software. Continuous development efforts on virtual remote and real laboratories have made hands-on tasks more accessible and affordable. In this article, we share our experiences on undergraduate and graduate control education at University College of Southeast Norway (USN), and Oslo and Akershus University college of Applied Science (HiOA). First, we present an overview of the course contents in our institutions, and then, we give examples on development of real and virtual laboratories, online course materials, new learning platforms and teaching methods.

**Keywords**—control education; control laboratories; virtual laboratories; simulation; learning management systems; active learning methods;

## I. EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

### A. Trends in higher education

Massive open online courses (MOOCs), e-learning, electronic learning management systems, and student active learning methods have become major trends in higher education of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

During the past decade the variety of massive open online courses (MOOC) has expanded and many top universities are offering a wide spectra of courses [1]. MOOCs combine teaching from the best academics, modern pedagogy, interactive content, virtual laboratories, and online group discussions delivered through non/for-profit platforms such as edX, Coursera, and Udacity [2]. However, the academic content should be supplemented with hands-on experiments supervised by experienced teachers in order to build practical skills [3].

For on-campus STEM education, student active learning methods have been proven to increase students' learning outcomes and to decrease the drop-out rates [4-6]. Examples on successful implementations of student active learning methods in

groups in technology-rich rooms are SCALE-UP (Student-Centered Active Learning Environment for Undergraduate Programs) at North Carolina State University [7] and TEAL (Technology-Enabled Active Learning) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [8]. Typically the pedagogy is based on Flipped Classroom (FC) methodology, where students are required to have their first exposure to the subject material at home *prior to* class, and where class time is spent *working with* the material [9].

### B. Trends in teaching aids for control education

Based on the 62 papers presented at 10<sup>th</sup> IFAC Symposium on Advances In Control Education [10] the course development is most active within the following topics: remote laboratories (21%), real laboratories (19%), teaching aids (19%), virtual laboratories (11%), e-learning (11%), robotics (10%) and course content (8%). Many educators aim to make part of the resource and time demanding real laboratories more easily accessible through internet. However, real laboratories are needed in order to ensure practical hands-on skills for the students.

### C. Trends in content of control education

Taking well-known text-books, e.g. [11], [12], [13], [14] as indicators of the course contents, it seems that the theoretical contents of control courses have not changed much over the last decades. Differential equations, transfer functions, state-space models, and frequency response - in the continuous-time and in the discrete-time domain, comprise the basis, as they did decades ago. Mathworks MATLAB seems to be the default computing tool upon which exercises in text-books are based, but also National Instruments MathScript and LabVIEW appear as tools.

We find it somewhat surprising to observe that most text-books apparently aiming at presenting a good basis for control theory, do not include model-based predictive control (MPC), with [13] as one exception, despite the fact that MPC theory and applications typically are pronounced topics in journals and conferences, plus many commercial software packages for MPC exist. One reason for the lack of focus on MPC may be that its theoretical basis

is optimization theory - a topic typically not taught at the undergraduate level.

## II. CONTROL EDUCATION AT HiOA AND USN

In this article, we share our experiences on undergraduate and graduate control education at University College of Southeast Norway (USN), and Oslo and Akershus University college of Applied Science (HiOA). First, we present an overview of the course contents in our institutions, and then, we give examples on development of real and virtual laboratories, online course materials, new learning platforms and teaching methods.

### A. Control education at USN/Porsgrunn

The University of Southeast Norway (USN) has approximately 16.000 students. Control is taught in various courses at three different campuses. The courses covered here are introductory courses in the bachelor and master programmes at the Porsgrunn campus.

The control courses have developed over the years. The main driving forces behind the development are:

- A desire to increase the students' ability to handle practical control challenges. This requires development of both the pedagogics and the contents of the courses.
- Feedback from students, in particular from those who have industrial experience in automation and control.
- Teacher's experience in research and development, in particular the relation between theory and practice.
- Technological changes implying increasingly availability of affordable computer hardware and software.

In the following, firstly, the development of the course contents is described, and secondly, the pedagogical development is described.

#### *Contents development*

Highlights of the contents development are:

- Only experimental PID controller tuning methods are presented, both open loop tuning and closed loop tuning, are taught. Open loop tuning focuses on a process step-response interpretation of the Skogestad PI tuning rules assuming integrator + transport delay process dynamics [15], but also tuning of a double integrator process dynamics is covered (the double integrator can represent bodies to be position controlled, e.g. ships). Closed loop tuning focuses on the Ziegler-Nichols Ultimate Gain method, both the original tuning rules [16] and modified tuning rules. Frequency response based tuning methods are not covered.

