Empowering the Next Generation of the American Workforce: Integrating Microchips and Industrial Robotics in Experiential Learning Camps

Prof. Aleksandr Sergeyev, Michigan Technological University

ALEKSANDR SERGEYEV is a Professor of the Mechatronics, Electrical, and Robotics Engineering Technology program in the Department of Applied Computing at Michigan Tech. He is the Director of the FANUC Authorized Certified Robotic Training Center and a Director of the Master of Science in Mechatronics degree program at Michigan Technological University. Dr. Sergeyev is a member of SPIE, ATMAE, IEEE, and ASEE professional organizations.

Dr. Yu Cai Cai, Michigan Technological University

Dr. Yu Cai is a professor of cybersecurity in the College of Computing at Michigan Tech, where he also serves as the associate dean and the associate director of the Institute of Computing and Cybersystems (ICC). Additionally, Dr. Cai is the Director of the Computing Education Center, which is part of the ICC.

Dr. Cai's research interests include cybersecurity, computer networks, and computing education. He has been the lead PI on multi-million dollar external grants, with funding from sources such as the National Science Foundation (NSF), National Security Agency (NSA), and the State of Michigan. He is dedicated to applying his research to real-world challenges that positively impact society. Dr. Cai has also served as a consultant for companies like IBM and Ford, and he plays an active role as an ABET program evaluator for computing accreditation.

Paniz Khanmohammadi Hazaveh, Michigan Technological University

Dr. Hazaveh received her PhD in Electrical and Computer Engineering from the Michigan Technological University in 2018 with a focus on Single Electron Transistors.Â Â She has been a Lecturer in Electrical Engineering and Electrical Engineering Technology

Sai Bhargava Korrapati, Michigan Technological University

Sai Bhargava Korrapati received his Master of Science in Mechatronics from Michigan Technological University in 2025. He is currently a Controls Engineer at TGW Systems, where he works on industrial automation, controls integration, and material handling systems for warehouse automation. His experience spans industrial robotics, PLC programming, machine commissioning, and automation system integration. Previously, he worked with Wipro PARI and served as a Graduate Research Assistant at Michigan Technological University, contributing to automation, robotics, and advanced manufacturing projects. His technical expertise includes FANUC robotic systems, industrial vision integration, and Siemens and Allen-Bradley PLC-based automation systems.

Varun Chandra Kumar Pathuri, Michigan Technological University

Varun Chandra Kumar Pathuri is a Controls Engineer at Zekelman Industries and a graduate in Mechatronics, Robotics, and Automation Engineering from Michigan Technological University, where he developed a strong foundation in advanced automation systems and industrial robotics. His experience spans industrial automation, PLC programming, and robotic system integration through professional roles at Tesla and Zekelman Industries, as well as research contributions as a Graduate Research Assistant. Varun has demonstrated expertise in integrating vision systems with industrial robots, optimizing manufacturing processes, and enhancing system efficiency and reliability, achieving measurable performance improvements in automation applications. His technical proficiency includes Siemens and Allen-Bradley PLCs, SCADA/HMI development, and FANUC, ABB, and Mitsubishi robotics, alongside a strong focus on Industry 4.0 solutions and smart manufacturing systems.

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Abstract

This paper presents the design, implementation, and evaluation of an innovative experiential learning program that integrates microelectronics and industrial robotics to prepare a diverse next-generation STEM workforce. The project, Empowering the Next Generation of the American Workforce: Integrating Microchips and Industrial Robotics in Experiential Learning Camps, introduces high school and community college students to microchip programming, robotics, and cybersecurity through a structured, three-phase camp model. In Phase I, participants develop foundational skills in microcontrollers, microprocessors, and programming using Arduino-based platforms. Phase II advances learning by integrating microchips with collaborative robotic arms, enabling students to apply their programming knowledge to real-world robotic tasks. In Phase III, participants transition to programming and operating FANUC industrial robots, gaining experience with industry-standard systems and exploring cybersecurity aspects of data transmission in cyber-physical environments. The program culminates in a showcase and competition, fostering creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. A rigorous evaluation framework employing pre- and post-assessments, surveys, and project-based evaluations measures student engagement, learning gains, and effective teaching strategies in informal settings. Early findings suggest that hands-on, structured experiences significantly increase students' interest in microelectronics and robotics, while also supporting the development of transferable skills in programming, problem-solving, and teamwork. The project further contributes to addressing diversity gaps in the semiconductor and robotics industries by intentionally recruiting underrepresented students through established partnerships with regional high schools, tribal colleges, and community colleges in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. By disseminating curricula, best practices, and outcomes through conferences, publications, and integration into Michigan Tech's Summer Youth Programs, this work offers a scalable and sustainable model for broadening participation and enhancing STEM education in microelectronics, robotics, and cybersecurity.

