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A Three-Layer Conceptual Content Model for Life Safety Education in Engineering Programs

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Abstract

This paper presents a three-layer conceptual content model for life safety education in technical and engineering programs. The model addresses the critical gap between theoretical safety knowledge and professional competency development by integrating: (1) an invariant theoretical core providing universal safety principles, (2) profession-specific contextual modules adapting content to engineering disciplines, and (3) an integrative practical product chain requiring students to create authentic workplace artifacts. The framework transforms content delivery from knowledge transmission to competency demonstration through a structured hazard-risk-control-evidence chain. This model operationalizes the risk-based thinking approach in engineering education and ensures constructive alignment between content, pedagogy, and assessment through artifact-based evaluation.

Keywords: Life safety education, engineering competencies, contextual learning, artifact-based assessment, risk-based thinking.

Introduction

Life safety education in engineering programs faces a fundamental pedagogical challenge: the subject matter is inherently practice-oriented and decision-focused rather than purely theoretical, yet traditional instructional approaches often treat it as a knowledge domain disconnected from professional contexts (Malhotra et al., 2023; Wiggins, 1990). This paper proposes a three-layer conceptual content model that directly addresses this gap by structuring content as an integrated architecture connecting universal safety principles with profession-specific risk profiles and authentic workplace deliverables.

The model's core premise is that life safety content should not function as a "list of topics" but rather as a competency-building framework operating through the hazard-risk-control-evidence chain. This approach shifts the educational objective from "knowing about safety" to "being able to manage safety" within specific engineering contexts, aligning with contemporary competency-based education principles (Gervais, 2016; Koretsky et al., 2022).

Methodological Foundation and Purpose

Theoretical Positioning

The nature of life safety as an academic discipline differs fundamentally from traditional technical subjects. Rather than being primarily theoretical, it constitutes a risk-oriented applied decision science requiring systematic integration of hazard identification, risk assessment, and control implementation (International Organization for Standardization, 2018). Consequently, the content model must serve not merely to present information, but to develop competencies within the hazard-risk-control-evidence framework established by international risk management standards such as ISO 31000.

Conceptual Objective

The model aims to create a content architecture that directly connects life safety material with professional activities in engineering disciplines, resulting in students developing the following competencies:

- Hazard identification (systematic recognition of workplace dangers)
- Risk assessment (evaluation of probability and consequence)
- Control selection and justification (evidence-based mitigation strategies)
- Decision documentation (professional reporting and record-keeping)
- Safety culture and professional responsibility

This competency cluster represents the minimum viable skillset for engineering graduates entering workplace environments where safety decision-making is integral to professional practice (Jonassen et al., 2006).

The Three-Layer Content Model: Structure and Function

Architectural Overview

The model consists of three interconnected layers, each serving distinct but complementary functions in developing safety competency (see Figure 1). The structural framework organizes content progression from universal foundations through profession-specific applications to tangible competency demonstrations, operationalizing Biggs' (1996) constructive alignment principles within the life safety education context.

Layer 1: Invariant Theoretical Core

This layer provides the universal foundation across all engineering disciplines, establishing common terminology, general principles, and basic safety logic applicable regardless of specialization. It implements the conceptual framework of ISO 31000:2018 (International Organization for Standardization, 2018), providing students with the fundamental vocabulary and processes of risk management: hazard-risk-control frameworks, human factors, emergency protocols, and normative culture. The outcome is base knowledge combined with general practical algorithms that serve as the platform for discipline-specific application.

