

# Design and implementation of accessible open-source augmented reality learning authoring tool

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## Abstract

The emerging learning technologies have brought new dimensions to the learning process. Particularly in this era, where due to health reasons, online learning is preferred, augmenting reality with digital information is paramount. Unfortunately, most of the existing augmented reality learning applications were not designed for different abilities, apart from having substantial annual licenses. Further, they require advanced digital competence such as programming, which many non-technical educational practitioners lack. This research attempts to fill this gap by designing and implementing an accessible open-source augmented reality learning authoring tool that will empower non-technical educational practitioners of different abilities to develop and use augmented reality applications for teaching and learning purposes.

## Keywords <sup>1</sup>

Learning Technologies, Augmented Reality, Augmented Reality Learning, Accessibility, Open-source

## 1. Introduction

Augmented Reality (AR) is a technology that superimposes real-world objects with virtual generated information in the same space, thus providing a more useful composite view. While AR is widely used with the sense of sight, it also applies to smell, touch, and hearing senses [1].

Since its inception, AR has been used in a wide range of applications, including entertainment, mapping, transportation, health, and education sectors. At first, AR was introduced as a training tool for airline and Air Force pilots during the 1960s [2]. Due to the advancement in information technology, AR is currently implemented in computer and mobile devices without requiring expensive technology such as head-mounted displays [3]. For learning purposes, AR creates immersive hybrid learning environments that facilitate critical thinking, problem-solving, and

communicating through interdependent collaborative exercises [4–6]. Other studies by Akçayır *et al.* [7] and Mylonas *et al.* [8] revealed that AR improves university students' laboratory skills and helps them build positive attitudes. A variety of research projects examined the initial suitability of AR for different learning scenarios, e.g. flipped learning or experiential learning, and in various disciplines [9–12] as well as its integration in teaching and learning processes [13].

However, studies show that most AR applications have been developed using proprietary Software Development Kit (SDK) such as Vuforia, Kudan AR, Adobe Aero, and Wikitude [5]. These are potent tools for handling all three AR system stages, namely recognition, tracking, and mixing, allowing ease of development for the developers [14], [15]. However, these AR tools are not open-source, and they carry heavy, substantial annual license fees. This represents an obstacle for

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many small to mid-sized companies as well as institutions of higher education alike.

In fact, open-source software does not only refer to the availability of source code. Moreover, it designates a broader sense of values that embraces and celebrates open exchange principles, collaborative participation, rapid prototyping, transparency, meritocracy, and community-oriented development [16, 17]. By developing an open-source tool, programmers and software users benefit from the control over the tool, training from the communities behind it, security, and stability. Thus, an open-source AR tool will benefit from using existing parts of an open-source learning tool and enhance it for AR authoring. Therefore, it provides an authoring tool available with an open-source license for use and opens for further future development by business partners and other stakeholders.

Research further reveals that few AR applications have been developed by using an open-source library such as ARToolkit, AR.js and DroidAR. With these libraries, programmers are using traditional languages such as #c, c/c++, python, Java and JavaScript to develop AR applications [5, 14]. This means, developing AR applications requires technical knowledge in these programming languages or hiring computer programmers. Unfortunately, many non-technical instructors lack this digital competence [18–20]. Also, it is costly to hire a programmer for mid-sized companies and educational institutions [21]. Furthermore, most of these applications are challenged with usability problems, inadequate technology experience, interface design errors, and technical difficulties [3, 22–24].

World Health Organisation estimates about 15% of the world's population have at least one particular form of disability. This number increases due to increased chronic diseases, ageing, and technology discovery to identify various disabilities [25]. The various forms of disabilities include auditory, cognitive, learning and neurological, physical, speech and visual disabilities. These forms require different approaches and strategies to reduce the obstacles in accessing the AR applications [26]. Most existing AR Learning applications, however, target one form of disability. For example, a multi-sensory AR map targets blind and low vision students [27], whereas *MoviLetrando* targets Autism Spectrum Disorder students [28]. Other authors dealt with

the auditory ability [29], low vision [30] and cognitive support [31]. Unfortunately, research shows that many proprietary and open-source AR applications are not designed for users with different abilities [32–34] and exclude many people who would benefit from these applications.

This research, therefore, aims to use existing open-source libraries and approaches to design and implement an inclusive and accessible AR tool based on an open-source learning environment, such as Moodle. It can be used to author AR learning in different disciplines by users with varying levels of accessibility and in different learning settings, from university classrooms and for on-the-job training.