- Feedforward control with possibly nonlinear differential equations models where the feedforward controller is obtained by substituting the process output variable by its setpoint and then solving the model for the control variable.
- The Laplace transform, transfer functions, and frequency response analysis are very briefly covered. Down-toning frequency response is in agreement with the low priority given to this topic as pronounced by industry people in the reports [17] and [18].
- Leaving out theoretical stability analysis in the frequency domain. However, the gain margin and phase margin of control loops are introduced using an experimental loop stability analysis approach [19].
- Discrete-time algorithms of the PID controller, a time-constant measurement filter, and process simulators.
- Principles and applications of model-based predictive control (MPC) are introduced as the most important model-based controller.

- In one of the introductory courses, an industrial process and control system simulator is introduced (the Kongsberg Oil & Gas Technologies K-Spice simulator)
- Programming skills, making the students able to actually implement control, filter, and simulation algorithms. To this end, National Instruments LabVIEW is introduced as the programming tool.

#### *Pedagogical development*

Highlights of the pedagogical development are presented in the following:

- Interactive real-time simulators from the SimView library [20] are used extensively in the theoretical exercises.
- Instructional videos supplementing the lectures [21].
- During 2016 and 2016, two introductory control courses will be offered both as online courses and traditional campus-based courses. Instructional videos will substitute traditional lectures in the online courses. However, laboratory exercises will, to the extent practical, still be a part of the course, requiring the online students to come to the campus to accomplish the experimental work during two or three days.
- A relatively large number of laboratory exercises based on the air heater [20] are closely integrated with the lectures.

### B. Control education at HiOA/Oslo

HiOA has approximately 18000 students, 1900 study engineering and 310 are undergraduate students in electronics engineering. At the undergraduate level HiOA offers courses in Dynamic Systems, Control

Systems I, Control Systems II and Instrumentation. The courses cover the following topics:

*Dynamic Systems:* Basic introductory course on mathematical modeling and dynamic systems analysis. Differential equations, transfer functions, block diagrams, state space models, frequency analysis, and time response.

*Control Systems I:* Basic introductory course on control. PID regulator, process simulation, frequency domain control design, Introduction to multivariable control.

*Control Systems II:* More advanced topics in control. Noise filtering, System identification, Kalman filtering, LQR/LQG control, MPC control. Introduction to nonlinear control.

*Instrumentation:* Instrumentation for control system engineers, sensor and actuators specifications, instrumentation diagrams, regulations and safety, PLC architecture and PLC programming.

Industrial hardware and software such as ABB's 800xA control system and Kongsberg's K-Spice simulator, are used in the laboratories for all our control courses.

### C. Accessible Laboratory Exercises

At USN, a number of laboratory exercises based on the air heater [22] shown in Figure 1. Together with LabVIEW running on students' laptops and the NI USB-6008 IO device laboratory exercises are run throughout the course, with students working in groups of two or three, see Figure 2. Twenty six identical rigs have been constructed in-house.

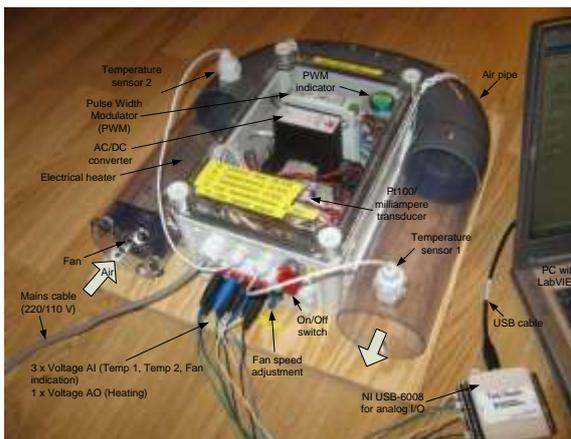


Figure 1: Air heater laboratory rig for temperature control. The voltage control signal manipulates the power delivered by the electrical heater. The outlet temperature is measured by a Pt100 element. The air flow through the pipe can be manually adjusted, representing a (measured) process disturbance.



Figure 2: Students working on laboratory assignments in groups.

The laboratory assignments cover:

1. Manual temperature control, monitoring, and data logging to file
2. Implementation of a dynamic process simulator from a time-constant and time-delay model with default model parameter values.
3. Adaptation of the mathematical model, i.e. parameter estimation, using a straight-forward, "brute force" least squares method implemented in nested for-loops.
4. Implementation of a discrete-time PI controller and an on/off controller.
5. Implementation of a discrete-time time-constant lowpass filter
6. Controller tuning using Skogestad's tuning rules and the Ziegler-Nichols Ultimate Gain method, see above.
7. The stability of the control loop. Hitherto, a qualitative analysis is included, including the stability impact of controller gain (both absolute value and sign), integral time, and filter time-constant. In the future, an experimental estimation of gain margin and phase margin [20] will be included.
8. Experimental, table-lookup feedforward control with air flow (disturbance) measurement as input signal and heater control signal as output signal.
9. Temperature control with an industrial PID controller (Fuji PGX5), instead of the LabVIEW-based control system

### D. Virtual laboratories / Commercial Large-Scale Simulators

In order to familiarize our students with industrial tools, and to give insight into chemical processes, commercial large-scale dynamic process simulators have been utilized at HiOA [23-25]. The simulation modules have been build up using the didactic model and the simulator training structure: briefing (lecture) – simulation (guided virtual laboratory) – debriefing (workshop). The simulation software K-Spice is provided by Kongsberg Oil and Gas Technologies Figure 3.

