

Implementation of the Deep Learning Approach in the Merdeka Curriculum for Social Studies

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Abstract: This study aims to develop a conceptual curriculum design model for Social Sciences (IPS) education by integrating the principles of Learning by Doing and Deep Learning within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. Using a qualitative approach through literature-based research and development, this study focuses on curriculum innovation that is in line with 21st-century learning needs and the Merdeka Belajar philosophy. The research was conducted in three stages: (1) analyzing learning needs and theoretical foundations; (2) building a curriculum model that combines experience-based learning and deep learning approaches; and (3) formulating the implications of the model for classroom learning practices. The results show that the proposed curriculum model encourages active, participatory, reflective, and competency-oriented learning. Learning by Doing increases engagement in learning experiences, while Deep Learning strengthens students' conceptual understanding and long-term mastery. This study concludes that the model contributes to the development of a more flexible, learner-centered, and transformative social studies curriculum. This model also provides guidance for educators and curriculum developers in redesigning social studies learning to better suit the demands of contemporary education.

Keywords: Deep Learning Approach, Social Studies Learning, Learning by Doing, Model Conceptual

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of 21st century learning, education is no longer limited to the teaching process, but has evolved to include training that encourages learners to develop adaptability, critical thinking, and creativity in the face of rapid socio-technological change. Learners are required to be active learners who are able to process, interpret, and interpret information in depth. Kovač (2025) emphasizes that the implementation of deep learning in education is oriented towards the active involvement of students in constructing meaning from the information obtained, rather than simply receiving knowledge passively. To realize meaningful and contextual learning, the learning by doing strategy is one of the most relevant and widely applied approaches. Constant (2022) states that “deep learning requires student-directed inquiry,” which implies the need for in-depth exploration, investigative processes, and critical reflection in learning activities. This is especially important in Social Studies (IPS) learning, which requires students to understand social phenomena analytically, holistically, and continuously.

According to Kamaruddin and Saqjuddin (2025), their research on social studies learning shows that the deep learning approach has a significant impact on curriculum design, resulting in a more participatory, reflective, and student-centered learning structure. The development of such a social studies curriculum should emphasize a balance between direct learning experiences (learning by doing) and deep learning as a positive foundation for educational transformation. On the other hand, a study conducted by Karim and Parhan (2025) on experience-based learning and deep learning reveals that the Fun-Based Learning strategy, as a concrete form of learning

by doing, is able to address challenges related to teacher readiness and the need for flexibility in the social studies curriculum structure. In addition, research by Valencia, Parker, and Lo (2023) published in the Journal of Social Science Education also confirms that social learning through a project-based approach and direct experience provides space for students to master social issues more deeply, increase empathy, and develop the collaborative skills that are so needed in the 21st century.

Based on these findings, the development of the social studies curriculum should be designed with an emphasis on the integration of learning by doing and deep learning. These two approaches are projected to encourage more active, reflective, and creative learning activities, as well as foster independence in students. The combination of these curriculum models not only aims to achieve academic success but also prepares students to build adaptive and innovative characters in facing the challenges of an ever-evolving global world. In line with this urgency, this study focuses on a conceptual study of the implementation of the learning by doing and deep learning approaches in the development of the social studies curriculum within the framework of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning). Through this study, it is hoped that a conceptual model for curriculum development can be formulated that is in line with the demands of education in the contemporary era. This model is intended to strengthen the theoretical foundation for educators and curriculum designers in developing learning that is integral, contextual, and student-centered.

