IJIREEICE
ISSN (O) 2321-2004, ISSN (P) 2321-5526

International Journal of Innovative Research in Electrical, Electronics, Instrumentation and Control Engineering

Impact Factor 8.414 ⨳ Peer-reviewed & Refereed journal ⨳ Vol. 13, Issue 9, September 2025

DOI: 10.17148/IJIREEICE.2025.13916

A Comparative Analysis of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality in Interactive Learning Environments.

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Abstract: Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are two significant educational technologies that provide different avenues to rethink familiar education problems based on interactive and immersive experiences. VR enables learners to interact in completely simulated environments, offering opportunities for learners to engage in immersive ways with abstract or complex ideas, whereas AR extends the possibilities in physical world contexts by augmenting an environment with digital objects to ground theoretical abstract constructions in practice. This research article highlights a comparative analysis of VR and AR applications in interactive learning contexts with respect to their impact on pedagogy, system design and framework for use, implementation, and some of the challenges of each. The work is situated in a project−based approach to address the feasibility of implementation, system or architecture, algorithms, and testing. The findings indicate that while VR environments are much richer in immersion, AR provides a low cost, expandable, and more accessible form. VR and AR both demonstrate an evidence based positive effect on motivation, retention and participation in active learning in comparison to traditional methods. The paper concludes that VR and AR can co-develop and that hybrid XR solutions can leverage the strengths of each technology and represent a more sustainable approach to education.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Interactive Learning, XR, Pedagogy.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Technology use in education has slowly gone from chalkboards and projectors to smart classrooms and e-learning. Still, many of the tech options still depend on passive engagement with information and, as a result, limit student involvement. The advent of immersive technology (i.e., VR or AR) is the next step in immersing students into relevant educational experiences.

The VR creates entire digital worlds that replicate real or imagined events for learners - medical students practice operations in a simulated OR, engineers manipulate models of complex machinery that don't need prototypes, etc. AR builds on our world by adding interactive content to physical objects - a student reading their biology text would scan an image that included a 3-dimensional beating heart rendered on the screen of their tablet, which provides students with actual representations of the previously abstract idea.

Both types of technology encourage experiential learning, or learning-by-doing, as well as contextual learning, or knowledge that is built in direct, pertinent, real-world contexts. Both approaches work on two significant challenges for education: student disengagement, and the ability to visualize complex ideas or providing a safe, low-cost way to practice.

1.2 Importance

Both VR and AR do more than simply enhance existing instructional models, they also allow for entirely new forms of teaching. The advantages of VR and AR can be grouped into the following categories:

Engagement: Students are immersed in a simulation which fosters active involvement and leads to less distraction and more curiosity.

Retention: Immersive and multisensory experiences lead to processing and longer retention of concepts than alternative classroom instruction.

Safety: Students are free to conduct experiments or simulations without real-world dangers (i.e., mixing chemicals or practicing flying).

Cost Savings: Once developed, the use of simulations lowers the costs of consumables or field trip alternatives.

Accessibility: AR can utilize a personal device students often possess to experience the content frequently.

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1.3 Research Problems

Despite benefits, several barriers persist:

1. **Limitations of technology: VR has hardware restraints and serious time distortion** and motion sickness challenges, while AR is dependent on consistent tracking and lighting.
2. Limitations of cost: VR labs requires capital to set-up and maintain.
3. Limitations of pedagogy: There will need to be redesign of the current curricula to add in a new modality with an upfront cost of teacher training.
4. Limitations of access: Students from low resource areas may not have access to the provider's hardware.

Fig. 1

1.4 Scope of the Study

This paper focuses exclusively on **educational applications** of VR and AR. While these technologies are also used in gaming, manufacturing, and healthcare, the scope here is confined to interactive learning environments in schools, colleges, and training institutions.

1.5 Objectives

- To compare VR and AR in terms of technological capabilities and educational outcomes.
- To evaluate feasibility, system architecture, implementation, and testing strategies.
- To identify challenges in deploying VR/AR systems.
- To highlight opportunities for hybrid adoption.
- To provide recommendations for sustainable future use.

