

Strategies for Assessment in SimVenture

Whilst the benefits of SimVenture, for both learning and teaching, are numerous and well documented, the software certainly presents challenges to the tutor in terms of the design and application of assessment. In particular, it is difficult to retain the fun engaging characteristics of the activities, and encourage innovative group work, whilst at the same time meeting the rigorous requirements of module assessment.

The purpose of this brief guidance note is to explore some of the issues and suggest a range of potential assessment techniques based on some three years experience of using SimVenture with a wide range of learners, primarily year 1 undergraduates, but also including groups ranging from year 10 school pupils to executive MBA students.

One of the key challenges is achieving the validation of individual learning outcomes whilst at the same time realizing the “real world” benefits of the group working experience offered by the software. There are a range of means by which this can be approached. Drawing on my own practical experience and reviews with others who have used the software in HE delivery, I would like to offer examples of three potential teaching and assessment strategies. They are all based on the premise of a delivery programme to undergraduate students extending over approximately 26 teaching weeks within the overall context of a module based on Business Decision Making. Clearly the suggested approaches have wider applicability to other module types and delivery methods, but will require modification to match the teaching requirements and student profiles.

Assessment option 1 – focus on Group Work

1. Establish “Boards of Directors” - typically these groups might consist of 5 members, with individual responsibilities for Finance, Sales & Marketing, HR and Organisation, and Operations, with a Managing Director overseeing the activities. Clearly other group sizes are easily accommodated. Teaching is by weekly lectures with the full year group, and in bi-weekly seminars with approximately 25 students in each group.
2. The groups work together through the initial learning processes around the key elements of a business, the linkages between those elements, and decision making techniques. This initial learning is conducted outside the software and uses a wide range of organisations as examples. The learning in these areas is assessed using formative techniques – completion by week 12.
3. Groups reflect on their teamworking in the module to date and are then introduced to the basics of the software, with each key element explored in

turn, and related to the other modules being studied – completing worksheets for further formative feedback. – completion by week 17.

4. Groups are introduced to the key activity for the module and run a tutor prepared scenario for, say, twelve activity months. All monthly runs must be preceded by a detailed documented board meeting, where all appropriate information is reviewed and the decision methods analysed. A detailed group portfolio is prepared, and individual learning logs are maintained – completion by week 23.
5. Students prepare their personal reflections on the business scenario and decision processes, supported by the group portfolio. Marking criteria 70% on group work and 30% on individual submission - hand in week 25, followed by overall tutor review.

A key advantage of this approach is that the early introduction of groups should lead to strong group bonds throughout the process and can support a competitive element which is described in the “additional suggestions” section below.

Key problems encountered are limited engagement by some students, who rely on other group members, so that they do not fully understand the concepts of the software, and also the traditional issue of summative assessment by group, when issues arise with low input to group activities by some students, sometimes resulting in tensions which need to be addressed by the tutor

Assessment option 2 - Skills/knowledge development then Group Work

1. This option is based on early establishment of individual learning and skills, both in terms of the software and the underlying business concepts, validated by an interim summative assessment – which can be in the form of a multiple choice or short answer activity delivered via an e-learning or other on-line facility.
2. Individual students work through the initial learning processes around the key elements of a business, the linkages between those elements, and decision making techniques. The learning in these areas is assessed using summative multiple choice questions – completion by week 12.
3. Students are then introduced to the basics of the software, with each key element explored in turn, and related to the other modules being studied – completing worksheets for formative feedback. – completion by week 16.
4. Students are then formed into Boards and proceed as per option 1, except that the final report submitted is a totally individual effort, although using information from the group portfolio. The assessment pattern is 30% on the activities up to week 16, and 70% on the final report submitted in week 25.

This option has the advantage of ensuring that the progress of students is validated at an early stage, and the final report, although a reflection on the team activities, is not dependent on a group consensus. The disadvantage is the lost opportunity to encourage students to learn by resolving team issues

Assessment option 3 – Self Managed Groups

1. For this variation, I am indebted to colleagues from other universities who have shared their experience of SimVenture at a number of events. This option involves general operations and timing per option 2.1.
2. Initial learning processes and interim summative assessment as in 2.2, followed by introduction to the software and formative assessment and feedback as in 2.3.
3. The group working element as described in 2.4 to be introduced by the tutor but with the emphasis on encouraging students to tackle and resolve any team working issues that arise, and making the group portfolio part of the final assessment. The allocation of portfolio marks is agreed between group members by negotiation, based on their perceived input of each member to the process. This is clearly a challenging approach for the tutor, and students will need some recourse to mediation if necessary.

This approach has significant additional advantages of encouraging maturity and self management in the groups. The potential disadvantages could be if the number of contentious group issues becomes too unwieldy for the tutor to manage.

Additional deployment suggestions – for any option

Where it is felt by the teaching team that a competitive element could provide an incentive and add interest, a scoring system for the end result could be devised, using, for example, an appropriately weighted average of the final cash and cumulative profit position of each group. In addition, or alternatively, an award could be made for the best overall team performance, including management of the group, participation, documentation, reflection etc. Relatively small prizes in the form of book tokens or cafeteria vouchers can be surprisingly effective, and if these can be supported by one or more local sponsors then this clearly yields further benefits.

Summary

Hopefully these brief suggestions have provided tutors with a range of potential approaches to assessment using SimVenture. My key advice would be to plan this aspect of the delivery particularly carefully and ensure that the “rules” are clearly documented and understood by all those involved, both learners and teaching colleagues.

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