Based on the above research description, this study aims to develop a conceptual model for social studies curriculum development that integrates the learning by doing and deep learning approaches. The main focus of the study is to formulate a curriculum development framework that is able

to respond to current learning needs, foster creativity and independence in students, and is relevant to the dynamics of educational transformation that demands flexibility, relevance, and competency orientation. In the context of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning), the curriculum should no longer emphasize the transfer of knowledge, but should be able to develop students' potential, character, and critical thinking skills. In this framework, students are positioned as active, autonomous subjects of learning who play a central role in the process of knowledge construction. The learning by doing approach is an important foundation because it is able to integrate and hone the diverse potential of students through direct experience and authentic learning activities.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design with a conceptual study approach and comparative literature review. The focus of the study is directed at analyzing and synthesizing various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings regarding curriculum development, particularly related to the integration of the learning by doing and deep learning approaches in Social Sciences (IPS) learning in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum. As stated by Creswell (2018), the purpose of conceptual research is to interpret, classify, and integrate knowledge from various sources to formulate theoretical understanding without directly collecting field data. Therefore, this study does not involve primary data but relies on a systematic review of relevant academic literature. The research design process consists of three main stages, namely This stage includes the selection and review of various studies related to curriculum development models, learning through practice approaches, and deep learning in the context of education. This stage involves a comparative analysis of various theoretical frameworks and empirical findings to identify similarities, differences, and opportunities for integration between concepts.

2.2 Data Analysis Methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis as the main method for interpreting and integrating various information obtained from academic literature. This analysis aims to identify theoretical patterns, key principles, and conceptual relationships that emerge from the learning by doing and deep learning approaches, along with relevant curriculum development models in the context of Social Science education. The entire analysis process was conducted by considering the Merdeka Curriculum framework so that the synthesis results could contribute theoretically to a more adaptive, contextual, and learner-centered curriculum design.

According to Mayring (2014), qualitative content analysis is described as the collection and categorization of

data, interpretation of texts from various leading sources, and the extraction of specific knowledge and relationships between various concepts. The framework for this qualitative content analysis serves as a reference guide for the analysis of the research data, which was conducted in three main stages in the researcher's selection and screening of a number of relevant literature, especially those related to curriculum innovation, learning through practice, and deep learning approaches in the context of education. In addition, it involves the collection and organization of literature based on themes in accordance with the three categories of analysis, which contain the principles and characteristics of learning through practice, the conceptual framework of deep learning in education, and models that integrate the two approaches. Integrating various theoretical findings and study results, the researcher formulated a conceptual model for the development of a social studies curriculum based on the Merdeka Belajar philosophy.

This analytical approach provides a systematic basis for building a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the harmonious integration of learning by doing, deep learning, and creative curriculum design. This integration serves to foster student independence while strengthening their deep understanding of social science material. Thus, this analytical framework not only clarifies the conceptual relationship between approaches, but also reinforces its relevance in developing a curriculum that is responsive to contemporary learning needs.

2.3 Data Validity Techniques

Data validation in this study was conducted through conceptual validation and critical analysis of the literature. Because this study is conceptual and based on literature review, the validation technique did not use field procedures such as observation or interviews, but rather through testing the credibility of sources, theoretical coherence, and the accuracy of interpretation of data obtained from academic literature. This was done to ensure the validity of the data. The research ensured that all references used were from credible, relevant, and up-to-date academic sources, including peer-reviewed journals. All sources were selected based on their relevance to the topics of curriculum development, experience-based learning, and deep learning in social science education.

The research applied systematic analysis procedures based on the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conceptual synthesis. Previous research also presented detailed findings, enabling application or adaptation to other research or educational practices with similar contexts and objectives, particularly in the development of experience-based curricula and deep learning. All interpretations and conclusions are based on clear theoretical evidence from the literature reviewed. Thus, the data validity technique in this study focuses on theoretical validity and consistency of

literature analysis, so that the research results are scientifically accountable and contribute significantly to the development of a contextual, innovative Social Science curriculum model that meets the demands of modern education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Curriculum Development as a Conceptual Basis

Curriculum development is a systematic effort that links educational theory with community needs and student learning experiences. Ornstein and Hunkins (2018) explain that curriculum development does not only focus on delivering material, but also includes designing learning experiences that are relevant and meaningful to students. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, the curriculum development process is directed at creating flexible, contextual learning that fosters independence and creativity in learners. The curriculum has two main dimensions, namely philosophical and operational, which play a role in directing the achievement of national education goals in an integrated manner. Tyler (1949) emphasizes that curriculum development involves four essential components: educational goals, learning experiences, organization of experiences, and evaluation. In practice, the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to actualize these four components through adaptive, relevant, and competency-oriented learning.