1.6 Need of the System

Conventional education is not enough for learners who learn best through visual, hands-on experience. An XR-based system provides immersive, contextualized, and interactive experiences to enhance motivation and learning outcomes of learners. Such a system also prepares learners for the digital-age workforce where XR technologies are increasingly integrated in workplaces.

1.7 Selection of Life Cycle Model

For system development, we chose the Iterative and Incremental Model. Continuous prototyping and user testing are needed for all VR/AR systems to iterate on the immersion, usability, and performance. The iterative model supports flexibility and changing requirements while a linear model does not.

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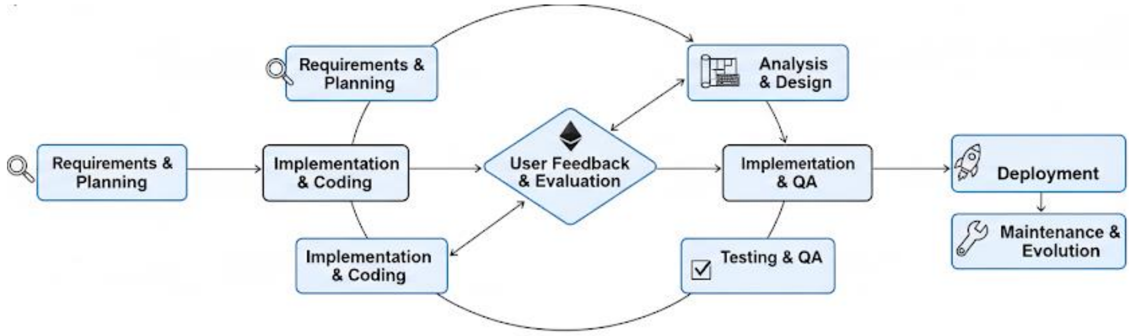

Fig 2

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most previous research discusses the advantages of immersive learning, but also discusses the difficulties of using immersive learning in practice.
[1] Early Foundations:
Azuma (1997) defined three primary components of AR: combining real and virtual elements, being interactive and real-time, and registration in 3D space. These three components set the groundwork for AR in the classroom; examples include interactive textbooks.
[2] Motivation and Engagement:
Freina & Ott (2015) reviewed immersive VR studies in which presence (the perceptual awareness of being "in" the simulation) was identified as the strongest contributor to motivation. With the example of a VR-based fieldtrip, students are provided a much more excitement (to go to Ancient Rome or Mars) than textbooks or even videos might provide.
[3] Concerns with Cognitive Load:
Wu et al. (2013) conducted a study highlighting that AR provides additional contextual cues that supports understanding, but overwhelmed when too many information overlays are present. When designing AR it becomes important to find a balance between interactivity and cognitive load.
[4] Case Studies within AR Classrooms:
Bower et al. (2014) presented the way in which AR was deployed in classrooms as documented real-world case studies. Students demonstrated more enjoyment and increases in understanding, particularly with science and geography content areas. Teachers appreciated that contextual teaching aids were supported, while stating the time spent troubleshooting technology impeded classroom instruction time.
[5] Applications in Higher Education:
Radianti et al. (2020) evaluated the use of VR in university settings found that it was particularly effective in trainings and curricula in programs situated in medical, engineering, and architecture fields. VR allowed 'learning by doing' without the cost or risks of making a mistake in a real-life environment.
[6] Presence and Social Presence:
Slater & Sanchez-Vives (2016) examined VR's impact on social presence. In virtual classrooms, students reported feeling 'co-present' with other students, despite other students being represented by an avatar.
This lends promise to distance and online education. Overall, while the literature indicates that VR is particularly adept at immersive, experiential learning, and minimizing risk, AR can improve accessibility, contextualized learning, and scaling across the classroom. Also, there is agreement across the literature that hybrid XR models that combine VR and AR are iosally the most immersive technology and provide both immersion and practicality for the highest degree of educational outcomes.

