

Using SimVenture in Information Systems

Description: This case study is based on an interview with Ms Jyoti Bhardwaj (17th June 2014) and a 2011 case study from the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and Resource Bank at Edinburgh Napier University written by Ms Jyoti Bhardwaj. Ms Jyoti Bhardwaj is a Lecturer and Teaching Fellow in the area of Information System at the School of Computing, Edinburgh Napier University and she has been using SimVenture since 2009/2010.

Course/subject: Information Systems

Type of student: Undergraduate

Number of students: 100-150

Why use SimVenture?

The educator used an internet search to discover a total enterprise simulation as she wanted some way of getting students to look at the business as a whole. She wanted a vehicle for getting students to work together purposefully with a subject relevant activity and via this develop team work and friendship groups among the first years. Also wanted a way to develop key employability skills, and promote small group interaction aligned to the general area of business systems.

How was SimVenture used with students?

Almost all School of Computing first year students take the compulsory Information Systems in Organisations module. In Week 2, on entering their first lab, students are quickly put into teams of two or three; during the first few sessions, exercises help them become familiar with the software; alongside this, the teams assign themselves names and set up their business, identifying markets, deciding strategies and creating a company identity. We are using SimVenture to reinforce and amplify concepts introduced in lectures, and primarily as a means of embedding lots of key employability skills, including teamwork, reflecting on decision making, synthesising and presenting data, designing presentations and verbal communication, as well as friendly competition between teams.

Impact on students: Since its first use in 2009-10, SimVenture has contributed to a marked improvement in retention rates amongst first years in the School of Computing. During the 2010-11 presentation, average module attendance across all teaching weeks was 90.3%. Students report real benefits from being able to go over their written feedback whilst looking back over their performance. It is definitely helpful for students to be assigned teams early on and at random, as it precludes disputes over team membership and encourages new relationships, rather than placing pressure on existing or newly-formed friendships. Most teams are self-regulating and work well; indeed, evidence of good team work, including the setting up, publicising and attendance at an out-of-hours social event, is assessed and marks given. However, staff do have to advise, encourage and, in exceptional cases, take action when team dynamics go wrong or a member is not participating fully.

How was it assessed?

There are three assessed elements, one associated with the lectures in the form of a multiple choice test in week 13 which is worth 40% of the module. The second is a short written report around week 10 which is worth 20%. The SimVenture activity accounts for 40% of the module and this work takes place in small groups and is demonstrated in group presentations.

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Presentations: A series of group presentations in weeks 5, 8 and 11. Each team presents individually to the module leader. Assessment criteria are notified beforehand, and the run-up to presentation is hectic, with teams working on collating data, justifying decisions, creating and rehearsing presentations. Written and verbal marks and feedback on the assessment criteria are given at the presentation itself, in order to stimulate discussion, reflection, improvement and confidence. A video of each presentation is recorded.

Student feedback: Module feedback from students is very positive, a clear majority citing 'learning presentation skills' as the best thing about the module. Attendance at labs is near universal. They are improving their vocabulary around business as well as their confidence in using it. However some students found the simulation a bit repetitive.

Educator perspective: The software hooks you in and is relatively straightforward for staff to master, and does include a number of useful scenario exercises for use in lab sessions. Assessment through individual team presentations is time-consuming and pressurised for the assessor, but giving immediate and tailored feedback is very effective. Teams and individual students make astonishing and heart-warming improvements in their presentation skills as the module progresses. SimVenture is used as a vehicle to embed a lot of employability skills and is one part in a carefully designed whole learning experience.

How was using SimVenture evaluated?

The SimVenture activities were reviewed on an on-going basis with a colleague who runs the labs. Exercises have been tweaked by using more than the basic scenarios. More structured sessions have been developed where the first half is whole class teaching and second half is group work facilitated.

Lessons learned:

- Keep groups small, four is not practical and can lead to students not being properly involved.
- Need to ensure that students have opportunities to get formative feedback on their presentations to develop key skills.
- A degree of creativity, experience and good planning is called for when designing a meaningful and challenging overall experience.
- Starting with SimVenture in the first semester provides a means of getting newly-arrived students into small and class-wide friendship and informal support networks.

Future work: Considering embedding SimVenture in week 1 in a new IT management degree programme in the shape of a one day competition to work as an icebreaker activity. You can find more details of using SimVenture in the 2011 case study:

Bhardwaj, J (2011) Using SimVenture to enhance employability and improve retention.
<http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/vice-principal-academic/academic/LTA/resources/Pages/Details.aspx?ItemID=82&Section=CS>

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