SIMITA – SIMULATIONS IN TRANSACTIONAL ACTIVITIES

ABSTRACT
SIMITA is a project that uses social collaborative online software to replicate a professional office environment where students can assume different roles and work in teams.

KEYWORDS
Simulation, role play, professional practice, team work, online collaboration

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DESCRIPTION
At the University of the West of England we are piloting the use of professional simulations in the legal education curriculum and augmenting this teaching and learning approach by the use of technology to support the transactional process that underpins it. We are currently piloting this approach in the Legal Process Course. It is a final year undergraduate course that takes 24 students each year. A series of around 25 weekly three-hour workshops are largely devoted to skills acquisition through practice and reflection. The casework is conducted outside class. After the first few weeks of the course we ask the students to form ‘firms’ of 4 for the first simulation – a civil case. We have 3 simulations – claimant/defendant actions – running in parallel, using the same case scenario. The firms are asked to take the case as far as negotiation and reach a settlement. The groups are then dissolved and students form new groups for the second simulation – a criminal case, where 3 groups work for the Crown Prosecution Service and 3 for the defence. The criminal case ends in a mock Crown Court before a judge and jury.

AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE
As explained above we are piloting this project within a final year undergraduate legal studies course. It is a cohort of 24 students divided in 6 groups. The project aims to create a pedagogic framework for embedding this type of learning activity in the curriculum and develop a technological platform to support it. Once completed, the project will be transferable for use in any course of a professional nature.
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The real practice of any profession in the workplace often does not follow a standard process. Professional practice is constantly faced by complex problems and indeterminate situations which practitioners have to unpick and define for themselves (Schön 1990). Theoretical knowledge is an important element of any professional curriculum, but workers undergoing further professional development need to understand the interplay between that knowledge, skills and values (Maughan & Webb 2005) in order to be able to apply that knowledge within the reality of their workplace. Professional simulations enable participants to experience and reflect critically on the problems and uncertainties of real workplace practice. Our approach to learning simulations involves inventing more or less complex scenarios and transactions for participants to work with and learn from. The focus on transactions is deliberate as so much of real professional practice is transactional in its nature; whether the transactions deal with information, goods or services. Professional simulations give context and meaning to theoretical models by enabling participants to synthesise them with their own experience; it informs their views of the reality of their profession (Frutos-Perez, Maughan & Tecks 2009).

TIME AND SETTING

As described above students are grouped in ‘firms of solicitors’ and they take on the role of ‘partners’ in the firms. Tutors play different roles in the simulation. Three simulations (following the same case scenario, a civil case) run in parallel from November to February. Then another three simulations (following the same case scenario, a criminal case) run in parallel from February to May.

RESOURCES

We have developed the SIMITA platform, an Online Simulated Working Environment (OSWE) that fosters team cohesion and interactivity, and that allows us to support the simulations efficiently. The system is built on a set of technologies that are already in place and well supported at the university: Blackboard Learn™ (virtual learning environment), Microsoft Office SharePoint Server™ (content and communication management platform) and Wimba Collaboration Suite™ (collaborative multimedia tools). Thus SIMITA is not a new system, but a new conceptual deployment of existing learning technologies. This development model offers significant advantages in terms of resourcing, reliability and flexibility, and has enabled us to develop the SIMITA platform very quickly and grow it dynamically following the principles of the Learning Design model (Koper & Tattersall 2005). The design approach is purposefully student-centered, aimed at facilitating the experience of engaging with a simulation-based type of learning activity (for example, by devolving ownership and management of the virtual workplace environment to students as much as possible).

The SIMITA platform offers a location to store, generate, edit and update all the case documents and resources. Each student firm is given access to their own private virtual office. The platform offers effective methods of communication between firms, firms and tutors, firms with their clients and other parties. Directories can be used to assemble all the information that is collected – this is particularly useful when new characters are created ad hoc. It also features an interactive virtual town map that contextualises all the information that makes up the different cases that firms have to work on.

SIMITA platform showing the announcements area of one of the virtual offices
ASSESSMENT

The Civil Case simulations are not formally assessed, so that students take part in the activities focusing on the process of dealing with their casework rather than the outcome.

The Criminal Case simulations form part of the summative assessment for the Legal Process course. Students receive marks both individually and as a team. Their individual performance is assessed based on their contribution as a partner of their firm. Their group performance is assessed based on a final case report that they have to submit (the focus is on applying case theory, ethical considerations, problem solving and reflection).

FACILITATOR ISSUES

From the tutors’ perspective, SIMITA enables them to monitor how groups and individuals within them are working. The tutor interface provides a high level view of all simulations that are running in parallel. It also provides the tutor with a central communication facility to contact and receive messages from all firms. The tutor can also access all firms individually to glean the detail of work being carried out by students. S/he can intervene in the simulation by contacting firms playing a particular role (client, witness, consultant, etc.). Those roles can easily be added to the simulation as and when needed.

SIMITA platform showing detail of a tutor’s communication with student firms

REUSABILITY

Both the simulation learning approach and the technology that supports it are highly transferable to any other subject domain with a professional angle. We also have plans to run interdisciplinary simulations with groups of students from different fields of study (e.g. health professionals, business managers, etc.).

REFERENCES