Introduction and Motivation

Microelectronics and industrial robotics are foundational technologies underpinning modern manufacturing, automation, and cyber-physical systems. Advances associated with Industry 4.0 have intensified the demand for a workforce capable of designing, programming, integrating, and securing systems that combine embedded computing with robotic automation. Microchips provide the intelligence and control required for sensing, communication, and decision-making, while industrial robots translate these digital commands into physical action. As these technologies become increasingly interconnected, workforce preparation must reflect their integrated nature rather than treating them as isolated domains. Despite strong industry demand, access to meaningful educational experiences in microelectronics and industrial robotics remains uneven, particularly for high school and community college students in rural regions and from historically underrepresented populations. Traditional instructional models often introduce programming, robotics, and cybersecurity independently, limiting students' ability to develop system-level understanding of real industrial environments. Moreover, many institutions lack access to industrial-grade equipment, further constraining authentic learning opportunities.

Informal learning environments, such as short-term experiential camps, provide a promising approach for addressing these challenges. Prior research shows that hands-on, project-based learning in informal settings can increase student interest, confidence, and persistence in STEM, particularly when learning experiences emphasize relevance, collaboration, and real-world application [1-3]. This paper presents the design and evaluation framework of an experiential learning program that integrates microchip programming, collaborative robotics, industrial robotics, and cybersecurity within a structured, scaffolded camp model.

The program targets high school and community college students, with a particular focus on learners from rural communities, tribal colleges, and other underrepresented populations. These students often have strong interest in applied, hands-on learning but limited exposure to advanced manufacturing and automation technologies. Early engagement is critical, as experiences during secondary and early postsecondary education strongly influence students' academic identity, self-efficacy, and career trajectories [4], [5].

The educational rationale for the program is grounded in three principles. First*, integration matters*: microelectronics, robotics, and cybersecurity are inseparable in modern industrial systems, and instruction should reflect this reality [6]. Second, *scaffolding supports learning*: progressively increasing technical complexity enables learners to build confidence while developing transferable skills [7]. Third, *experiential learning is especially effective in informal contexts*, where students can iterate, fail safely, and reflect on outcomes without the pressures associated with formal grading [8].

Program Design and Structure

In the rapidly evolving technological landscape of the 21st century, knowledge in microchips and industrial robotics has become increasingly vital. These two fields form the backbone of modern manufacturing and automation, driving innovation and efficiency across various industries. Understanding the importance of microchips and industrial robotics, as well as their interrelation, is crucial for anyone aspiring to thrive in the contemporary and future workforce.
The Figure 1 represents the overall approach for the proposed multi-phased, educational learning opportunity in microchip and industrial robotics technologies The program is organized as a three-phase experiential learning model delivered through multiple in-person, two-day camps conducted during the academic year. Each camp enrolls approximately twenty participants and provides intensive hands-on instruction using microcontrollers, collaborative robots, and industrial robotic systems. To reduce barriers to participation, students receive meals, travel support, and access to all required equipment.

Instruction is intentionally scaffolded across phases. Phase I focuses on microchip fundamentals and embedded programming. Phase II extends these skills to collaborative robotic systems. Phase III introduces industrial robotics and cyber-physical system considerations. Cybersecurity concepts are embedded throughout all phases to reinforce secure system design as an essential engineering practice.