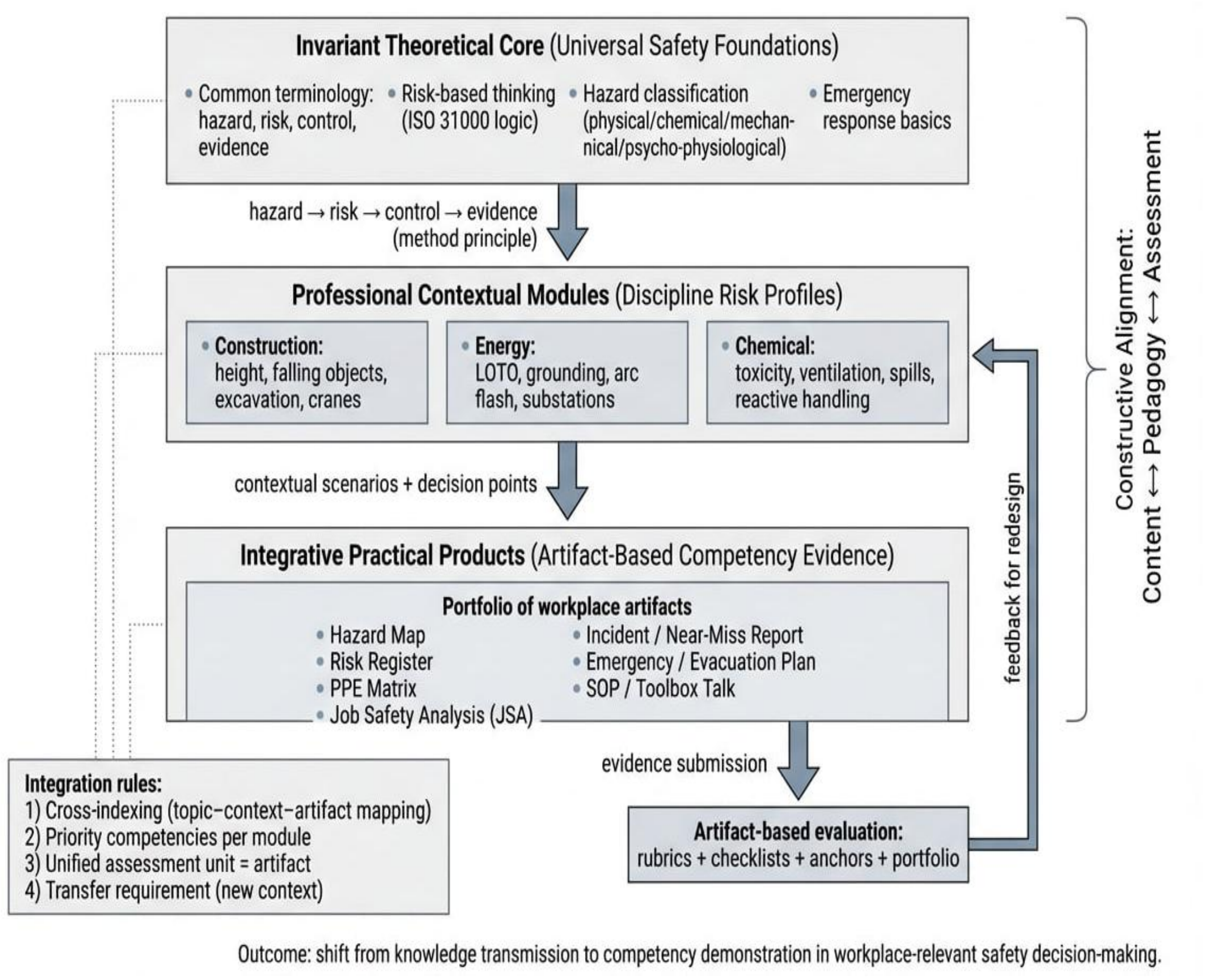

Figure 1. Three-layer conceptual content model showing integration of invariant core, contextual modules, and practical products.

Layer 2: Professional Contextual Modules

This layer connects content to specific engineering risk profiles through discipline-specific scenarios and applications. Contextual modules address the persistent challenge in applied technical education of balancing universal principles with discipline-specific applications (Fernández-Sánchez et al., 2015). Examples include construction height hazards, energy lockout/tagout (LOTO) procedures, chemical toxicity management, and oil and gas explosion risks. The outcome is profession-specific hazard mapping enabling students to identify "in my profession" safety challenges.

Layer 3: Integrative Practical Products

This layer transforms competency into demonstrable evidence through authentic workplace artifacts. Authentic assessment, rooted in constructivist educational theory, emphasizes the importance of contextual active learning experiences and enables students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in practical contexts (Gulikers et al., 2004; Herrington & Herrington, 1998;

Villarroel et al., 2020). Examples include Job Safety Analysis (JSA), risk registers, personal protective equipment (PPE) matrices, evacuation plans, incident reports, and standard operating procedures (SOPs). The outcome is a competency portfolio with evidence-based validation that mirrors real professional deliverables (Ullah, 2020).