In Social Studies (IPS) subjects, the curriculum not only functions as an instrument for knowledge transfer but also as a means to build critical, reflective, and social thinking skills. Print (2019) emphasizes that the development of the Social Studies curriculum must be oriented towards citizenship education, which is education that fosters social awareness, responsibility, and participatory skills as citizens. Thus, the Social Studies curriculum not only teaches social concepts but also instills human values, empathy, and involvement in social life. The social studies curriculum development model developed in this study is based on the integration of two main approaches, namely learning by doing and deep learning. These two approaches complement each other in realizing meaningful, contextual, and real-experience-oriented learning. Learning by doing emphasizes the importance of direct experience as the basis for learning, while deep learning focuses on deep conceptual understanding and the interconnection between ideas.

John Dewey's (1938) thinking provides a strong theoretical foundation for this approach, emphasizing that education must start from the real experiences of students. According to Dewey, meaningful learning cannot be obtained only through lectures but through the active involvement of students in solving everyday problems. Thus, learning by doing becomes a fundamental principle in an authentic and relevant learning process. The

combination of learning by doing and deep learning is integrated into a conceptual model designed to address the challenges of 21st-century education. Both approaches are in line with the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) vision, which emphasizes freedom of expression, experience-based learning, and the development of independent, creative, and contextual character. As emphasized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022), an ideal curriculum must be adaptive to the local context and the needs of students, while teachers act as facilitators who design meaningful learning experiences.

The conceptual model developed in this study positions teachers as micro-curriculum designers, capable of integrating social theory with the realities of students' daily lives. Teachers are no longer merely conveyors of material, but become managers of the learning environment that encourages exploration, experimentation, reflection, and meaning-making of learning experiences. Thus, the curriculum functions as a dynamic system that lives and develops according to the needs of students—not just as an administrative document.

Fullan (2020) emphasizes that the success of curriculum innovation is greatly influenced by the context of its implementation, especially social, cultural, and local values. In the context of social studies learning, this means that the curriculum must help students understand the social environment, appreciate diversity, and be able to contribute to social change. A literature review shows the importance of experience-based learning in improving the conceptual understanding of social studies students (Supriatna, 2020; Kurniasih, 2022). This study expands on these findings by incorporating the dimension of deep learning, so that the curriculum is not only practice-oriented but also guides students towards reflective and analytical meaning-making. The conceptual model produced by this study has three main components: Active and Contextual Learning Design; Focuses on exploration, inquiry, and social problem-solving through real activities relevant to students' lives. Reflective and Analytical Learning Process; Requires students to engage in self-reflection, critical thinking, connecting experiences with concepts, and building deep understanding. Authentic and Continuous Assessment; Uses assessments that evaluate the learning process and outcomes holistically, including the social impact of students' projects and assignments.

This model contributes to the development of a social studies curriculum that is relevant to the needs of 21st-century learners. The integration of classical theories (Tyler, Taba) with modern theories (constructivism, learning by doing, deep learning) makes it a balance between the tradition of systematic curriculum planning and humanistic pedagogical innovation. From a curriculum evaluation perspective, this model expands the meaning of learning outcomes as outlined by Anderson & Krathwohl

(2001), which emphasizes the importance of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Learning outcomes are no longer limited to cognitive aspects but also include social, emotional, creativity, and self-reflection skills. Thus, this research encourages the emergence of a more humanistic, contextual, and transformative social studies curriculum paradigm. The curriculum becomes a vehicle for shaping individuals who are able to think critically, feel empathetically, and act constructively in social life.

3.2 Learning by Doing in the Social Studies Curriculum

The learning by doing approach introduced by John Dewey (1938) is one of the main foundations of progressive education. Dewey emphasized that experience is at the core of meaningful learning. Learning does not simply take place through the verbal delivery of material, but through the active involvement of students in real activities related to their social lives. In the context of Social Studies (IPS) learning, this principle is very relevant because IPS studies the relationship between humans and their environment from social, cultural, economic, and political aspects. According to Dewey, learning by doing encourages learners to experience, explore, experiment, and reflect on each learning process. The knowledge gained is not only theoretical but also applicable and contextual to everyday life. Thus, learners develop higher-order thinking skills and stronger social sensitivity.