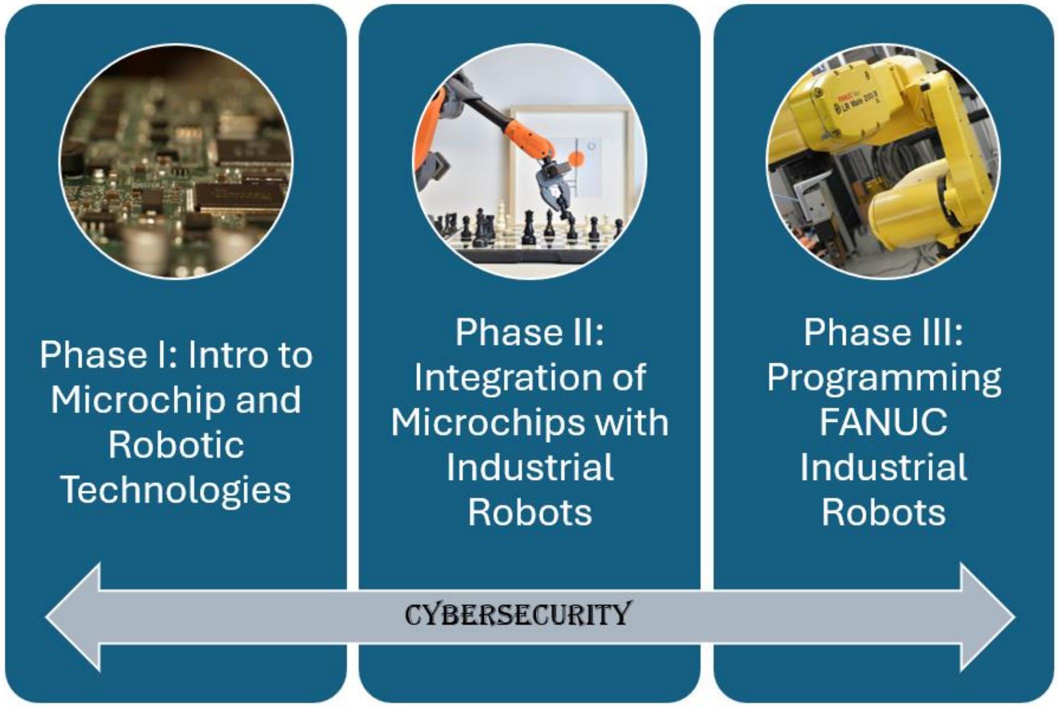

Figure 1: Multi-phased, educational learning opportunity in microchip and industrial robotics technologies

Phase I: Introduction to Microchips and Robotics Technologies

Phase I of the experiential learning program is designed to establish a strong conceptual and technical foundation in microchip technologies and introductory robotics concepts. The instructional approach integrates theoretical instruction with hands-on activities to cultivate a robust understanding of microcontrollers, microprocessors, and their roles in embedded robotic systems. This phase provides participants with the essential knowledge and skills required to effectively program the microcontroller embedded in the robotic platforms used in Phase II, while also developing transferable programming competencies [7], [9] applicable across multiple technological contexts.

Instruction in Phase I begins with an exploration of the history and evolution of microchip technologies. This historical framing provides participants with contextual understanding of how microcontrollers and microprocessors have developed over time and why they are central to modern computing, automation, and robotics. Participants are introduced to the core definitions and functional roles of microcontrollers and microprocessors, with explicit emphasis on their use within embedded systems and robotic applications. This early distinction is critical for helping learners understand why microcontrollers, rather than general-purpose processors, are typically used in robotic control systems.

Building on this foundation, detailed discussions focus on the key differences between microcontrollers and microprocessors, highlighting their respective capabilities, architectural features, and application domains. A comparative analysis is used to clarify the advantages and limitations of each technology and to illustrate appropriate use cases. As part of this instruction, the architecture of Arduino-based microcontroller boards is examined in detail, serving as a representative example of widely used embedded platforms. Through this analysis, participants learn about core components such as processing units, memory, input/output interfaces, and peripheral integration. Practical examples further demonstrate how microcontrollers are deployed in embedded and robotic systems, in contrast to microprocessors that are typically reserved for more complex, high-level computing tasks.

To broaden participants' understanding of microchip technologies beyond programming and system integration, Phase I also includes an introduction to the microfabrication process. Instruction covers the major stages of microchip design and manufacturing, providing insight into how microelectronic devices are produced at scale. This content is reinforced through a guided tour of Michigan Technological University's microfabrication facility, allowing participants to observe the production environment firsthand. The combination of theoretical explanation and direct observation strengthens conceptual understanding and connects abstract ideas to real-world industrial processes.