Layer Interdependencies

The three layers function not as independent units but as an integrated system governed by constructive alignment principles (Biggs, 1996, 2003, 2014). Layer 1 establishes the conceptual foundation and common language. Layer 2 contextualizes this foundation within specific engineering environments. Layer 3 requires students to synthesize both layers into professional-quality deliverables that serve as competency evidence. This integration ensures that curriculum objectives, teaching methods, and assessment tasks are all aligned to support the same learning outcomes (Larkin & Richardson, 2013).

Layer 1: Invariant Theoretical Core

Purpose and Scope

The invariant core must provide the safety "language" and management logic common to all engineering disciplines. Rather than exhaustive theoretical coverage, this layer delivers essential concepts and algorithms that enable progression to profession-specific applications. This approach aligns with the risk-based thinking framework increasingly integrated into engineering education and professional practice (International Organization for Standardization, 2018).

Component Blocks

Conceptual-Methodological Block

This block establishes fundamental definitions and frameworks:

- Life safety: object, subject, and objectives
- Core terminology: "hazard," "risk," "consequence," "probability," "barrier/control" as defined in ISO 31073:2022
- Risk-based thinking: prioritization logic and "acceptable risk" framework
- Safety culture: responsibility, discipline, and ethical-professional positioning

Hazard Factor Classification

A comprehensive but concise taxonomy of workplace hazards based on international safety standards:

- Physical factors: electrical current, noise, vibration, lighting, microclimate
- Chemical factors: toxic substances, aerosols, fuels and paints
- Mechanical factors: moving parts, pressure, cutting/crushing hazards
- Biological factors (where applicable to work environment)
- Psychophysiological factors: fatigue, stress, human error

Core Hazard Management Algorithms

Operational procedures rather than theoretical exposition, following ISO 31000:2018 risk management process:

- Hazard identification methods: workplace inspection, checklists, "what-if" analysis
- Risk assessment: risk matrices, evaluation scales, prioritization frameworks
- Control hierarchy as defined by ANSI Z590.3 (five-level intervention framework):

1. Elimination (removing the hazard entirely)
2. Substitution (replacing with less hazardous alternative)
3. Engineering controls (physical barriers and safety systems)
4. Administrative controls (procedures, training, signage)
5. Personal protective equipment (PPE as last line of defense)

Emergency Response and First Aid

Essential protocols adaptable to profession-specific contexts:

- Fire/evacuation algorithms, notification and command systems
- Basic first aid principles (depth adjusted by professional context)

Pedagogical Requirement

Each topic in the invariant core must provide brief algorithms plus minimal examples rather than extensive explanation, following competency-based education principles that emphasize skill mastery over time-based content coverage (Gervais, 2016). The core serves as a platform for progression to Layers 2 and 3, not as a standalone theoretical module.

Layer 2: Professional Contextual Modules

Function and Design Principles

Professional contextual modules constitute the "connecting layer" that links life safety to specific engineering disciplines. Content moves from general principles to real risk profiles matching students' future engineering environments. This approach addresses Jonassen et al.'s (2006) observation that "workplace engineering problems are substantively different from the kinds of problems that engineering students most often solve in the classroom" (p. 139).

Module Construction Principles

1. Hazard profile development: Identification of dominant hazards for each discipline
2. Each module specifies:

- Objects (workshop/construction site/laboratory/substation)
- Processes (installation, maintenance, commissioning)
- Typical errors and failure modes
- Control measures and documentation requirements

Sample Contextual Module Set

The following represents a modular architecture adaptable to institutional needs and program requirements:

- Construction and Infrastructure Safety: Height hazards, falling objects, crane operations, excavation work
- Energy and Electrical Safety: Lockout/tagout (LOTO), grounding systems, substation work, arc flash risks
- Chemical-Technological Safety: Reagents, gases, ventilation systems, spill scenarios
- Manufacturing/Mechanical Process Safety: Machine tools, rotating parts, maintenance hazards, workplace ergonomics

- Oil & Gas/Explosion-Hazard Environments: Fuel-vapor risks, static electricity, hazardous zones, gas analysis
- Information Technology/Laboratory Environments: Electrical safety, ergonomics, server room hazards

Critical Design Note

These modules are not separate courses but rather cross-referenced applications of the invariant core. Each contextual module reprocesses core concepts and algorithms using profession-specific material, ensuring coherence with the overall framework (Biggs, 1999).