Research by Rahman & Kurniawati (2023) shows that the application of social experiences in social studies learning can improve students' collaborative skills, social empathy, and reflective abilities. These findings reinforce that learning by doing not only develops students' cognitive aspects but also their social character. Meanwhile, Putri and Mulyana (2024) found that project-based learning in social studies subjects helps students understand the interrelationships between economic, cultural, and environmental concepts holistically. This makes learning more meaningful because students can see the direct relationship between the material and the social realities they face. In the context of curriculum development, the principle of learning by doing requires that the curriculum be designed flexibly. Teachers are given the autonomy to modify learning materials and strategies to suit the local context and the needs of students. Tyler (1949) states that effective learning experiences must be built on a clear understanding of educational goals, but still allow room for adaptation based on student needs. This is in line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, which places teachers as creative, reflective, and contextual learning designers.

Social studies learning makes it possible to apply learning by doing through various authentic activities such as social projects, field observations, social simulations, contemporary case studies, and direct interaction with the community through interviews. These activities provide opportunities for students to not only understand social

studies concepts theoretically, but also develop empathy, teamwork skills, and social sensitivity in decision making. Kolb (1984) emphasizes that experience is the main source of learning and describes it through four stages in the Experiential Learning Cycle: concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In social studies learning, these four stages can be applied systematically and continuously. For example, students visit a traditional market as a concrete experience; then discuss the socio-economic dynamics they observe as a stage of reflection; relate this to microeconomic theory at the conceptualization stage; and then design solutions to improve the welfare of local traders as an active experiment. Thus, learning does not stop at understanding theory, but moves towards real practices that are relevant to students' lives. The learning by doing approach also contributes significantly to the development of 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity. In the context of social studies, these skills are an important foundation for shaping intelligent, caring citizens who are able to contribute constructively to their environment. Learning through experience provides space for students to encounter real social situations, analyze them, and make responsible decisions.

From a curriculum evaluation perspective, learning by doing provides added value because it places the process as an integral part of learning assessment. Evaluation is no longer limited to numerical achievement but also looks at student development holistically. The CIPP model developed by Stufflebeam (2003)—covering Context, Input, Process, Product—is relevant in assessing the success of experience-based curricula. In social studies learning, teachers can assess student participation, reflective abilities, social-emotional engagement, and the quality of solutions produced from projects or social activities. Thus, learning by doing supports a more authentic, sustainable, and comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum that focuses on the development of student competencies.

3.3 Integration of Deep Learning in Meaningful Learning

In the context of education, deep learning not only emphasizes the accumulation of knowledge, but also directs students towards a process of deep meaning-making of the knowledge being learned. Valencia, Parker, and Lo (2023) state that deep learning enables students to understand the relationships between concepts, contexts, and values contained in a subject. In Social Studies (IPS) learning, this approach is particularly relevant because IPS deals with social realities that are dynamic, complex, and laden with ethical values.

This approach encourages students to interpret the meaning of social events and relate them to their personal

experiences and the dynamics of community life. Thus, students do not just memorize social facts, but engage in higher-order thinking activities such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. Karim & Parhan (2025) emphasize that meaning-based learning provides space for students to view social phenomena from various perspectives while identifying the moral values inherent in them.

The application of deep learning in the development of social studies curricula focuses on the design of exploratory and reflective learning activities. For example, students are given assignments to analyze issues of poverty, social inequality, or environmental sustainability by utilizing social theories in depth. These activities not only build analytical skills but also foster social awareness and empathy. Thus, deep learning in social analysis serves as a learning strategy as well as a process of forming a critical, humanistic, and reflective personality.