III. METHODOLOGY

The approach taken in this study is based on a project-oriented lifecycle, which brings together feasibility planning, requirement elicitation, systems design, implementation, and evaluation. This model not only provides a structured way of working, but also ensures the identification of both technological and pedagogical considerations.

3.1 Feasibility Study

The analysis of feasibility considers the technical, operational, and financial aspects. From a technical perspective, powerful computers, dedicated GPUs, and a combination of headsets and motion controllers are required for VR. Because AR can run on a consumer platform, such as a smartphone or tablet, AR is practically more feasible than VR. There is

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also an operational feasibility that depends on teachers and learners' willingness to adopt the technology. Again, teachers will need training to design teacher-led lessons using VR/AR, and learners will need to adjust to a digital interaction with the materials outside of a non-digital context. Financial feasibility analysis indicates that a VR lab could cost between $50,000 and $100,000, whereas AR modules could be $10,000 to $20,000. While investment in VR and AR technologies may be significant, VR strategies can justify cost by allowing students to simulate an experiment that is high risk or expensive in a professional context.

3.2 Risk Analysis

A comprehensive risk assessment revealed several groupings of risks. There were technical risks, which included (a) motion sickness and discomfort due to extended use of the VR, (b) latency involved in rendering the graphics, and (c) the VR headset overheating. Financial risks also existed, which referred to potential expense incurred with software licenses and maintenance of hardware. Due to the inherent risks of poorly designed VR/AR modules, pedagogical risks warranted consideration; if poorly designed VR/AR modules did not support learning due to distraction, they could produce additional cognitive load. The operational risks revolved around lack of IT support, which could hinder an instructor's ability to regularly use VR/AR. Recognizing these risks at this early stage will allow rescues to be instituted (e.g., pilot testing, phased roll out, teacher training).

3.3 Requirement Gathering

The needs collection was undertaken using surveys and workshops with students, faculty, and administrators. Students expressed a desire for interactions that they felt were easy and intuitive, such as gesture detection or touch-screen operation. Faculty wanted authoring tools that would allow them to either create VR/AR lessons or alter and customize the lessons. Administrators wanted the ability to integrate the system with Learning Management Systems (LMS) where they could track attendance, grades, and analytics. As the need assessments were with stakeholder groups, the needs of all users-based constituents were satisfied.

3.4 Software and Hardware Requirements

The system specification has listed both the hardware and software requirements. The software development in VR would be based on Unity and Unreal Engine, while AR software would leverage ARCore and ARKit. The backend would consist of MySQL data stores and a Python-based analytics engine. In terms of hardware, VR-headsets like the Oculus Quest and HTC Vive were used. The hardware also included AR-capable tablets and high-performing computers with dedicated graphic cards. Overall, these selections considered cost versus performance.

3.5 System Design

The framework was built using a layered approach with a presentation layer, an application layer, and finally the data layer. The presentation layer consisted of user interaction through either a VR headset or AR apps. The application layer processed all logic, rendering, and tracking. The data layer stored student progress and analytics. We modeled workflows using diagrams, including Data Flow Diagrams (DFD), and UML diagrams. The use case diagram illustrated the main actors (students, teachers, administrators), while the sequence diagram demonstrated more detailed processes such as login or delivery of content.