In the following, an example is given for the Dynamic Systems course which is taught for about 60 second year undergraduate electronics engineering students. Two of the learning outcomes of the course are “Student can characterize responses of first and second order systems in time and frequency domain” and “Student can carry out simulation of dynamic systems and interpret the results”. The goal of the simulation module is to give the students hands-on skills to use an industrial simulator, to make a step-change and identify the process response. The parameters of the process response will be used further for control tuning purposes.

The experiences from the simulator module are positive, the students and the teacher were very positive in their evaluation, 97% of students agreed that simulation exercises increase their understanding of process dynamics. However, the final exam results for the identification tasks were lower than the average final exam mark for both 2013 and 2014 [25]. In order to enhance learning through simulation training, we are currently working on developing an automatic assessment system [26].

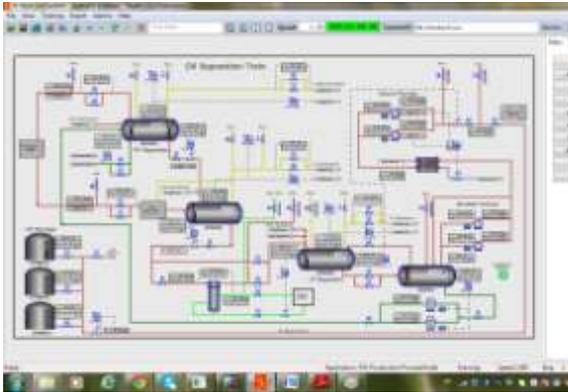


Figure 3: K-Spice® generic oil and gas production simulator.

#### E. Jupyter notebooks and interactive code

Numerical simulation tools have a crucial role in increasing the understanding of control theoretical concepts as well providing insight and promoting the curiosity and engagement of students [27, 28]. Typically, MATLAB/Simulink is the numerical simulation software tool of choice in most of current control systems courses. Alternatives exist which are gradually providing similar functionalities while at the same time being open source and free of use. Among those are GNU Octave [29] and Python.

Automatic control is a highly multidisciplinary subject which has been refereed as the “hidden technology”[30]. It involves, among others, the fields of mathematics, physics, electrical and mechanical engineering. In practice, all modern control systems are eventually implemented using some sort of software and programming language. Software development is therefore becoming increasingly important and demanded skill, and its importance has naturally gradually increased in control engineering course curriculums [31, 32].

A relatively recent technology allows integrating interactive code with rich text in so-called notebooks [33]. Notebooks can be viewed and executed using a simple internet browser. This provides an excellent way to distribute educational content and provide the students with a starting executable code with which to experiment and develop new ideas. Jupyter is at the forefront of this technology and provides support for a great number of programming languages including Julia, Python, and R [34]. Notebooks can be viewed in an internet browser using a notebook viewer (nbviewer) which does not require any special software. Additionally the student can chose to download the notebooks to their computers where they have the possibility to interact and modify the initial code.

Python is a popular object oriented scientific programming language that is becoming increasingly used in research and industry. Several Python libraries exists that are of interest for control engineering students. For instance numpy and matplotlib provide numerical and data visualization tools quite similar to MATLAB. Particularly interesting is the python control systems library [35] which implements basic operations for analysis and design of feedback control systems including block diagram algebra, Bode and Nyquist plots, time response, etc. By installing a python scientific distribution, like continuum analytics anaconda, the student can easily experiment with these open source tools at no cost. See Figure 4 for an example of notebook using python, numpy, and matplotlib to easily visualize simulation results [36].

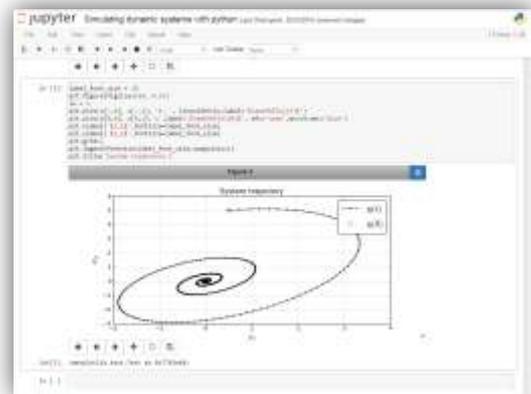


Figure 4: Example of interactive code using a browser, Jupyter notebook, and python-control toolbox.