## **2. Research objectives and questions**

The main objective is to develop an accessible augmented reality learning authoring tool. Specifically, the research aims the following

1. To identify the requirements for developing an open-source AR learning authoring tool
2. To develop an open-source tool for authoring AR learning, building on an existing OS learning platform.
3. To validate the AR authoring tool through authoring a pilot AR learning application

This thesis intends to answer the following main question: How can you design and implement an augmented reality learning authoring tool for a broad audience? The secondary research questions are as follows: -

1. What are the requirements for developing an accessible open-source AR learning authoring tool?
2. How can we develop an accessible open-source augmented reality learning authoring tool?
3. What kind of AR learning applications can be authored with the tool?

## **3. Theoretical framework**

The combination of real-world with multimedia elements is one of the promising technologies in the field of education. This follows from the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which states that people

learn better when the instruction is given using both words and pictures than words alone [35]. Further, Buchem et al. [36] argue that AR is characterised by various affordances such as embodied, collaborative, and augmentative affordances. These affordances make AR indispensable in a learning environment as it forages helpful information for learners and constructs more profound knowledge.

Though Garzón noted that the effectiveness of AR in learning is medium [33], numerous studies have reported the interaction between learner and AR artefacts is potent in learning. For instance, AR learning has resulted in learning gain and motivation [3, 32, 37, 38], content understanding and retention [32, 39–41], increased interaction and attention [42, 43], learning efficiency and performance [44, 45] and enhances problem-solving abilities and influence decision making [3, 5].

Various other examples have proved that AR is beneficial in teaching and learning. For instance, Mylonas et al. [8] used AR as a visual aid to teach students how electrical devices consume energy. Fidan and Tuncel [46] integrated AR application with problem-based learning activities to help students understand physics concepts and improve their attitudes towards physics.

Like any other technology, AR is not without challenges and limitations. Alalwan et al. [47] conducted a semi-structured interview with 29 science teachers in a developing country. They found that teachers' competency, proper instructional design and resources were common limitations in AR utilisation. Also, Pellas *et al.* [48] pointed out that teachers could not modify or add content to AR applications. These teachers' incapability might be because most non-technical teachers are at the basic-level of digital competence [49, 50]. Dirin & Laine [51] found usability problems, when evaluated two mobile AR applications. The usability problems in AR are also reported by other researchers [3, 23, 24]. While the usability problems can be solved through following good design principles, Buchem et al [36] proposes interdisciplinary training to alleviate digital illiteracy among educational practitioners.

Accessibility is a concept that ensures a product or service is usable by people with different abilities. Designing for accessibility widens a pool of users, opens equal opportunity for various user types and increases the compatibilities with other devices [52, 53].

Accessibility is more than technical standards, it is also a moral obligation and legal requirement. For instance, European Union directives 2016/2102 directs websites and mobile applications of the public sector to be accessible [54].

Despite its significance, many AR applications do not consider accessibility in the early design stage, or they are dealing with one form of ability. Examples of AR studies with a particular ability are numerous. Mentioning a few are Albouys-Perrois *et al.* [27] implemented a Multi-sensory AR map for blind and low vision students by using text-to-speech, tactile tools, and visual calibrated projector. Antão et al [28] improved the performance and reaction time skills of Autism Spectrum Disorder students using the AR computer game *MoviLetrando*. In auditory ability, Al-Megren & Almutairi [55] developed a mobile application that uses AR to support literacy among hard of hearing children. Another study employed AR to give cognitive support during assembly tasks [31]. Further, a systematic review by Garzón [33] of 61 selected AR in education settings articles from 2012-2018 revealed that only one paper dealt with the accessibility of AR learning. This finding agreed with previous studies by [32] and [34], whose results showed very few systems designed for users with diverse needs.

However, designing for accessibility is more than considering a particular form of disability; it is adhering to accessibility guidelines and standards such as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) [56] and IEEE Standard for Augmented Reality Learning Experience Model [57]. In addition, consider XR Accessibility User Requirements [58] and follow developers' guidelines such as the XR Association Developer guide [59], helpful in making an XR application accessible. Thus, the development of an accessible AR authoring tool intends to comply with the mentioned standards, guidelines, and use cases, particularly level AA of WCAG 2.1.

