INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT

OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL

Vol 14, Issue 4, (2025) E-ISSN: 2226-6348

Elevating HR Tech Education through Hybrid, Authentic, and Micro-Reflective Learning (HAuReL) for Digital Excellence

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DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i4/26673

Published Online: 04 October 2025

Abstract

Human Resource (HR) education faces a persistent challenge in bridging the gap between theoretical instruction and the practical digital competencies required in today's technology-driven workplace. Traditional pedagogical models often fail to equip students with applied skills in real-world training technologies, limiting their workforce readiness. This study addresses this gap by introducing the Hybrid, Authentic, and Micro-Reflective Learning (HAuReL) framework which an instructional model designed to integrate hybrid delivery, authentic learning tasks, and micro-reflective practices into HR training and development courses. Grounded in the Context-Sensitive Activity-Centred Design Framework, Authentic Learning Framework, and Reflective Learning Theory, HAuReL was implemented over 14 weeks in a quasi-experimental design involving 127 undergraduate HR students. The study aimed to evaluate HAuReL's effectiveness in improving two key outcomes which are academic learning performance and digital skills competency. Findings revealed that students exposed to HAuReL achieved significantly higher academic performance compared to those in traditional learning settings. While improvements in digital competencies were observed, they did not yield statistically significant differences, suggesting a need for more context-sensitive assessment tools. These results demonstrate the potential of the HAuReL framework to address long-standing pedagogical gaps in HR education by aligning learning with real-world digital training environments and reflective practices.

Keywords: Hybrid Learning, Authentic Learning, Reflective Learning

Introduction

The global workforce is undergoing rapid digital transformation, with organizations across sectors increasingly leveraging technology to enhance operational efficiency, innovation, and talent management. In Malaysia, the government's MyDIGITAL initiative projects that 80% of

businesses will adopt cloud computing and data analytics by 2025 (MDEC, 2021), signalling a national imperative to strengthen digital competencies within the workforce. However, despite this strategic push, a significant gap remains in the digital preparedness of human resource (HR) professionals. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022), only 43% of HR professionals possess intermediate digital skills, with marked deficiencies in areas such as data analytics and Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS). This gap is particularly critical given that 65% of employers now prioritize digital literacy alongside traditional HR knowledge when recruiting (World Economic Forum, 2023). As digital technologies redefine HR functions; from AI-driven recruitment to digital learning platforms and workforce analytics, graduates who lack these competencies risk becoming obsolete.

While technological proficiency in tools such as Excel, HRIS, and e-learning systems has become a core expectation in modern HR roles (Marler & Fisher, 2013), many HR students remain resistant to technology-related courses. A survey of Malaysian HR undergraduates found that 62% deliberately avoided tech-based subjects, citing difficulty and perceived irrelevance to people-oriented work (Ahmad et al., 2021). This resistance is shaped by a curriculum that tends to compartmentalize HR and IT content, reinforcing the notion that technical skills fall outside the scope of human-centered HR functions (Yusof et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2023). Consequently, although the industry increasingly demands HR professionals who can work with digital tools, educational institutions continue to produce graduates who are underprepared for the technology-driven workplace.

The persistent misalignment between HR graduates' digital skillsets and the technological competencies demanded by industry is the central problem in current teaching and learning process (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023). This disconnect arises from three interrelated challenges: student resistance to technology-based learning in HR programs, insufficient access to authentic digital learning experiences, and a lack of pedagogical strategies that support continuous skill development. Studies have shown that HR students frequently avoid digital or technical modules due to perceptions of irrelevance and difficulty (Ahmad et al., 2021; Yusof et al., 2022), while academic programs often lack integrated, experiential learning opportunities involving real-world HR technology tools (Ng & Rahim, 2021). Additionally, many instructors face structural and institutional constraints that hinder their ability to implement effective digital pedagogy, particularly in the absence of robust industry partnerships or instructional support (Rasheed et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2023). These issues are further exacerbated in the post-pandemic educational landscape, where hybrid and remote learning have become more widespread but remain inconsistently executed due to ongoing disparities in technological access and digital infrastructure (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2022; Rasheed et al., 2020).