In line with the principles of Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning), the deep learning approach opens up as much space as possible for students to think independently, innovate, and construct meaning through relevant learning experiences. Learning is no longer teacher-centered; instead, the center of learning shifts to the exploration of experiences and the construction of student understanding. In this context, teachers act as facilitators who guide the process of critical thinking and the process of exploring meaning, not merely as conveyors of information. The integration of deep learning into the curriculum also encourages the formation of reflective learners. Kamaruddin & Sajuddin (2025) explain that reflective learners are able to review their thinking, consider various alternative perspectives, and make decisions rationally and humanely. This is very important in social studies learning, which requires students to understand social pluralism and cultural diversity.

In addition, the application of deep learning requires the reconstruction of learning objectives. Curriculum objectives no longer focus solely on mastery of material, but on the development of reflective, solution-oriented, and meaning-oriented ways of thinking. Tyler (1949) emphasizes the importance of alignment between objectives, learning experiences, and assessment. Thus, learning objectives within the framework of deep learning must reflect an emphasis on values, meaning, and higher-order thinking skills that support meaningful social studies learning.

3.4 Conceptual Model in Social Studies Learning

Based on theoretical analysis and relevant literature review, this study formulates a conceptual model to strengthen social studies learning through the integration of learning by doing and deep learning approaches. This model is built on three core components that complement

each other in creating an active, reflective, and meaningful learning experience.

▪ *Active and Contextual Learning Design*

Social studies learning must be designed to provide direct learning experiences through projects, simulations, and contextual case studies. Through these activities, students are invited to explore social, economic, and cultural phenomena in their surroundings. This approach allows students to understand social studies not only as abstract concepts but as part of the social reality they encounter every day.

▪ *Reflection and Critical Analysis*

The learning experiences gained through direct activities need to be reprocessed through structured reflection, discussion, and literature analysis. In this way, students not only carry out activities but also understand the meaning and social implications of these experiences. This process fosters critical thinking, argumentation, and social sensitivity, which are the essence of social studies learning.

▪ *Authentic and Continuous Assessment*

Assessment in social studies learning needs to prioritize the process, not just the final result. Authentic assessment includes observation of student engagement, collaboration skills, problem solving, and reflection on learning experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Through this approach, evaluation better describes the development of students' social competencies, attitudes, and understanding as a whole.

This conceptual model emphasizes that social studies learning must be dynamic, relevant to real life, and responsive to changing times. The implementation of learning by doing and deep learning encourages teachers to design experience- and reflection-based learning that is appropriate to the socio-cultural context of students. The integration of these two approaches is also in line with the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) vision, which emphasizes flexibility, contextuality, creativity, and independence of students. Anshori (2023) emphasizes that Merdeka Belajar directs the curriculum to be more adaptive, based on local values, and centered on students' developmental needs.

Thus, this conceptual model of social studies learning makes an important contribution because:

- students understand social realities through direct experience; teachers act as facilitators of reflective learning;
- learning fosters students' social character, creativity, and intellectual independence.

Overall, the integration of learning by doing and deep learning is the answer to the challenges of 21st-century education, namely the transformation of learning from mere cognitive understanding to a deeper understanding that is applicative, collaborative, and socially charged.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, curriculum development in the context of Merdeka Belajar needs to be directed towards creating meaningful learning experiences through the integration of the principles of learning by doing and deep learning. The collaboration of these two approaches provides a strong foundation for students to actively build knowledge through real experiences, while honing their critical, reflective, and independent thinking skills. In Social Sciences (IPS) learning, this integration enables students to understand complex social phenomena through direct involvement in social activities, in-depth analysis of contextual issues, and systematic reflection on their learning experiences. Thus, IPS learning focuses not only on knowledge transfer, but also on the formation of social character, awareness, and higher-order thinking skills. The conceptual model formulated in this study emphasizes three main components, namely: Active and contextual learning design, which provides opportunities for students to experience and explore social phenomena directly. Reflective and analytical learning processes, which strengthen students' ability to process experiences into deep understanding. Authentic and continuous assessment, which evaluates the process and development of students' competencies more holistically. Overall, this conceptual model provides direction for the development of a social studies curriculum that is more relevant, contextual, and responsive to the demands of 21st-century learning. The integration of learning by doing and deep learning is an important foundation in creating learning that is not only informative but also transformative for students.

5. REFERENCES

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