SIMPLE: A PLATFORM FOR PROFESSIONAL SIMULATIONS

ABSTRACT
SIMPLE, the SIMulated Professional Learning Environment, is an open source teaching, learning and assessment environment. SIMPLE supports the creation of a virtual town where students engage in authentic simulations of professional transactions. SIMPLE was developed at the University of Strathclyde and funded by the UK Centre for Legal Education and JISC.

SIMPLE simulations takes place in a virtual environment created using an open source simulation engine which allows academics to create a virtual village where students in virtual organisations engage in authentic simulations of professional transactions. The town is represented by a map and an online directory of government agencies, institutions, businesses and people.

Learners are sited in a professional context, where their work is, as it will be in the workplace, distributed between tools, colleagues, resources, anticipated and unanticipated problems, and individual constructions of knowledge and experience. They are able to develop links and liaisons with each other and to practise the collegiality, networking, values and community building within and between professions that exists within actual workplaces.

AUDIENCE/GROUP SIZE

Almost all the simulations run through the SIMPLE platform involve groups of between three and four students. The simulation blueprints can be adapted for use at both undergraduate and post graduate level and, as the platform itself is 'neutral', any professional discipline can run a simulation through the environment which is then populated with the relevant information for each simulation. Although developed initially for use in professional law courses there are SIMPLE simulations currently operating in management science and architecture modules.

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

SIMPLE provides a framework for students to engage in transactions typical of real life situations. This immersion allows students to shift from merely learning process, procedures and facts to learning, through first hand experience, about professional capabilities such as personal responsibility, team working, ethics, client care and risk management
SIMPLE encourages the embedding of professional work patterns and practices in academic programmes, the enhancement of professional programmes, and the creation of more authentic tasks and deeper student understanding of symbolic thinking as well as of professional practice.
SIMPLE embodies the concept of transactional learning (Maharg, P 2007) which has been defined as 'active learning, through performance in authentic transactions, involving reflection in and on learning, deep collaborative learning, holistic or process learning, with relevant professional assessment that includes professional standards'.

TIME AND SETTING

The SIMPLE platform has been the setting for a whole range of simulations which take place over varying lengths of time at different student levels and different institutions. Scenarios can be 'variablised', that is to say key elements such as client name, witness statement etc are altered across transactions so that each transaction is unique within the class. A few examples of simulations run in SIMPLE are given here:

Law: The Civil Court Action: *In the Civil Court Action students will progress a virtual court action from the initial instruction from their virtual client to a f2f court hearing. During the course of the action they will require to gather information from the client and other witnesses which will inform their drafting of the action, correspond with the court and opposing side (represented by another student law firm), keep their client up to date with progress and respond to expected and unexpected events in the transaction. While the students play the roles of lawyer, the tutor will manage the transaction by acting as the client, witnesses and any other person the students contact in the virtual village.*

Law: Personal Injury Negotiation: *Students in virtual law firms take part in a pre-litigation negotiation over an injury sustained by the claimant at work at a local university (located in the virtual town) with one side representing the injured claimant and the other representing the interests of the university's insurer. There is a sophisticated range of resources, including graphics, maps, video, photographs, witness statements, template documents, etc. Students create the file of the transaction by contacting characters (around 17 in total are available to them) in-world. In their negotiation, students represent their client's interest, and follow guidelines on negotiation already given to them in a Foundation Course in Professional Legal Skills. Their learning is supported by two online forums.*

Management Science: The Music Festival: *Students working in groups assumed the roles of Business Consultants to a company who wanted to run a music festival in the city. The Company, who became the student's client, required a critical path project plan to be produced for the planning, organisation and running of the festival. The students required to develop this plan through corresponding with the relevant people and organisations in the virtual town created for this simulation.*

Architecture: Design Management & Practice: *The main focus of the simulation was for students to consider contractual issues in the construction process and involved the students acting as project architects on a complex construction project. The simulation ran for 8 weeks and required the completion of 16 discrete scenarios that were completed in a specific order.*

RESOURCES

Each SIMPLE simulation blueprint will have a bank of resources which will have been created specifically. These will be in as 'real to life' format as is possible and have included:

- Map of virtual town containing all the utilities, businesses, government organisations etc
- Websites linked to each of the relevant organisations in the virtual town
- Reports required to support each simulation which may be requested by the students acting in role e.g. doctors reports, car accident reports etc
- Photographs e.g. of the place of an accident, an injury, a venue etc
- Videos e.g. of witnesses being interviewed, of a constructions site etc
- Relevant legal documents e.g. contracts, statements etc
- Templates and forms e.g. Planning application forms, transfer of property forms etc
- Other miscellaneous resources e.g. newspaper reports, death certificates etc