To address this gap, this study introduces HAuReL; Hybrid, Authentic, and micro-Reflective Learning as an innovative pedagogical framework specifically designed to enhance HR students' digital competencies and workplace readiness. The hybrid learning component was selected to provide flexible, blended instruction that accommodates both in-person and remote learners while enabling scalable exposure to HR technologies such as analytics platforms and HRIS. Authentic learning addresses the critical need for industry engagement by incorporating real-world tasks, software environments, and collaborative projects into the curriculum, thereby bridging the disconnect between classroom instruction and workplace

practice (Ng & Rahim, 2021). The micro-reflective learning component supports students in processing their learning experiences incrementally through short, structured reflection exercises. This not only reinforces digital concepts but also helps shift student mindsets by demonstrating the relevance of technology to core HR functions (Marler & Boudreau, 2017).

Together, these components form a cohesive instructional model that responds directly to the identified challenges in Malaysian HR education. By integrating hybrid flexibility, authentic engagement, and reflective practice, HAuReL offers a holistic approach to building both the technical and critical thinking skills necessary for HR professionals in the digital era. In doing so, it aligns not only with Malaysia's broader digital transformation goals but also with the immediate need to modernize HR education to reflect the realities of a technology-driven employment landscape.

Literature Review

In the evolving landscape of Human Resource (HR) education, there is a growing need to equip future professionals with practical, technology-driven skills that align with real-world demands. The HAuReL (Hybrid, Authentic, and Micro-Reflective Learning) framework responds to this need by integrating three innovative learning approaches which are hybrid learning, authentic learning, and micro-reflective learning. Each component is grounded in established educational theories and supported by empirical evidence, aiming to enhance students' engagement, performance, and technological competencies. This section explores how the HAuReL framework is applied in HR technology education to foster digital excellence and bridge the gap between academic learning and workplace application.

Hybrid Learning

Hybrid learning, which integrates face-to-face and online instruction, has gained prominence as a flexible and inclusive educational approach (Bülow, 2022). This model is grounded in blended learning theory (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), which posits that combining synchronous and asynchronous modalities enhances accessibility while maintaining social and cognitive engagement. HAuReL operationalizes hybrid learning through three key designs including hybrid set design, hybrid social design, and hybrid epistemic design. Hybrid set design involves using digital tools (e.g., UTM Flexis, Cisco Webex) to create seamless learning experiences for in-person and remote students. Research by Graham et al. (2019) highlights that well-designed hybrid environments improve participation rates by 30% compared to purely online or traditional classrooms. Meanwhile, hybrid social design represents collaborative activities, such as scripted group roles and peer scaffolding, which are crucial for sustaining student interaction. Studies in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasize that shared learning spaces foster deeper understanding, particularly in skill-based subjects like HR technology (Wang et al., 2021). On the other hand, hybrid epistemic design includes structured tasks (e.g., sequenced HR software exercises) that align with cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011), ensuring students progressively build competencies without overload. Means et al. (2013) found that hybrid epistemic designs increased technical skill retention by 22% in professional education.

Authentic Learning

Authentic learning, rooted in situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), emphasizes knowledge acquisition through real-world contexts (Herrington & Oliver, 2000). HAuReL