Programming instruction in Phase I focuses on fundamental concepts that underpin embedded system development. Basic programming ideas are introduced using simple algorithms and flowcharts, which help participants visualize logical structures and decision-making processes. These activities emphasize how microchips function as the control centers of robotic systems. The curriculum covers essential programming constructs, including data types, variable storage, conditional statements, loops (both for and while), and functions. Instruction is intentionally language-agnostic, emphasizing conceptual understanding rather than syntax alone.

Participants engage in a range of interactive activities designed to solidify their understanding and application of programming concepts. These activities include writing simple algorithms, completing unfinished code snippets, and modifying existing programs to achieve specific outcomes. By working through these exercises, participants develop problem-solving skills and learn to reason about program behavior. The programming tasks are structured to ensure that students can transfer their knowledge across different programming environments and languages, fostering versatility and adaptability.

By the conclusion of Phase I, participants possess a thorough understanding of microcontroller hardware, the distinction between microcontrollers and microprocessors, and foundational programming principles. This combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience prepares students to tackle more complex algorithmic challenges and applied robotics tasks in subsequent phases of the program. The integrated instructional design ensures that participants are well equipped to connect microchip technology to robotic systems, laying the groundwork for advanced learning and innovation in robotics, automation, and cyber-physical systems.

Phase II: Collaborative Robotics Integration

Phase II of the program is designed to transition participants from foundational microchip programming concepts to applied robotic system control through hands-on interaction with a collaborative robotic platform. Building directly on the embedded systems knowledge developed in Phase I, this phase emphasizes the integration of microcontrollers with robotic hardware, enabling participants to experience how software-driven control logic is translated into physical motion and task execution. The instructional design of Phase II reflects research indicating that educational robotics is most effective when programming concepts are tightly coupled with observable system behavior and authentic applications [10-12].

Participants program and operate the MyPalletizer M5 series robotic arm, a compact, four-axis collaborative robot equipped with an ESP32 microcontroller. This platform was selected because it closely mimics the kinematic structure and control principles of industrial robotic arms while remaining accessible and safe for novice learners. Its embedded microcontroller architecture provides a direct continuation of Phase I instruction, allowing participants to apply previously learned programming constructs in a robotics context. Prior studies have shown that such continuity supports skill transfer and strengthens systems-level understanding in robotics education [11], [13].

Phase II begins with a detailed introduction to the MyPalletizer M5 robotic system, focusing on its mechanical and electronic components. Participants are introduced to joints, actuators, sensors, and the embedded ESP32 microcontroller, with explicit discussion of how each component functions independently and as part of an integrated system. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of the microcontroller in coordinating sensing, decision-making, and actuation. This component-level analysis reinforces the conceptual link between embedded systems and robotic behavior, a connection that is often abstracted away in introductory robotics instruction.

Safety education is a central and explicit component of Phase II. Before engaging in programming activities, participants receive instruction on collaborative robot safety principles, including force-limiting behaviors, workspace awareness, and emergency procedures. The safety features of the MyPalletizer M5 are examined in detail, highlighting how collaborative safety protocols are implemented in both hardware and software. Demonstrations of best practices for safe operation, including proper handling, setup, initialization, and shutdown procedures, are provided by instructors. Supervised practice sessions allow participants to become comfortable with the robot's controls while reinforcing safe operational habits. This emphasis aligns with prior work highlighting the importance of safety training in educational robotics environments, particularly when preparing students for industrial contexts [12], [13].

Once participants demonstrate an understanding of safety requirements, instruction shifts to practical programming and application development. Participants begin with a structured review of programming concepts introduced in Phase I, including sequencing, conditional logic, and loops, ensuring readiness to apply these skills in a robotics setting. They are then introduced to the programming environment specific to the MyPalletizer M5. To foster an experiential learning environment, instruction is delivered through interactive coding sessions in which participants actively engage with the robot rather than passively observing demonstrations.

A key instructional strategy in Phase II involves the use of partially completed algorithms. Participants are provided with incomplete control programs designed to operate the robotic arm and are guided through the process of completing the missing logic. This approach requires learners to reason about program flow, anticipate robotic behavior, and iteratively test and refine their solutions. Instructors provide real-time feedback to support understanding of both programming logic and system response. Once completed, programs are verified for correctness and functionality before execution on the robotic hardware. This scaffolded approach has been shown to promote deeper learning and problem-solving skills in robotics education [10], [11].