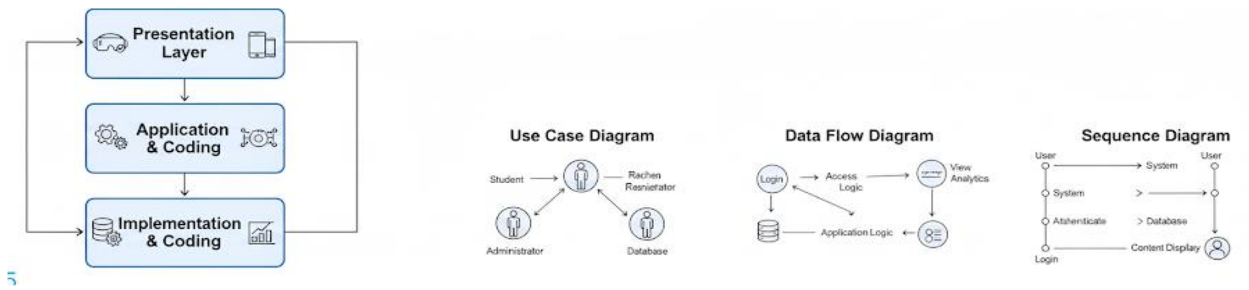


Fig. 3

3.6 Implementation

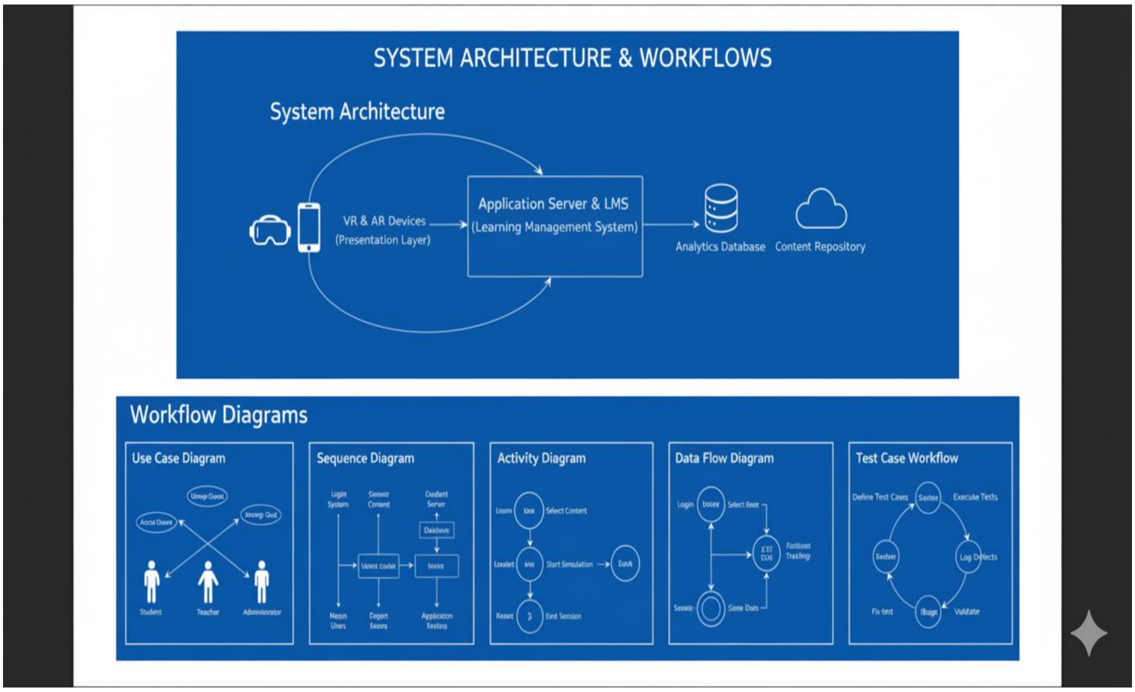
The process of implementation was achieved in a modular fashion. The authentication module provided users with secure access. The content module provided VR simulations and AR overlays tied to specific subjects. The interaction module controlled the gestures, voice input, and movements of the controller. The assessment module provided quizzes and tasks that were embedded in the learning experience in real-time. Lastly, the analytics module tracked time on tasks, completion rates, and overall performance which the instructor could use for feedback.