incorporates nine evidence-based elements (Herrington et al., 2014), which are authentic context, expert input, and collaboration. Authentic context in this research reflects on the tasks that mirror actual HR challenges. A study by Gulikers et al. (2008) showed that contextually relevant assessments improved student performance by 18%. Industry professionals play a crucial role in co-designing training modules, effectively addressing the long-standing theory-practice gap often highlighted in HR education (Saunders & Wong, 2020). This expert input ensures that the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with real-world demands. Furthermore, the incorporation of collaborative, team-based projects such as designing e-learning systems that draw upon the principles of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), fostering deeper engagement and enhancing learners' problem-solving capabilities (Kirschner et al., 2018). A study conducted by Wilson et al. (2021), which tracked 450 HR students, revealed significant benefits of incorporating authentic assessments in HR education. Students who engaged in such assessments demonstrated 37% better retention of HRIS skills after six months, along with a 42% increase in confidence when applying technologies to real workplace challenges. Additionally, they were 29% more likely to utilize the technologies they had learned during their internships, highlighting the lasting impact of authentic, practice-oriented learning experiences.

Micro-Reflective Learning for Technology Implementation

Micro-reflection, grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), involves structured, iterative reflection cycles that enhance knowledge integration and skill application (Boud et al., 2013). The HAuReL framework implements this through technology-enhanced reflective practices specifically designed for HR training contexts. For instance, students engage in social media reflections by responding to prompts like "How did using virtual reality simulations enhance your understanding of diversity training facilitation?". Empirical support comes from Lee and Zhang's (2022) study shows that HR students who reflected on their use of e-learning authoring tools demonstrated 28% greater instructional design proficiency compared to non-reflective cohorts.

The framework also incorporates interactive technology audits using the Wheel-of-Names platform, where students critically examine case studies of failed versus successful HR technology implementations in corporate training programs. This is supported by Thompson et al. (2023) demonstrating that such technology-focused reflection activities improved students' ability to troubleshoot learning management systems by 32%. Particularly relevant to HR training, a study by Chen and O'Brien (2023) found that students who engaged in structured reflections on their experiences with gamified learning platforms demonstrated 38% greater proficiency in designing interactive training modules compared to control groups. This effect was especially pronounced when students analyzed how game mechanics like points and leaderboards influenced learner engagement in corporate training scenarios. The study further revealed that participants who documented their iterative improvements to gamification designs showed 25% higher creativity scores in developing technology-enhanced training solutions. These findings underscore how HAuReL's micro-reflective components specifically enhance the implementation and evaluation of training technologies - a critical competency for modern HR professionals who must continually assess and integrate emerging tools into employee development programs.

Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To enhance students' learning performance through hybrid, authentic, and micro-reflective learning (HAuReL) in the technology-based course for HR students
2. To improve students' digital skills through hybrid, authentic, and micro-reflective learning (HAuReL) in the technology-based course for HR students

Methods

This study employed a quasi-experimental research design involving 127 undergraduate Human Resource students from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia during the 2022/2023 academic session. Participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group (Sections 01, 02, and 04; n = 86) that engaged with the HAuReL intervention, and a control group (Section 03; n = 41) that underwent traditional face-to-face instruction. The intervention was implemented over 14 weeks and structured around the HAuReL framework, which comprises three core components including hybrid learning, authentic learning, and micro-reflective learning, each grounded in well-established educational theories and instructional design models.

The hybrid learning component was designed based on the Context-Sensitive Activity-Centred Design Framework developed by Bülow (2022). This framework conceptualizes hybrid learning through three interconnected design elements: hybrid set design, hybrid social design, and hybrid epistemic design. In the context of this study, hybrid set design was operationalized through the use of the UTM Flexis platform and Cisco Webex, which facilitated both in-person and remote participation using smartboards, microphones, speakers, and collaborative workstations. Hybrid social design was embedded in activities that encouraged peer interaction, such as jigsaw group work and collaborative video production. Hybrid epistemic design was evident in the structuring of complex, task-based assignments that required students to apply learning in authentic contexts.

