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Modele software pentru soluții de învățare nelingvistică

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Software models for non-linguistic learning solutions

Abstract

Software engineering is a multifaceted discipline. Mastering it requires memorizing a lot of factual information, knowledge of at least one programming language, and learning a particular set of skills that enable the learner to tackle complex engineering tasks. Programming can only be learned by solving problems specifically designed to develop these kinds of skills. This makes efficiently teaching software engineering difficult. The traditional way of teaching programming heavily relies on *content delivery*. Traditional programming courses do not go too far from the lecture form, failing to innovate learning, only supplementing information delivered during lectures with various visualization techniques, and only sporadically. They do not illustrate the relations between different concepts presented to students from one lecture to the next, leaving it up to students to infer those connections. This paper demonstrates how teaching programming techniques without using textual explanations can be more effective. It identifies several key methods of achieving that, and showcases a few aspects of designing software that allow teaching major programming concepts without using textual information, appealing to students' *computational thinking* abilities. Using methods described in the first part of this work, a software prototype is developed showcasing a non-textual interactive approach to teaching *engineering thinking*.

Keywords—*non-linguistic learning; educational software; cognitive load theory; computational thinking;*

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Adnotare

Ingenieria software este o disciplină cu mai multe fațete. Stăpânirea acesteia necesită memorizarea multor informații concrete, cunoașterea a cel puțin unui limbaj de programare și învățarea unui anumit set de abilități care îi permit studentului să abordeze sarcini complexe de inginerie. Programarea poate fi învățată doar prin rezolvarea unor probleme special concepute pentru a dezvolta aceste tipuri de abilități. Acest lucru face dificilă predarea eficientă a ingineriei software. Modul tradițional de a preda programarea se bazează în mare măsură pe *livrarea conținutului*. Cursurile tradiționale de programare nu se îndepărtează prea mult de forma de prelegere, nereușind să inoveze învățarea, doar completând informațiile livrate în timpul prelegerilor cu diverse tehnici de vizualizare și doar sporadic. Ele nu ilustrează relațiile dintre diferitele concepte prezentate studenților de la o prelegere la alta, lăsând la latitudinea studenților să deducă acele conexiuni. Această lucrare demonstrează modul în care predarea tehnicilor de programare fără a folosi explicații textuale poate fi mai eficientă. Textul tezei identifică câteva metode cheie pentru a realiza acest lucru și prezintă câteva aspecte ale proiectării software-ului care permit predarea conceptelor majore de programare fără a utiliza informații textuale, apelând la abilitățile de *gândire computațională* ale studenților. Folosind metodele descrise în prima parte a acestei lucrări, este creat un prototip de software care prezintă o abordare interactivă non-textuală a dezvoltării *gândirii inginerești*.

Cuvinte-cheie—*învățare nelingvistică; produs software educational; teoria încărcării cognitive; gândirea computațională;*

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Introduction

Since the time of its inception the domain of software engineering has been evolving at an accelerating pace. Each year more and more people decide to pursue a career in software development. According to the US Department of Labor, software developers make up 1622200 (1.6 million) jobs in the country, with this occupation being the fastest growing (25% growth rate compared to an average 5% growth rate in other occupational fields) [BLS]. The number of software specialists in the US is expected to reach 2 million by the year 2031. At the same time, according to some sources working in the field of software development, software quality is in a steady decline year after year¹ (both, directly compared to the quality of the earlier software projects, and relative to the pace at which hardware complexity and performance increases). There's a growing demand for software engineers as software penetrates more and more domains. As a result, software engineering training becomes more important with each passing year. As more people enter the software engineering domain with the goal of becoming professional developers, the entrants' average level of expertise in related domains (mathematics and physics, primarily) naturally keeps dropping. In such a context, this paper poses – with the intention of answering – three questions.

The first question that needs to be answered aims at the fundamental forms of teaching that have become prevalent in modern education. Education largely revolves around the tried-and-true practice of gathering groups of people in a room and reading a lecture to them. Teachers are required by the curriculum to cover a certain amount of content to prepare their students for subsequent courses or examinations. Even though lectures can make up only part of a course (with other parts being dedicated to hands-on practice in the form of laboratory work or seminars where students drive the learning process), it is a significant part that students tend to pay the most attention to. As such, lectures become the core of each course and shape the students' impressions of the subject. This often has drastic consequences for students' success in later courses that rely on material from previous courses, even more so in cases where students are expected to have mastered certain skills during a course [OLSSON]. Information passed from instructors to students during lectures is represented in textual form. This requires the ability to comprehend textual information to be on a high enough level. But text isn't the only way to communicate ideas to students. In fact, it may not be the best form for that purpose. Thus, a question should be asked: are visual forms of presenting information better than textual forms in the context of teaching engineering? There is a plethora of evidence that points at that being the case. A number of research papers dealing with the subject will be discussed in the first chapter of this work.

¹  The Thirty Million Line Problem

The second question deals with the issue of teaching people programming through different paradigms, the choice of a paradigm usually being an afterthought – by the virtue of picking an existing programming language, with its quirks and concepts. This paper argues that the order, in which those two things (programming language and programming paradigm) are considered, should be reversed. And before that first choice is made, one question has to be answered: is procedural programming better than structured programming better than functional programming better than object-oriented programming?

The third question deals with the application of interactive tools to the domain of teaching. It could be formulated as follows. Does interactivity impact in a positive manner the understanding of the issue that is being explored by learners? By extension, it needs to be determined what kind of interactivity specifically boosts understanding (simple visualization techniques; gamification; use of virtual or augmented reality etc.).

This paper cannot hope to definitively answer all three questions posed above. Rather, this paper will provide several concrete examples of how software enables students to learn the “spirit of engineering and problem solving”². It argues that teaching programming without using textual explanations can be more effective in some contexts, and identifies several key aspects of using software that allow teaching major programming concepts without using textual information in order to make the whole learning process more efficient.

²  Talk: Video Games and the Future of Education

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