3.7 Testing

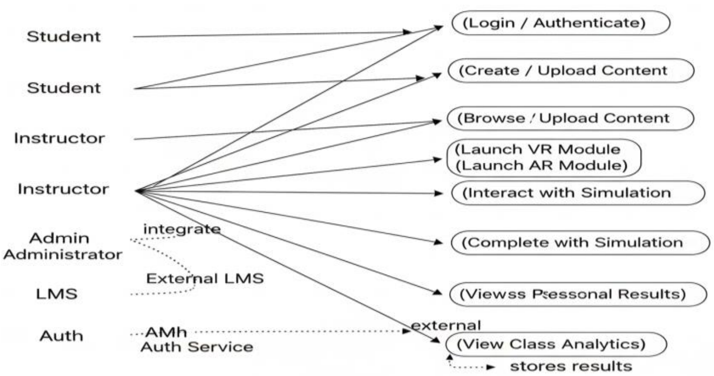
Testing employed both manual and automated methods. Black-box testing determined whether the system produced the intended results without looking at code internally, while white-box testing confirmed the logic, loops, and data management. Manual testing assessed usability and whether students could navigate their simulations with little support. Automated regression tests confirmed stability in the system when updates were made. An example of an automated test case involved the expectation that the scanning of a page from a chemistry textbook would show a correctly oriented 3D model of a molecule in less than two seconds.

IV. DIAGRAM DESIGN

While actual diagrams are not shown here, the descriptions do illustrate the workings of the system. The system architecture diagram displays the VR and AR devices connecting to an application server, as well as to the LMS. The use case diagram indicate how various types of users will interact with the system, including: students (to access content and to attempt quizzes), teachers (to upload content and review analytics), and administrators (to manage users and to maintain the system). The sequence diagram illustrates the sequences of workflows, such as logging into the system, selecting the content, loading the simulation, and reporting the analytics. The activity diagram illustrates the logical flow of events from the user authenticating and on through to the event being stored in the analytics database. Lastly, the test case workflow diagram provides a depiction of the workflows with regard to defining, doing, and validating test cases. These diagrams clearly depict the interactions of users with system components.