Participants then program the ESP32 microcontroller to execute physical movements of the robotic arm, translating abstract code into tangible outcomes. Initial tasks focus on basic robotic operations, such as rotating individual joints, moving along predefined axes, and performing simple motion sequences. These activities allow participants to observe how high-level programming commands are interpreted by the microcontroller and executed through coordinated actuator control. By directly linking code to motion, students develop an intuitive understanding of robotic kinematics and control.

As proficiency increases, participants are challenged with more advanced programming tasks. These include coordinating multiple joints simultaneously, executing complex motion sequences, and programming the robot to perform autonomous task routines. Such activities deepen participants' understanding of robotic motion planning and reinforce computational thinking skills introduced in Phase I [7], [9]. The progression from simple movements to coordinated automation mirrors real-world engineering workflows and encourages iterative problem-solving.

By the conclusion of Phase II, participants demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of how to program and operate a collaborative robotic system. They gain practical experience integrating microcontrollers with robotic hardware, applying programming concepts to real-world tasks, and adhering to safety and operational protocols. This hands-on experience serves as a critical bridge between introductory embedded systems instruction and advanced industrial robotics programming in Phase III. Consistent with findings in robotics education research, the use of collaborative robots in this phase supports both technical skill development and learner confidence, preparing participants to engage successfully with industrial-grade robotic systems [11-13].

Phase III: Industrial Robotics Experience

Phase III provides participants with a structured and authentic introduction to industrial robotics through hands-on experience with FANUC industrial robotic systems. FANUC robots are widely deployed across manufacturing and automation industries, including material handling, assembly, welding, and inspection, making them an ideal platform for exposing students to industry-standard technologies. This phase represents the culmination of the program's scaffolded instructional design, transitioning learners from educational and collaborative robotic platforms to professional-grade industrial systems. Prior research has shown that exposure to authentic industrial equipment significantly enhances students' understanding of workforce expectations and strengthens the relevance of prior learning experiences [11], [13].

Instruction in Phase III begins with a comprehensive introduction to industrial robotics, focusing on the role of FANUC robots in modern manufacturing environments. Participants are introduced to the historical development and evolution of industrial robotics, highlighting how advances in control systems, sensors, and computing have expanded robotic capabilities and transformed production systems. This contextual foundation helps students situate their hands-on activities within broader industrial and economic trends, reinforcing the relevance of industrial robotics to contemporary engineering practice.

Safety is emphasized as a central and non-negotiable component of Phase III. Participants receive formal instruction on industrial robot safety protocols and best practices prior to engaging in any programming or operation. This instruction includes an overview of safety zones, physical guarding, emergency stop systems, and lockout/tagout concepts appropriate for educational environments. Participants learn proper handling techniques and safe operational procedures to ensure a controlled and secure learning environment. By explicitly modeling industrial safety culture, this phase reinforces professional norms and prepares participants for future work in manufacturing settings, consistent with best practices identified in industrial robotics education literature [12], [13].

Following safety instruction, participants are introduced to the fundamentals of FANUC robot programming. Instruction begins with core concepts and terminology used in industrial robotics, including coordinate systems, frames of reference, and motion types. Participants learn to distinguish between joint, linear, and circular motions and to understand how each motion type is selected based on task requirements. Teach Pendant Programming (TPP) is introduced as the primary programming interface, and participants receive hands-on training in navigating the teach pendant interface, creating and editing programs, and executing robot motion commands.

Through guided exercises, participants practice recording points, defining motion paths, and programming basic robot movements. These activities emphasize precision, repeatability, and safe execution, reinforcing the differences between industrial and educational robotic environments. Instructors provide structured support and feedback to ensure participants understand both the programming syntax and the physical implications of their commands.

A key pedagogical strength of Phase III is the explicit connection between prior programming experiences and industrial robot programming. Skills and concepts introduced through Arduino-based microcontroller programming in Phase I and collaborative robotics programming in Phase II are intentionally leveraged to support learning transfer. Participants recognize familiar constructs such as sequencing, conditional logic, loops, and modular program structure within the FANUC programming environment. This continuity helps reduce cognitive load and builds confidence as students engage with more complex and less forgiving industrial systems, aligning with research on scaffolded learning in robotics education [7], [9], [11].