Another interesting possibility is the use of Octave kernel together with Jupyter notebooks. GNU Octave is an open source scientific programming language with a syntax very similar to MATLAB. This provides the possibility of distributing educational notebooks with text, mathematical equations, and code. See

Figure 5 for an example of a Jupyter notebook using Octave.

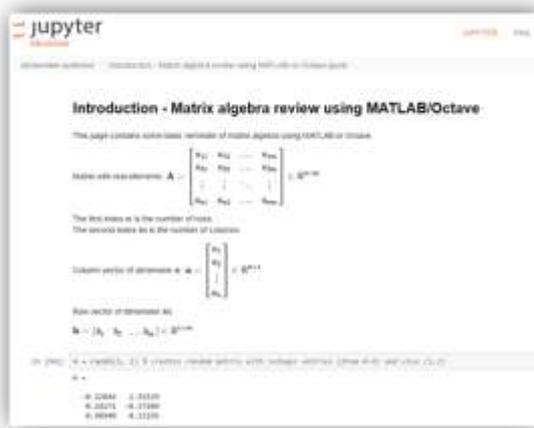


Figure 5: Example of Jupyter notebook using an Octave kernel.

### F. Learning Management Systems and OpenEdx

OpenEdx is currently one of the most popular open source MOOC platforms. The introductory undergraduate dynamic systems course at HiOA is going to experiment with the use of OpenEdx, see Figure 6. One of the most appealing functionalities is the ability to provide Quizzes for the students for each of the units which provides feedback and interactivity to the learning experience. With OpenEdx is simple to include LaTeX style mathematical expressions integrated in Quizzes, which provides a great level of flexibility.



Figure 6: Example of OpenEdx course with Quizzes containing mathematical expressions.

### G. Student-Active Learning Methods

At HiOA we have tested Flipped Classroom inspired teaching methods in a technology rich group room [37]. The experiment was conducted in dynamic-systems course with about 60 students during fall semester 2014. The main goal of the research was to find out if students' learning outcome would

increase due to the use of student-active learning methods. The data collection included students course evaluation, students attendance, students' pre and post scores from the Control Systems Concept Inventory [38], teachers classroom-activity log, five in-class mini-exams, and final exam grades.

The students were given reading assignments with theory quizzes prior to the classroom sessions. During the classes the students worked in small groups of 3-4 students and used a small screen at the end of each table to present the work for their group. Short tasks (5-20min) were given on concepts, theory and basic calculations, long exercises (20-45 min) on modeling of dynamic systems and simulation of these models with Matlab/Simulink. After each task, the teacher chose one of the groups to present their results for the whole class. These plenary presentations were facilitated with large screens using AirMedia software. Every other week the students took a 20-minutes long mini-exam on theory and modeling. The mini-test was graded by the peer-students right afterwards based on the solution presented by the teacher on the SmartBoard.

The students' course evaluation indicated that 70% of the students preferred the active learning classroom to traditional lecturing. Students valued the mini-exams as a tool to monitor their own progression in the course and they emphasized the good learning outcome of the group work. The students gave the course with an average final mark B.

Student attendance of 72% was considered good and above average among this student cohort. However, only 42% of the students answered the quizzes prior to the classes. Students conceptual understanding increased during the course, the normalized gain was 20% measured by the Control Systems Concept Inventory. The average final grade for the course in dynamic systems was compared to the average final grade for the course in electrical circuits between cohort 2013 (traditional lecturing) and cohort 2014 (active learning methods). The average grade in electric circuits was 3,94 for cohort 2013 and 3,35 for cohort 2014, indicating that cohort 2013 was academically stronger than cohort 2014. However, the difference between the cohorts had become non-significant after the dynamic systems course; the final grade was 2,64 for cohort 2013 and 2,63 for cohort 2014. Although the results were not conclusive, the results indicate that active learning methods applied in 2014 were more valuable for student learning than traditional lecturing.

## III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Global trends in higher education, online course materials and affordable hardware and software have provide great possibilities in order to make control education more accessible, efficient and interesting for students, teachers and universities. In this article we have given examples of experiences at USN and HiOA and have shown how some of these teaching tools have been applied in control systems courses.

Special attention is given to an experiment involving Flipped Classroom methodology together with a technology rich group room. This teaching methodology was tested with positive results during an undergraduate dynamic systems course. The paper also discusses, among others, the use of accessible laboratories, industrially relevant virtual laboratories, open source simulation tools, open learning management systems, and new teaching methods that are promising or have been successfully implemented in control systems courses at USN and HiOA.

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