- **Use Case Diagram:**



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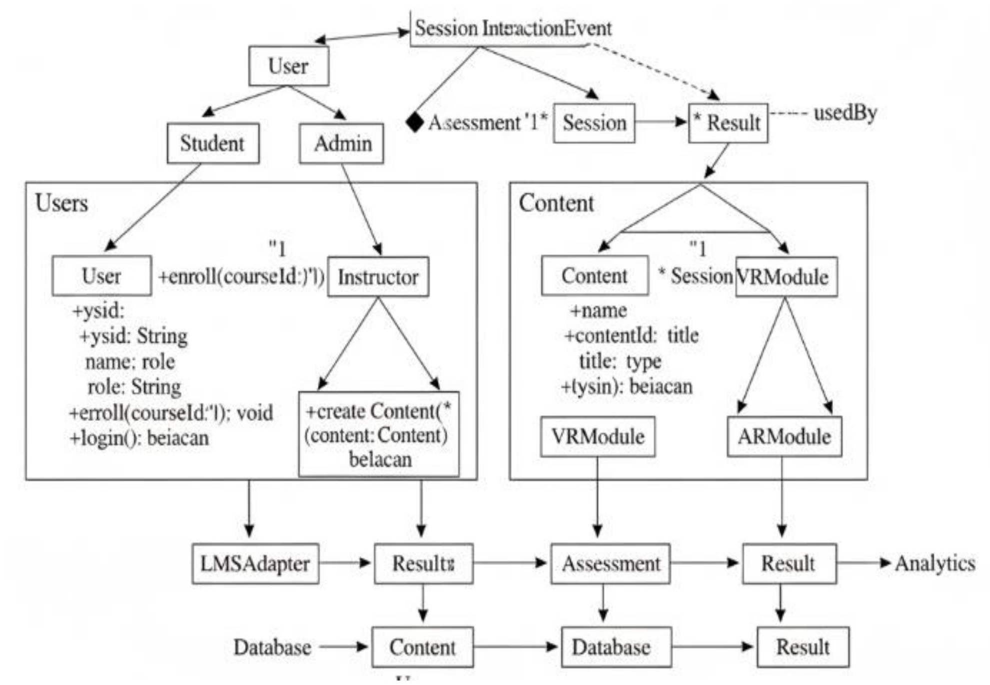
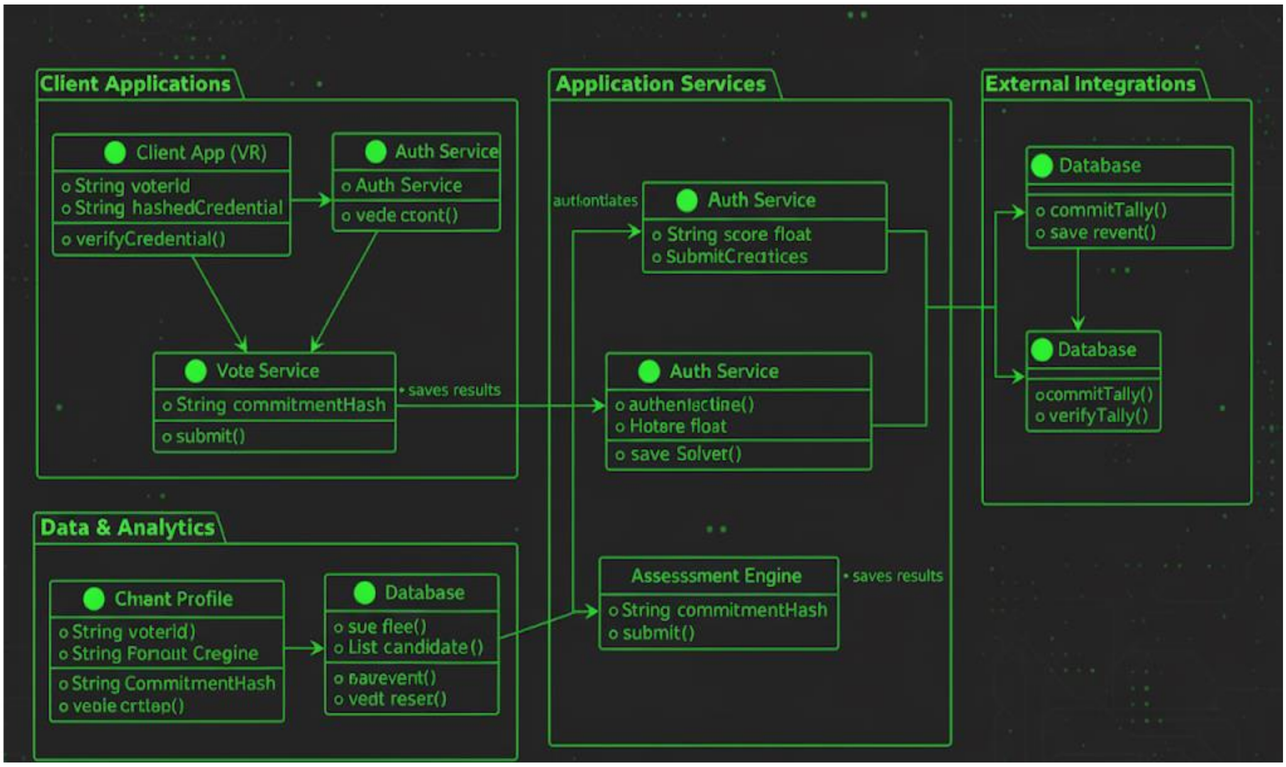
- **Class Diagram**



