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User-Friendly SAM Inspires Students to Learn Microsoft® Office

Andrew Blitz is Professor of Computer Science at Edison State College (ESC), Lee Campus, in Fort Myers, Florida, where he has taught for five years, in addition to being a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University. The college, which has three campuses and a center, has been serving southwest Florida since 1962. One of Edison State's missions is to inspire learning, requiring conscientious teachers like Andrew as well as the use of innovative resources that support instructors and engage students. SAM (Skills Assessment Manager), the online learning environment for Microsoft® Office, is one of them. Andrew has used SAM since 2003, and his list of reasons for the longtime "relationship" includes the easy-to-use interface, instant feedback provided to students, 24/7 availability, and the fact that students don't have to purchase any plug-ins or software.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Andrew typically teaches five information technology classes per term, each with about 25 students. He uses SAM in his blended Computer Literacy and Computer Applications for Business courses, which are general education requirements for all students pursuing an associate or baccalaureate degree, regardless of their discipline. About 70% are returning students who are looking to retrain themselves and change careers. The rest are fresh out of high school. Students attend lectures on campus and then work through the SAM online trainings, projects, and assessments on their own.

Andrew was first introduced to SAM in 2003 when he selected the *Microsoft Office: Introductory* text, from the Shelly Cashman Series®, for his Computer Applications for Business course. "The text's step-by-step presentation includes images on each page, so students can see exactly what the screen will look like at each point in their project," he says. SAM was, and still is, the hands-on training and assessment supplement for the text, and Andrew recognized its value for teaching and learning.

THE CHALLENGES

Keeping track of performance for 100 students each term and being able to provide them with one-on-one assistance are ongoing challenges for Andrew. "Some of my students work at two jobs so that they can afford to pay for school. They're busy, and don't have time to see me during office hours. They need to do their work whenever they find some spare minutes," he says. "That's why being able to do their assignments online is so advantageous."

Many of Andrew's students are intimidated as they adapt to a new software program and to using technology in general. "Students entering these courses are typically not technologically savvy," says Andrew. "Some are just learning how to use the computer, and many have never taken a class that requires

CHALLENGES

- **Novice computer users** are intimidated by required computer applications courses, and need user-friendly learning resources.

- **Busy, non-traditional students who work full time** need flexible, self-contained homework and study options.

- **Students may not get feedback in a timely manner** when instructors grade and manage assignments manually.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) online environment for Microsoft Office
- Pinard, Katherine T. and Robin M. Romer, *CMPTR*
- Shelly, Gary B. and Misty E. Vermaat, *Microsoft Office 2010: Introductory*

RESULTS

- **SAM is easy to set up, learn, and use,** and requires no software or plug-ins, enabling novice and accomplished computer users to gain proficiency in Microsoft Office skills. Ability to repeat and re-submit assignments encourages students to review material when they make errors, promoting learning and retention.

- **Available 24/7,** SAM covers Microsoft® Word and other Office applications as well as technology concepts and issues via real-world simulations and auto-graded assignments. Students work at their convenience and see their scores instantly.

- **Automatic grading and instant feedback** save instructors time while allowing students to proceed at their own pace. After exams, students can generate reports that direct them to areas needing further study.

them to submit work online — so it's important for them to be able to ease into the course without getting overwhelmed." In addition, the cost of learning materials can be a particular burden to students on financial aid, so Andrew continually seeks resources that are more affordable.

THE RESULTS

SAM eases students' anxieties in several ways, and that, in turn, pleases Andrew. For instance, because SAM is web-based, it requires no installation or special software on students' computers. SAM runs on a number of platforms and is supported by multiple browsers, meaning that novice computer users are less likely to face technical issues that could stymie them.

"Compared to other companies' products, SAM is easier to learn, easier to use, and easier to maintain. It's also easy to set up and administrate because I'm the administrator. And of course it makes learning Microsoft Office easier, too," says Andrew.

SAM features step-by-step trainings, auto-graded assessments to evaluate proficiency of textbook concepts, and cheat-proof projects that ask learners to use an Office application to communicate, solve a problem, or make a decision. SAM also offers computer concepts labs on topics including computer hardware, networks, and security.

SAM solves the potentially formidable task of creating, grading, and keeping track of students' homework assignments and assessments, because they are completed online and graded automatically. Andrew can easily monitor students' performance throughout the course. "The best thing about SAM is that it gives students instant feedback on their assignments, so they know exactly how they are doing. If they need remediation, they get a clear report indicating their deficiency," he says. "Students like that SAM allows them to do their work at any time, 24/7, without an instructor having to jump in. It saves time for them and for me."

Andrew says that students' comprehension has increased with SAM. "When students use SAM consistently you can see an improvement in their scores as they move from chapter to chapter. There is a definitive advantage to their being able to see their grades and have the chance to improve them. They have three attempts, so if they miss the first time, they can see exactly what they've done wrong before trying again," says Andrew. "Their grades improve in part because they repeat assignments and resubmit them, but the repetition engages them and helps them retain what they learn."

Andrew and his colleagues, who report similar success with SAM, are gearing up for Office 2013 and looking forward to using SAM 2013. Says Andrew, "I can't picture what it would be like to teach without SAM."

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