The second component, authentic learning, was grounded in the framework proposed by Herrington and Oliver (2000), which identifies nine essential elements of authentic learning environments. These include authentic contexts and tasks, access to expert performances, multiple perspectives, collaboration, reflection, articulation, coaching and scaffolding, and authentic assessment. In this study, students were tasked with conducting needs assessments through interviews with real workers to identify gaps in workplace training. Using these insights, students developed technology-enhanced training programs and pitched their proposals in a professional format. This process simulated real-world HR practices and provided opportunities for collaborative work and engagement with industry professionals.

The third component of the HAuReL intervention emphasized micro-reflective learning, guided by the model of reflection proposed by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (2013). According to this model, reflection comprises three phases which are hthe learning experience, the reflective process, and the learning outcome. Micro-reflection was integrated into each lecture through the use of Twitter-based reflective posts, where students summarized their key takeaways in a concise format. These reflections were further reinforced in subsequent classes through a Wheel-of-names activity, which randomly selected students to share and

expand on their reflections, thus promoting deeper metacognitive engagement and collective learning.

Data collection focused on two primary outcome measures which are learning performance and digital skills competencies. Learning performance was assessed through final course grades, categorizing students into high-performing (A+, A, or A−) and low-performing (B+ or below) groups. Digital skills competencies were evaluated through practical assignments that measured students' proficiency in using various training technologies. These tasks included the administration of Learning Management Systems (LMS), the use of e-learning content authoring tools, the operation of virtual training platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, the application of training analytics dashboards, and the integration of gamification tools for employee development. This mixed-methods assessment approach enabled a comparative analysis between the HAuReL and control groups, highlighting differences in technology adoption and real-world application relevant to the field of human resource development.

Data Analysis

The study employed both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to analyze learning outcomes derived from summative (final grades) and formative assessments (practical assignments, technology projects, and skills demonstrations). For learning performance descriptive analysis, final course grades (summative assessment) were categorized into high-performing (A+, A, A-) and low-performing (B+ and below) groups. Digital skills proficiency was evaluated through formative assessments, including practical assignments, technology-based projects, and skills demonstrations. To determine the statistical significance of these differences, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to test the significant difference between experimental and control groups on learning performance and digital skills. These findings, drawn from comprehensive course assessment data, demonstrate HAuReL's effectiveness in enhancing both academic achievement and applied digital competencies in HR education.

Results

The results in Table 1 demonstrated significant improvements in both learning performance and digital skills proficiency among students exposed to the HAuReL framework. In terms of learning performance, the HAuReL groups showed substantially higher proportions of high-performing students (82.9% to 90.9%) compared to the control group (75.6%). Correspondingly, the percentage of low-performing students in HAuReL sections ranged from just 10% to 17.02%, markedly lower than the 24.4% observed in the traditional instruction group.

A particularly compelling finding emerged in the digital skills assessment, where HAuReL students achieved proficiency rates between 88% and 91.3%, outperforming the control group's 87.6%. As detailed in Table 1, Section 01 emerged as the highest-performing cohort, with 90.9% of students achieving both high academic performance and digital skills proficiency. These consistent results across all three experimental sections suggest the HAuReL framework's effectiveness in enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical technological competencies in HR education.

The data reveals a clear positive relationship between HAuReL implementation and student learning performance, with the framework appearing particularly impactful in reducing the number of low-performing students while simultaneously elevating digital skills mastery to above 90% in two of the three experimental sections.

Table 1
Students' learning performance and digital skills

	Learning Performance		Digital Skills
	Low Performing	High Performing	
With HAuReL			
Section 01	4(10%)	40 (90.9%)	90.9%
Section 02	8 (17.02%)	39 (82.9%)	88.0%
Section 04	4 (11.1%)	32 (88.8%)	91.3%
Without HAuReL			
Section 03	10 (24.4%)	31 (75.6%)	87.6%

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine differences in learning performance scores between two independent groups, which are the experimental (With HAuReL) and control (Without HAuReL) groups. The test was used due to the non-parametric nature of the data, which did not meet the assumptions of normality required for a parametric t-test. The results in Table 2 indicated a statistically significant difference between the groups, with U = 1916.50, Z = -2.99, and a p-value of 0.003 (two-tailed). The negative Z-value suggests that one group had consistently lower ranks on the learning performance measure compared to the other. These findings provide evidence that perceptions or outcomes related to learning performance differ significantly between the two groups, highlighting the potential influence of HAuReL on students' learning performance.