Open-source is both a legal term and a development model [60]. Legally, it is governed by an open-source license, a license that is approved by Open Source Initiative (OSI). This license gives the software users the legal power of using, inspecting, modifying and distributing the software source code. These rights are outlined in the ten characteristics of the Open-Source Definition (OSD) [60, 61].

Whether the open-source software will be free of charge or not will depend on the adopted business model and the open-source license used [62].

As a development model, Open-source can be developed in a distributed manner with developers scattered geographically and organisationally [63]. This peer-reviewed manner of development can foster different organisations, such as Universities and companies, to cooperate in producing reliable, cheaper, and faster-delivery software [64]. AlMarzouq et al. [60] argued that the quality of open-source software depends on license, community, and development process. The license, for instance, decides which components to use and encourages or discourages community participation. While the motivated community is essential, the development process determines feedback speed and the review process. Thus, this study intends to adopt an Open-Source license that will enable partner universities and companies to participate in the development of accessible AR learning tool.

#### **4. Research methods**

This research aims to design and implement an accessible open-source augmented reality learning authoring tool for non-technical instructors with different levels of abilities. The guiding research methods will be Design-based Research (DBR) blended with Agile Methodology in Scrumban (AMS). While various researchers have successfully used DBR to develop learning interventions [65–67], AMS is an effective project management methodology in information systems development [65]. Both DBR and AMS are iterative and involve practitioners from the early stages of problem analysis to product acceptance. Despite its success, some studies have reported the challenges of DBR. These include researchers' biases [66, 67], the possibility of iterations to exceed available resources [66], and the inapplicability of interventions in different settings [68]. AMS, on another side, has been reported to have a positive influence in both project management knowledge areas and project management triple constraints, i.e. scope, cost and time [69]. Unfortunately, applying AMS to create an intervention without creating knowledge is not

research [70, 71]. Thus, we anticipate that AMS and designed research to develop an intervention can complement each other. Some studies that have hybridised the DBR with agility include Cochrane [72], Cooney [73] and Dass [74].

The research will be carried out in higher learning institutions and partner companies located in Germany and Tanzania. The partner universities and companies will provide both educational practitioners and customers. Like other DBR approaches, we will follow a pragmatic paradigm by using appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods [67, 75] such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and document reviews.

Further, we will follow the DBR processes as outlined by Plomp [70]. Plomp examined various researches conducted by using DBR and concluded the following three phases. The first phase is preliminary research comprising practical problem analysis, literature review and conceptual or theoretical framework development. The second is the development phase, in which the prototype is iteratively developed as a micro-cycle of the research with formative evaluations. And the last is the assessment phase consisting of summative evaluation to check if the intervention meets the agreed specifications [70, 76]. These three phases are conducted iteratively [71, 77].

The AMS consists of roles, processes and artefacts. The roles are scrum master and scrum team. The activities in the process include kickoff, the meeting to plan the sprint, sprint execution, the daily Scrum and the sprint review meeting. The iteration, also known as a sprint, should be planned such that it is completed in a short time. The last component of AMS is scrum artefacts: these are product backlog, sprint backlog, and burnout charts [65]. Thus, since AMS focus on sprints with small deliverables and direct communication among the partners, it can help adapt quickly to the project unpredictability and become helpful to DBR, as shown by Kastl and Romeike [78] and Confrey [79]. They applied the agile methodology to improve intra-communication, team member cooperation and active participation in the DBR design activities.

## 5. Current status and future work

This work started in January 2021, and it is currently in the completion of the first phase of DBR, specifically, literature review and framework development.

The next steps to accomplish this work are as follows: - To start the data collection and prototype development, employing AMS in prototype development and conducting the summative evaluation. This will be followed by phase three, which is a summative evaluation of the work. We expect to do two to three iterations of this phase model in the next twelve months.

## 6. Expected contributions

This research will contribute to the empirical knowledge concerning accessible open-source AR learning. Primarily, it will add knowledge on the usage of open-source libraries and approaches in developing an authoring tool for an AR learning tool. The knowledge will be helpful to researchers, academicians, and other enthusiasts to expand the research and extend the work for different educational and societal needs.

It will provide source code for the accessible environment to create AR resources and thus, contribute an interface for non-technical authors to develop AR learning applications suitable for teaching at universities and on-the-job training. We believe students and teachers will achieve their curricula demands through these AR Learning applications.

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