Layer 3: Integrative Practical Product Chain

Purpose and Assessment Function

Layer 3 transforms life safety content into demonstrable "outcomes" through student-produced artifacts that model real workplace documents and decision frameworks. This shifts assessment from reproductive knowledge testing to evidence-based competency demonstration, implementing authentic assessment principles that reflect real professional practices (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Villarroel et al., 2020).

Integrative Product Portfolio

Students produce the following professional-quality deliverables throughout the course:

1. Hazard Map (visual identification of hazards on site/facility diagrams)
2. Risk Register (hazard inventory with risk levels, priorities, and controls)
3. Job Safety Analysis (JSA) (step-by-step task hazard analysis)
4. PPE Matrix (situation-specific PPE selection with justification)
5. Control Plan (engineering and administrative control specifications)
6. Incident/Near-Miss Report (causal analysis and prevention recommendations)
7. Evacuation & Emergency Action Plan (site-specific emergency procedures)
8. Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)/Toolbox Talk Script (brief instructions and briefing text)

Content-to-Product Progression Chain

Every topic must follow this mandatory sequence to ensure constructive alignment:

Concept (core) → Scenario (context) → Artifact (product) → Reflection (conclusion/transfer)

Example Application:

- Core: Risk matrix concept
- Context: "Workshop maintenance operations" scenario
- Product: Risk register + JSA
- Reflection: "Which decision was incorrect and why?"

This chain operationalizes the shift from "knowing" to "being able to do" while creating evaluable evidence of competency (Biggs, 2014).

Integration Mechanism Between Layers

For the model to function effectively, layers must be interconnected rather than sequential. Four integration rules ensure coherent operation and maintain the constructive alignment that Biggs (1996) identified as essential for quality learning outcomes:

Cross-Indexing

A content map (topic-context-artifact mapping) specifies which invariant core topics appear in which contextual modules and which artifacts, preventing fragmentation and ensuring comprehensive coverage. This systematic approach ensures that all essential competencies receive adequate attention across the curriculum.

Priority Competency Designation

Each module identifies 1-2 primary competencies (hazard identification, risk assessment, etc.) with others serving supporting roles. This prevents competency dilution across excessive learning objectives, a common pitfall in outcomes-based education (Ecclestone, 1999).

Unified Assessment

Since artifacts are the assessment unit, both content and pedagogy must serve artifact production. This ensures constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks, creating what Biggs (1999) termed a "web of consistency" that supports deep rather than surface learning.

Transfer Requirement

Each module concludes with a brief transfer assignment: "In which professional situation would I apply this?" This requirement bridges academic learning and workplace application, addressing the transfer of knowledge from theory to practice that authentic assessment is designed to facilitate (Gulikers et al., 2004).

Resultant Advantages of the Three-Layer Model

The proposed conceptual content model directly addresses the content-practice gap identified in traditional life safety education:

- Content connects to professional contexts (Layer 2), addressing the need for workplace-relevant education in engineering programs (Litzinger et al., 2011)
- Learning outcomes transform into integrative products (Layer 3), providing direct evidence of competency rather than indirect measures (Mueller, n.d.)
- Assessment operates through evidence (artifacts) rather than recall, implementing authentic assessment principles proven to enhance student engagement and achievement (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014)
- Content-pedagogy-assessment unity becomes mandatory in instructional design, ensuring the constructive alignment essential for deep learning (Biggs, 1996, 2003)

This integration ensures that life safety education functions not as information delivery but as competency development within authentic engineering contexts. The model provides the foundation for subsequent methodological design addressing:

(a) Mechanisms for selecting and combining contextual modules based on program needs
(b) Instructional cycles (diagnosis → scenario/scaffolding → activity → debriefing → transfer)
(c) Criterion-based assessment packages for artifacts with clear rubrics

These components complete the transformation from content architecture to operational instructional system, enabling implementation of evidence-based, professionally relevant life safety education in engineering programs.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The three-layer model advances life safety pedagogy by operationalizing several critical educational principles identified in contemporary engineering education research:

First, it implements authentic assessment through workplace artifact production rather than decontextualized testing. Students demonstrate competency through deliverables that mirror professional practice, addressing Villarroel et al.'s (2020) call for assessments that enable students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in practical contexts. This approach aligns with evidence showing that authentic assessments motivate students to engage deeply with subject matter and prepare them for professional complexities (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014).