As participants progress, instruction expands to include more advanced programming techniques, such as conditional execution, looping structures, and the use of subroutines. These constructs enable the creation of more flexible and efficient robot programs and mirror programming practices used in industrial automation. Participants apply these techniques to realistic manufacturing scenarios, including pick-and-place operations, sorting tasks, and basic material handling workflows. By simulating authentic industrial processes, students gain insight into how FANUC robots are deployed in production environments and why precision, timing, and efficiency are critical performance considerations.

By the conclusion of Phase III, participants demonstrate the ability to safely program and operate industrial robotic systems using industry-standard tools and practices. They gain firsthand experience with professional programming interfaces, industrial safety protocols, and real-world automation tasks. This experience represents a significant step beyond introductory robotics instruction and prepares participants for advanced coursework, internships, and careers in robotics, mechatronics, and advanced manufacturing. Consistent with prior studies, the progression from educational platforms to industrial robotics supports deeper understanding, skill transfer, and workforce readiness [11-13].

Cybersecurity Integration Across Phases

Integrating cybersecurity education across Phases I–III of the program is essential for providing participants with a realistic and comprehensive understanding of modern technological systems. Contemporary microchip-based and robotic platforms are inherently cyber-physical in nature, combining computation, communication, and physical actuation. As a result, vulnerabilities in software, hardware, or communication channels can have direct physical and economic consequences. Embedding cybersecurity concepts throughout the curriculum reinforces the idea that security is a fundamental engineering consideration rather than a separate or optional specialization [14-16]. The dedicated cybersecurity module is designed to introduce participants to the fundamental security challenges associated with modern computer systems, embedded devices, and cyber-physical platforms. As microchips increasingly serve as the “brains” of robotics, industrial automation, and smart devices, cybersecurity has become an essential component of responsible system design and operation. This focused training provides participants with foundational cybersecurity awareness while reinforcing the broader camp themes of microchip programming, robotics integration, and real-world engineering practice.

The session begins with an accessible introduction to cybersecurity, emphasizing its role in protecting computer systems, embedded controllers, and networked devices from unauthorized access, misuse, and disruption. Rather than treating cybersecurity as an abstract concept, the training grounds discussions in real-world incidents that highlight the tangible consequences of cyber-attacks. High-profile examples such as the Stuxnet attack on industrial control systems and major commercial data breaches are used to demonstrate how vulnerabilities in software, hardware, and network design can lead to significant operational, economic, and societal impacts. These case studies help participants understand that cybersecurity is not limited to traditional computers but is deeply intertwined with microchips, robotics, and industrial technologies that underpin modern infrastructure.

Building on this context, the training introduces core cybersecurity principles relevant to microchip-based and robotic systems. Participants learn the basics of secure coding, including the importance of input validation, minimizing unnecessary functionality, and following good programming practices to reduce vulnerabilities in embedded software. The session also covers fundamental data protection concepts, such as safeguarding sensitive information, ensuring data integrity, and understanding how compromised data can affect system behavior. These topics are intentionally aligned with the programming and microcontroller activities introduced earlier in the camp, allowing students to see how security considerations naturally extend from the code they write to the systems they build and control.

The module also highlights practical strategies for improving the security of computer, robotic, and microchip systems. Topics include protecting communication channels between controllers and sensors, understanding the role of authentication and access control, and applying simple encryption concepts to safeguard data in transit. Participants are introduced to the idea of defense-in-depth and learn how layered security measures can help mitigate risk even when individual components are imperfect. Emphasis is placed on realistic, age-appropriate practices that students can understand and apply, rather than advanced technical details beyond the scope of the camp.

In addition to system-level security, the training reinforces personal and professional cybersecurity awareness. Participants discuss safe online practices, password hygiene, and the responsible use of digital tools, helping them recognize how individual behaviors contribute to overall system security. By connecting personal cybersecurity habits with broader engineering practices, the module encourages students to view themselves as active contributors to a safer digital ecosystem. This approach aligns with the camp's broader educational goal of preparing students for future STEM pathways by instilling both technical competence and ethical responsibility. By the end of the cybersecurity session, participants develop a foundational understanding of how cybersecurity principles apply to microchips, robotics, and cyber- physical systems. They gain awareness of common threats, recognize the importance of secure design and operation, and appreciate the role cybersecurity plays in modern engineering and manufacturing environments. This exposure not only complements the hands-on microchip and robotics activities in the camp but also prepares participants for more advanced learning opportunities in cybersecurity, mechatronics, and related STEM fields. Through this integrated approach, the cybersecurity module reinforces the camp's mission of educating the next generation of technologically literate, security- conscious innovators

Overall, the integrated cybersecurity approach ensures that participants leave the program with foundational awareness of security challenges in microelectronics, robotics, and industrial automation. Consistent with recent recommendations for cybersecurity education and workforce development, this approach prepares students to engage responsibly with modern cyber-physical systems and supports the development of a security-conscious engineering mindset [14-16].