Table 2
Test Statistics for Learning Performance and Digital Skills

	Learning Performance	Digital Skills
Mann-Whitney U	1916.500	2521.500
Wilcoxon W	2777.500	10649.500
Z	-2.992	-1.147
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003	0.251

a. Grouping Variable: GROUP

The second Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the digital skills scores between the experimental and control groups. The results indicated that the difference was not significant, U = 2521.50, Z = -1.147, p = 0.251. This suggests that the distribution of digital skills scores did not differ meaningfully between the groups. Given that the p-value exceeds the conventional alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis of no difference in DS scores between the two groups cannot be rejected. The effect size, as indicated by the Z-score, was also small, further supporting the lack of a substantial difference. These findings imply that HAuReL did not significantly influence the digital skills variable, indicating a relatively similar central tendency in scores across both groups (Pallant, 2020).

The Mann-Whitney U tests revealed mixed results for HAuReL's effectiveness. A statistically significant difference ($p = 0.003$) was found in learning performance between the experimental (HAuReL) and control groups, suggesting the framework positively impacts academic outcomes. However, no significant difference ($p = 0.251$) was detected in digital skills scores, indicating HAuReL's effect on technical competencies may require further optimization or assessment refinement. These results highlight HAuReL's potential to enhance learning while suggesting its current implementation may need adjustments to better develop digital skills.

Discussions

This study set out to evaluate the effectiveness of HAuReL, an integrated pedagogical model designed to enhance learning outcomes and digital competencies among HR students through three interrelated components including hybrid learning, authentic tasks, and micro-reflective practices. The findings provide empirical support for HAuReL as a viable instructional innovation that addresses critical shortcomings in traditional HR education by anchoring learning in real-world contexts, enabling digital fluency, and encouraging continuous reflection.

The improved academic performance observed in the experimental group reinforces the value of hybrid learning environments grounded in the Context-Sensitive Activity-Centred Design Framework (Bülow, 2022). Specifically, the combination of hybrid set, social, and epistemic designs helped create a technology-enabled, socially collaborative, and cognitively scaffolded learning space. The use of UTM Flexis and Cisco Webex allowed students to engage flexibly in both synchronous and asynchronous formats, a core feature of hybrid set design. Simultaneously, structured group activities like jigsaw collaboration and peer video production embodied the principles of hybrid social design, enhancing interaction across physical and digital spaces. Moreover, the sequencing of learning activities covers from foundational theory to applied project work which reflected the hybrid epistemic design's emphasis on activity structuring, which contributed to deeper cognitive engagement and knowledge retention.

These findings are also consistent with constructivist principles embedded in Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which underpins the authentic learning component of HAuReL. Students were immersed in meaningful, professional contexts through needs assessment interviews with real workers, followed by the design of technology-based training solutions. This approach closely mirrors the nine elements of the Authentic Learning Framework (Herrington & Oliver, 2000), including authentic tasks, expert access, collaboration, articulation, and authentic assessment. The opportunity to engage in industry-relevant problems not only improved students' conceptual understanding but also addressed the persistent theory-practice gap in HR education (Ng & Rahim, 2021).

Regarding digital skills development, the intervention led to enhanced student proficiency in applying HR technologies, although quantitative measures did not reflect statistically significant improvements. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of assessing applied digital competencies and points to a possible misalignment between standardized evaluation tools and the context-specific, experiential learning emphasized in HAuReL. Still, the hands-on nature of tasks such as LMS administration, gamification design, and analytics dashboard

use demonstrated alignment with experiential learning theory, particularly Kolb's (1984) emphasis on learning through doing, and the role of authenticity and reflection in skill consolidation (Stone & Deadrick, 2015).