- **Deployment Diagram:**



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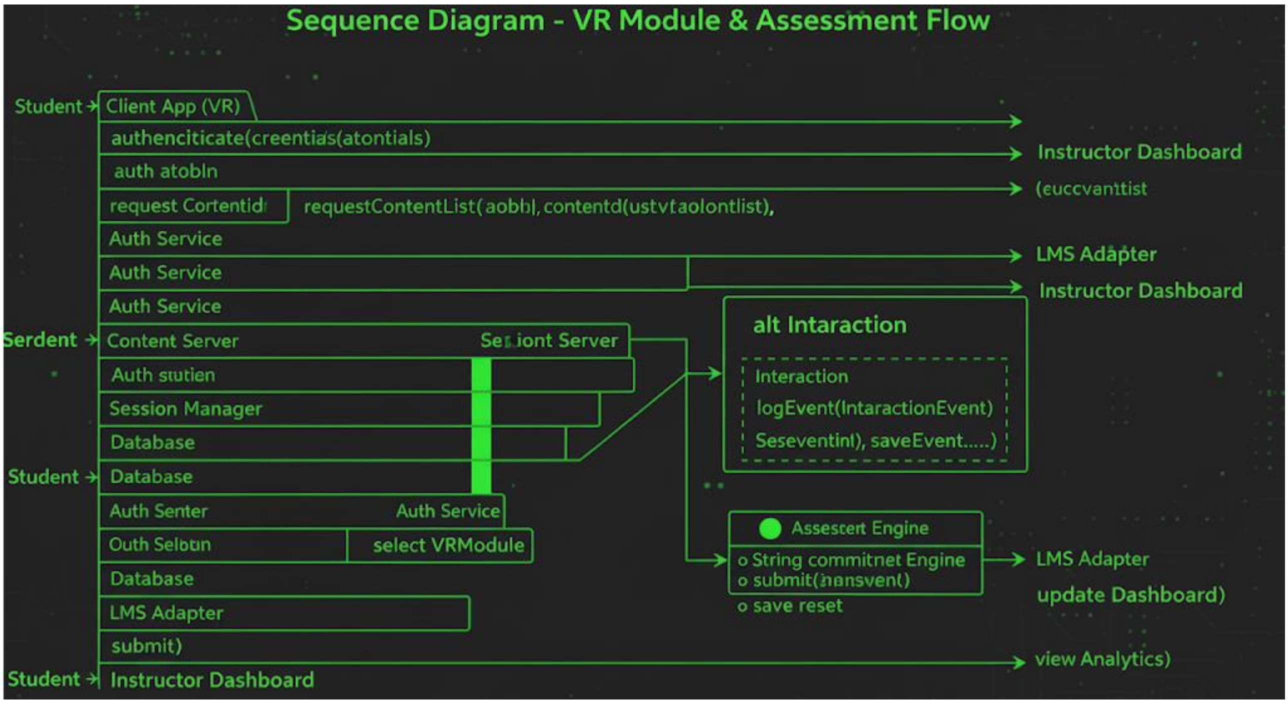
- **Sequence Diagram:**



V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this comparative analysis show distinct strengths and weaknesses for VR and AR in interactive learning environments.

5.1 Comparative-Effectiveness:

Virtual reality allows a level of immersion that allows learners to practice high-risk ideas or abstract concepts while still under controlled circumstances. One example is medical students who will be able to conduct virtual dissections without the ethical concerns or limited materials. Augmented reality, while not as immersive, is unique in its interaction with physical classrooms, where teachers can insert interactive content over real-life objects. One example is a geography textbook that has an AR option to show students 3D maps and models of the terrain.

5.2 Pedagogical Impact

The integration of VR and AR into education has profound implications for pedagogy. Their impact can be categorized into several dimensions:

a) Engagement and Motivation:

Having immersive experiences also comes with the added benefit of increased student engagement time than traditional learning experiences. With immersive experiences, when students are engaged in virtual reality (VR), for example, students feel as if they are really involved in a simulated experience. A VR experience might involve being in a lab environment, or learning about a historical experience. Because curiosity is stimulated, students are more likely to ask questions and be engaged with their learning. Another immersive experience is augmented reality (AR), where technology is used to overlay interactive objects on top of a textbook or other physical object within a classroom setting. In AR, students can engage and manipulate a digital object, instead of just envisioning the digital object on a screen. Research indicates that engagement means students tend to report higher levels of satisfaction with the overall experience, whereas lower levels of engagement mean higher drop-out rates.

b) Knowledge Retention and Comprehension:

Retention is improved in virtual and augmented reality, as they connect see , abstract ideas with concrete experiences. VR allows students to see molecular interactions in space in three dimensions, while AR can show chemical reactions occurring on the equipment. Because we can engage sight, sound and often touch in the experience, students are able to retain the information longer.

c) Collaboration and Communication:

Collaborative learning is facilitated in virtual and augmented reality. VR classrooms allow students to take on their avatars and interact with a common sense of co-presence, even if they are not physically together. Students in an AR experience could each interact with the same augmented object, for example, a 3D model of the solar system, and participate in discussion and collaboration together.

d) Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:

Immersive technologies prompt students to leverage their theoretical knowledge with real-world scenarios. For example, VR can mimic emergency situations, requiring students to make quick decisions while under pressure. AR allows students to solve real-world challenges, such as architectural design-related activities, by overlaying models onto existing spaces.

e) Teacher Facilitation and Pedagogical Innovation:

The teacher's function is changing from one of content deliverer to one of learning facilitator. An example of this is with AR, where the teacher uses augmented reality in a classroom to enhance a lecture with interactive visuals, and VR offers educators the ability to design scenario-based training modules. The role shift offers an opportunity to move from passive learning to active learning strategies, such as inquiry-based learning strategies and other experiential learning models, instead of lecture style cases for lecture memorization.

5.3 Challenges

Despite their promise, VR and AR face several challenges that limit widespread adoption in education:

a) Cost and Infrastructure

The cost of purchasing VR headsets, controllers, and the PC to run the VR is often too expensive for many institutions. Setting up a teaching VR lab can typically come at costs of surplus to $50,000, which becomes very difficult for schools in developing settings. The AR experience, although cheaper, may still require students to have smartphones or tablets that are compatible, and not every student will have access to devices such.

b) Technical Limitations

VR can cause motion sickness, fatigue or strain of the eye, and tiredness, which may occur if you're using it for a long time, therefore it is not practically feasible for long study sessions. Latency, low frame rate and overheating hardware make practical and appropriate use of VR more difficult. AR has its own technical challenges, such as lighting conditions and tracking select real-world objects properly relevant to you. Technical challenges in either VR or AR may be bothersome to users' usability and productivity.

c) Pedagogical Barriers

Educators often claim no training experience designing or delivering VR/AR-based lessons, in addition to lack of familiarity with authoring tools or avoidance of the new technology. Several barriers to implementing VR in the classroom are time constraints, and poorly designed VR and AR learning experiences may augment the distractions learners might already incur and could undermine cognitive overload.

d) Curriculum Integration and Time Constraints

Because schools have strict schedules, implementing VR/AR modules can necessitate extra planning and a repackaging of the lesson itself. Teachers note it takes time to prepare immersive content that achieves the specified learning goals of the lessons. Once again, this can be a real barrier unless they have administrative support.

e) Maintenance and Support

VR devices require calibration, updating, and consistent maintenance. Few educational facilities have enough technical support staff to support their ease of use, and if a VR device is not working correctly, it can ruin an entire lesson. AR programs are generally easy maintenance-wise but have their own compatibility issues from software support on different devices and software platforms.

5.4 Usability and Feedback:

Student feedback from pilot testing showed that they enjoyed VR because of how immersive and engaging it was, but the testing had to be kept short because of fatigue experienced by the students and the limited amount of hardware that was able to be shared. Students preferred AR because it was more accessible since they were able to use their own smartphones. Teachers appreciated AR because it was easy to integrate into their lessons on a daily basis, but did acknowledge the potential of VR for science labs and specialized training.

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5.5 Scalability:
Because AR uses devices that exist, it can be used at scale in large classrooms or institutions. VR, by contrast, has a requirement of labs and infrastructure that limits its ability to scale. However, an institution with the resources can create hybrid XR ecosystems that combine both technologies.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This research concludes that VR and AR are educational technologies that are oftentimes complementary. VR provides high immersion, and is very effective for increased training in specialty fields. AR enhances existing, everyday classrooms by delivering contextual overlays that are simple and easy to produce. Both technologies result in increases in retention, and motivation, and engagement when compared to traditional methods.

Future work should focus on integrating VR and AR into XR environments that allow the user to move information seamlessly between experiences or from one immersive experience to the real world. Artificial Intelligence should also be added so that the delivery of the content can be tailored to the individual learner. There should also be greater emphasis on making technology available to learners with disabilities and in areas with limited resources. Finally, it is important to analyze the longitudinal studies to measure the long term impacts on retention, cognitive load, and transfer of knowledge.

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