Some of the simulations have chosen to offer additional student support:

- On line discussion forums
- Weekly tutorial meetings
- FAQs
- Surgeries
- Hard copy and on line guidance documents
- Preliminary exercises
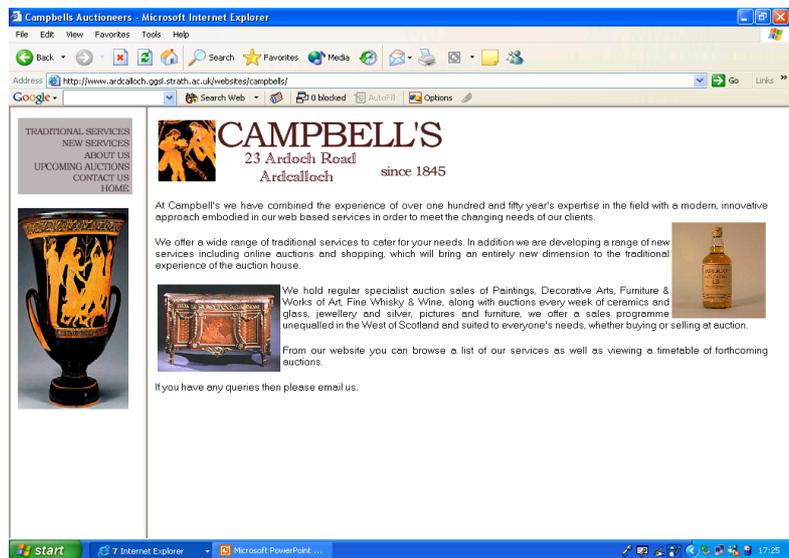
ASSESSMENT

Assessment has to be built into each simulation. For most of the SIMPLE simulations tutors have attempted to integrate the assessment into the flow of the transaction – and accordingly continue the willing suspension of disbelief required for total immersion in a role play scenario. For example if a document requires to be submitted to a government agency in a particular format, that submission can be made a suitable assessment point with the student not able to progress until they have satisfied the government agent (aka the tutor). One difficulty with this is the need to progress the simulation (if a student continually gets the same thing wrong the time scale for the simulation may not work). One solution is to offer the student two attempts to submit a satisfactory piece of work and if not, they have failed the simulation and are then required to undertake an exam or other form of assessment outwith the simulation.

Most of the SIMPLE simulations involve group assessment both during the simulation itself and in the portfolio/report which may be submitted at the end. Some module leaders undertake a form of peer appraisal to ensure all students have performed adequately.

THE STUDENT VIEW

This authentic immersion allows us to shift students from merely learning process, procedures and facts to learning, through firsthand experience, about professional capabilities such as personal responsibility, team working, ethics, client care and risk management. And this transition is clearly articulated by students:

 "…working in the virtual environment has helped me focus on the concepts of individual and collective responsibility"

"…taught me the importance of a client-oriented focus and strong client relationships… I believe we all learned valuable lessons in relation to people management that we will take with us to our respective traineeships."

"Specifically…I was able to visualize transactions and the chain of events…this knowledge is something that cannot effectively be taught in lectures."

"…prioritization was imperative to the success of our firm."

FACILITATOR ISSUES

SIMPLE has a highly sophisticated tutor management structure in place which significantly reduces the burden of running the simulation. The simulations require a supporting infrastructure which is usually managed by the module leader. Certain actions in the simulation will require an academic decision e.g. whether a particular standard/criteria has been met. However there are usually a number of administrative tasks which can be transferred to a postgraduate assistant e.g. release of materials either individually or on block to student groups when a certain milestone has been reached. This reduces the ongoing management of the SIMPLE simulation for the academic.

REUSABILITY

Although developed initially for use in professional law courses there are SIMPLE simulations currently operating in management science and architecture modules. SIMPLE can be adapted for use in almost any professional learning context.

REFERENCES AND LINKS

The SIMPLE project website: http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/research/projects/tle.html

The SIMPLE Community website: http://simplecommunity.org

Soon all the materials associated with our SIMPLE simulations will be available as open educational resources. Watch progress on this site: http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/research/projects/oer.html

Online staff tutorial for training in SIMPLE http://www.law.strath.ac.uk/ltdu/simple/gettingstarted/

Maharg, P. Transforming Legal Education, 2007, Ashgate Publishing