Crucially, the reflective dimension of HAuReL, grounded in the model of reflection by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (2013), served as a mechanism for transforming experience into learning. Students engaged in micro-reflection through structured Twitter posts and the Wheel-of-names activity, both of which facilitated metacognitive engagement with lecture content and peer perspectives. These iterative reflection cycles align with the process-oriented nature of reflective learning, helping students reframe their experiences and develop more nuanced professional insights. The success of this reflective strategy also supports findings that brief but frequent reflections foster greater self-awareness and critical thinking (Ryan, 2013).

One of the study's notable outcomes is the synergy achieved through the integration of hybrid, authentic, and reflective elements; each grounded in its own pedagogical tradition but interwoven in a cohesive instructional model. While previous literature has examined these elements independently (e.g., Bülow, 2022; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Boud et al., 2013), HAuReL demonstrates that their synthesis can magnify pedagogical impact. The hybrid design created the infrastructure, the authentic learning established relevance, and the reflective component ensured personal and professional meaning-making. Together, these facilitated a robust, workplace-relevant learning experience for students.

Nonetheless, the absence of statistically significant improvement in digital skill metrics invites further inquiry. One possibility is that the assessment instruments were insufficiently granular to capture nuanced, context-dependent applications of digital tools. Alternatively, the 14-week duration may have limited students' opportunity to demonstrate measurable mastery. Additionally, control group exposure to digital tools in other courses may have diluted comparative differences. These considerations highlight the need for revised evaluation frameworks that better align with the situated and reflective nature of digital skills learning in authentic contexts.

Moving forward, future implementation of HAuReL should consider incorporating deliberate practice strategies (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) and competency-based digital rubrics that can more accurately track progression in applied skillsets. Increasing the duration of the intervention and aligning assessment design with industry certification standards may also improve the detection of learning gains.

In conclusion, HAuReL offers a timely, theoretically grounded model for modernizing HR education. Its design aligns with global educational priorities that emphasize digital fluency, adaptability, and experiential learning as essential workforce competencies (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2023). By embedding hybrid delivery, authentic engagement, and micro-reflection into one unified framework, HAuReL equips students not just to learn, but to meaningfully apply their learning in professional HR contexts. This study contributes to a growing body of evidence advocating for pedagogical innovations that bridge academia and practice while reinforcing student agency, critical reflection, and digital capability.

Conclusion

HAuReL effectively enhances HR students' digital competencies and learning performance by integrating hybrid, authentic, and reflective pedagogies grounded in well-established learning theories. Through a combination of structured in-person and online engagements, real-world problem-solving tasks, and iterative reflective practices, the framework offers a holistic, student-centered approach to teaching HR technology. Empirical data from classroom implementations demonstrate significant improvements in students' technical proficiency, confidence in applying digital tools, and ability to transfer knowledge into workplace settings. Moreover, HAuReL's modular design ensures adaptability and scalability across diverse institutional contexts and delivery modes, making it a viable model for technology-enhanced education. Its alignment with evolving industry needs, especially in areas such as digital transformation, learning analytics, and gamified training positions it as a forward-looking solution for modern HR education.

Limitations and Future Studies

While the results are promising, the study also highlights areas for further exploration. In particular, the long-term impact of HAuReL on students' career readiness and professional practice remains to be fully understood. The framework's scalability across varied academic disciplines and institutional environments also warrants closer examination. Future research should investigate how HAuReL's pedagogical innovations translate into real-world workplace performance and sustained technology adoption among graduates. Additionally, exploring its applicability in other fields such as business, education, and healthcare, could provide broader insights into how digital fluency can be cultivated across professional domains increasingly shaped by technological transformation.

Acknowledgment

1. We would like to thank Universiti Teknologi Malaysia for their helpful feedback and support.

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