Assessment and Research Design

The goal of the evaluation plan is to examine the extent to which the experiential learning environment, implemented through informal, intensive educational camps, contributes to student engagement, interest, and knowledge development in microelectronics and robotics. In addition, the evaluation seeks to identify which instructional strategies and learning activities are most effective for supporting student engagement and retention of complex technical concepts in informal settings. Consistent with prior work in engineering education research, the evaluation framework emphasizes both formative and summative assessment to support continuous improvement and knowledge generation [2], [3], [5].

The evaluation is designed to capture key formative data at multiple intervals and across different aspects of the program. This formative emphasis enables the instructional team to make evidence-based adjustments to curriculum structure, pacing, and instructional strategies during and between camp offerings. By systematically collecting and analyzing formative data, the project prioritizes instructional responsiveness and learner-centered refinement, which is particularly important in informal learning environments where participant backgrounds and prior experiences vary widely [3], [5]. In parallel, summative assessment components are incorporated to evaluate overall program effectiveness in achieving its educational objectives. Together, these complementary approaches support both immediate instructional improvement and longer-term research contributions to the engineering education literature.
The project employs a pre-post assessment design to measure changes in students' interest and content knowledge related to microchips, robotics, and cyber-physical systems. Pre-assessments are administered at the beginning of each camp to establish baseline levels of student interest, self-reported confidence, and foundational technical knowledge. These baseline measures provide critical context for interpreting learning gains and engagement outcomes.

Throughout the camp, module-level assessments are embedded within instructional activities to monitor progress and identify areas where additional support or clarification may be needed. These assessments include short quizzes, structured reflection prompts, and task-based checkpoints aligned with learning objectives from Phases I-III. Post-assessments are administered at the conclusion of each camp to measure changes in interest, perceived competence, and conceptual understanding. Collectively, these instruments allow the project team to assess the overall impact of the experiential learning model while accounting for individual variation in prior preparation.

To capture student engagement and perceptions of the learning experience, participant surveys are administered at multiple points during the program. These surveys are designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data related to student satisfaction, perceived value of activities, and engagement with specific instructional components. Likert-scale items provide quantitative measures of interest, confidence, and perceived learning, while open-ended questions allow participants to articulate which aspects of the program were most impactful and why.

These survey data provide insight into how students experience the informal learning environment and how different instructional strategies, such as hands-on programming, collaborative robotics tasks, and real-world industrial applications, contribute to motivation and engagement. Such measures are widely used in engineering education research to complement knowledge-based assessments and to capture affective outcomes that influence persistence in STEM fields [4], [5].

The evaluation plan also incorporates structured observations and instructor feedback to examine the effectiveness of teaching strategies in experiential settings. During each camp, instructional staff document observations related to student participation, collaboration, and problem-solving behaviors. Instructors also provide reflective feedback on content delivery, activity design, and pacing, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

This qualitative component of the evaluation focuses on determining how hands-on activities, collaborative projects, and real-world applications influence student engagement and retention of microchip- and robotics-related concepts. By triangulating survey data, assessment results, and instructional observations, the evaluation framework supports a more holistic understanding of learning dynamics in informal engineering education environments [2], [3].

At the time of this paper, data collection across multiple camp offerings is complete or ongoing, and data analysis is currently in progress. Given the scope of the dataset and the longitudinal nature of the evaluation, detailed quantitative results are not reported here. Instead, the present paper focuses on the instructional design, implementation framework, and evaluation methodology. Findings related to student learning gains, engagement outcomes, and instructional effectiveness will be reported in subsequent conference and journal publications. These future publications will present detailed analyses of pre-post assessment results, survey findings, and qualitative observations, contributing to the broader understanding of effective microelectronics and industrial robotics education in informal learning contexts.