Second, the model ensures constructive alignment by making artifacts the organizing principle for content selection, pedagogical activities, and assessment criteria. This eliminates the common misalignment where content coverage, classroom activities, and evaluation measure different constructs (Biggs, 1996). As Biggs (2014) emphasized, "learning is constructed by what activities the students carry out; learning is about what they do, not about what we teachers do" (p. 7). The three-layer model operationalizes this principle through systematic integration of theoretical foundations, contextual applications, and practical demonstrations.

Third, the integration of invariant core with contextual modules addresses a persistent challenge in applied technical education: balancing universal principles with discipline-specific applications. The model achieves this through systematic cross-referencing rather than either excessive abstraction or fragmented specialization, following the competency-based education approach proven effective in engineering programs (Malhotra et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

For curriculum developers, the model provides a structured framework for designing life safety courses that are simultaneously rigorous (through the invariant core), relevant (through contextual modules), and results-oriented (through artifact production). This addresses the need identified by Johnson and Ulseth (2014) for clear competency frameworks in engineering education that align with accreditation requirements such as ABET standards.

For instructors, the artifact-based approach clarifies teaching objectives: each session serves either conceptual foundation-building, contextual application, or artifact development support. This reduces ambiguity about session purposes and enables more focused pedagogical planning, consistent with recommendations from Larkin and Richardson (2013) on creating high challenge/high support academic environments through constructive alignment.

For students, the model creates transparency in expectations. Rather than studying for examinations of uncertain scope, students work toward producing professional-quality deliverables with clear evaluation criteria. This transparency supports the development of self-directed learning and professional competencies valued in workplace contexts (Svinicki, 2004).

For institutions seeking professional accreditation or industry partnership, the artifact portfolio provides tangible evidence of graduate competencies in workplace safety management, facilitating program assessment and continuous improvement processes required by accreditation bodies.

Alignment with International Standards

The model's theoretical foundation aligns closely with ISO 31000:2018 risk management principles, providing students with internationally recognized frameworks applicable across sectors and organizational contexts (International Organization for Standardization, 2018). This alignment ensures that graduates develop competencies transferable to diverse engineering environments and consistent with global professional expectations.

Limitations and Future Development

Several aspects require further elaboration:

The model describes the "what" (content architecture) but requires accompanying specifications for "how" (instructional cycles) and "how well" (assessment rubrics). These components are addressed in subsequent methodological framework development. Future research should empirically evaluate the model's pedagogical effectiveness through controlled studies comparing student outcomes with traditional approaches (Gervais, 2016).

The selection and combination of contextual modules must be systematically regulated to prevent either insufficient contextualization (too generic) or excessive specialization (too narrow). Clear decision rules informed by industry consultation and accreditation requirements are needed to ensure appropriate module selection for different engineering programs.

Artifact quality standards must be carefully calibrated to student developmental levels while maintaining professional authenticity. This requires detailed rubric development and validation, potentially incorporating input from industry practitioners to ensure workplace relevance (Koretsky et al., 2022).

Conclusion

The three-layer conceptual content model transforms life safety education from knowledge transmission to competency development through systematic integration of universal principles, profession-specific contexts, and authentic workplace artifacts. By organizing content around the hazard-risk-control-evidence chain rather than topical coverage, the model ensures that graduates develop actionable safety management capabilities within their engineering disciplines.

The model's primary contribution lies in its architectural clarity: it specifies what content serves universal foundation (Layer 1), what content provides professional contextualization (Layer 2), and what products demonstrate competency (Layer 3), while prescribing explicit integration mechanisms to ensure coherent operation. This systematic approach operationalizes constructive alignment principles (Biggs, 1996, 2003) within the specific context of life safety education, addressing the documented gap between classroom learning and workplace application in engineering programs (Jonassen et al., 2006).

This framework provides the foundation for complete instructional system development, including module selection protocols, pedagogical cycle specifications, and criterion-referenced assessment instruments. Together, these components enable implementation of evidence-based, professionally relevant life safety education in engineering programs that prepares graduates for the complexities of contemporary workplace safety management aligned with international standards such as ISO 31000:2018.

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