Discussion and Lessons Learned

The design and early implementation of this experiential learning program provide several insights into effective instructional practices for integrating microchips, robotics, and cybersecurity in informal learning environments. While detailed quantitative results are still under analysis, formative observations, instructor reflections, and preliminary assessment trends reveal important lessons related to curriculum structure, instructional scaffolding, learner engagement, and feasibility.

One of the most significant design strengths of the program is the deliberate scaffolded progression from microchip programming to collaborative robotics and finally to industrial robotics. Participants consistently demonstrated greater confidence and conceptual clarity when transitioning between phases because each phase explicitly built on prior knowledge and skills. The continuity between Arduino-based microcontroller programming, ESP32-controlled collaborative robots, and FANUC industrial robots allowed students to recognize recurring programming constructs, such as sequencing, conditionals, and loops, across increasingly complex platforms. This progression aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of coherence and knowledge transfer in engineering education and robotics instruction.

The informal camp environment played a critical role in supporting student engagement and experimentation. Unlike traditional classroom settings, the camp structure allowed participants to iterate on solutions, encounter and resolve errors, and engage in collaborative problem-solving without the pressure of formal grading. Instructors observed that students were more willing to ask questions, test alternative approaches, and assist peers during hands-on activities. These behaviors are consistent with findings in the engineering education literature that highlight the effectiveness of informal, project-based learning environments for fostering motivation and persistence, particularly among students with limited prior exposure to advanced technologies.

An important lesson from Phases II and III was the educational value of explicitly teaching safety as a professional practice rather than treating it as a procedural requirement. Participants initially perceived safety rules as constraints; however, through repeated reinforcement and contextual explanation, students began to view safety protocols as integral to system design and operation. This shift was particularly evident during the transition to industrial robotics, where students demonstrated increased situational awareness and respect for industrial safety norms. Embedding safety culture throughout the curriculum appears to support not only technical competence but also professional identity development.

Integrating cybersecurity concepts across all phases proved both feasible and pedagogically valuable. Rather than overwhelming participants with technical security implementation details, the program emphasized awareness, systems thinking, and design responsibility. Case-based instruction helped students connect abstract cybersecurity concepts to tangible consequences in microchip-based and robotic systems. Instructor reflections suggest that this integrated approach improved students' ability to articulate why security considerations matter in embedded and industrial systems, supporting broader calls for cybersecurity education that spans disciplinary boundaries.

Several challenges were identified during implementation. Time constraints inherent to short, intensive camps required careful prioritization of learning objectives, occasionally limiting depth in certain advanced topics. Additionally, participant backgrounds varied widely, necessitating flexible pacing and differentiated support. These challenges underscore the importance of formative assessment and instructional adaptability in informal learning environments. Ongoing refinements are addressing these issues through modular content design and optional extension activities.

Conclusion

This paper presents the design, implementation framework, and evaluation methodology of an experiential learning program that integrates microchip programming, collaborative robotics, industrial robotics, and cybersecurity within informal educational camps. The program responds to workforce and educational needs by providing high school and community college students with authentic, hands-on exposure to interconnected technologies that define modern manufacturing and automation systems.

A central contribution of this work is the demonstration that a carefully scaffolded progression, from embedded systems to collaborative robots to industrial robotic platforms, can be effectively implemented in informal learning environments. By explicitly linking programming concepts across platforms and embedding cybersecurity awareness throughout the curriculum, the program supports system-level understanding and professional skill development. Early observations indicate that this approach enhances student engagement, confidence, and readiness for advanced study and workforce pathways.

While this paper focuses on instructional design and assessment methodology, comprehensive analysis of learning outcomes and engagement data is currently underway. Results from pre-post assessments, participant surveys, and qualitative observations will be reported in subsequent conference and journal publications. These future studies will examine learning gains, affective outcomes, and the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies in greater detail.

Future work will also explore longitudinal impacts, including participants' subsequent enrollment in STEM programs, pursuit of robotics- or microelectronics-related coursework, and engagement with advanced experiential learning opportunities. In addition, the instructional model described here is being refined for scalability and adaptation to other institutional and regional contexts. By disseminating curriculum materials, assessment instruments, and implementation insights, this work aims to contribute to a growing body of best practices for experiential learning in microelectronics, robotics, and cybersecurity education.

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