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Increasing Student Engagement in Computing Courses with SAM

Professor Kathleen Gowdey, a Microsoft® Certified Application Specialist (MCAS) and a Master Instructor, Microsoft Office, has been teaching computer-related courses for more than 40 years at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. She teaches Fundamental Computer Literacy, Keyboarding, Software Integration, and other application-specific business computing courses — for Microsoft Word®, Excel®, Access®, and PowerPoint® — both on campus and online.

In the spring of 2012, Kathy started using SAM — the learning environment from Cengage Learning that supports assessment, training, and projects — as part of a pilot project for a Microsoft Word course that she was teaching. She likes the fact that SAM is very responsive. “Students can go through training at their own pace, at the levels that suit them best. SAM helps students at any hour of the night or day; it’s designed to help students learn.”

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

Kathy’s students are traditional daytime students, recent high school graduates, and non-traditional adult students who are returning to school to earn degrees or simply to learn new skills. Some take Kathy’s courses on campus; others enroll online. Many are employed — either full-time or part-time — so they have limited time in which to complete their coursework. Most students have at least a basic understanding of the various software products, though many perceive their knowledge levels to be higher than their actual levels when they first enroll in Kathy’s courses. Says Kathy, “They don’t know what they don’t know!”

A small percentage of Kathy’s students — typically those who are returning to school as non-traditional students — have very little hands-on experience with computers, so it may be particularly difficult for them to understand some of the core concepts, especially at the beginning of the semester.

THE CHALLENGES

One of Kathy’s primary challenges is to achieve the right balance — to maintain student engagement across all levels of application knowledge, while sustaining a pace that enables her to cover the required material in a given semester. She must address the needs of all students so that they can have the knowledge they need to succeed, but she also wants them to be so engaged that they are motivated to truly master the material.



CHALLENGES

- **Students at different levels** in terms of computer application knowledge; need to provide environment that caters to the needs of all levels.
- **Time-consuming** to manually correct application-based projects and to create make-up exams.
- **Limited access** to computing resources. Learners may not always have access to the required hardware, software, and connections after hours.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) online learning environment
- Shelly, Gary B. & Misty E. Vermaat, *Microsoft Word 2010: Comprehensive*
- Shelly, Gary B. & Susan L. Sebok, *Microsoft PowerPoint 2010: Comprehensive*
- Shelly, Gary B. & Jeffrey J. Quasney, *Microsoft Excel 2010: Comprehensive*
- Shelly, Gary B., Philip J. Pratt, & Mary Z. Last, *Microsoft Access 2010: Comprehensive*
- Susie H. VanHuss & Connie M. Forde, *The Sports Connection: Integrated Simulation*

RESULTS

- **SAM provides a self-paced environment**, with three levels of learning, making it possible for students who have higher levels of experience in one or more of the applications to move through the material quickly and to enable in-depth exploration and practice opportunities for students who have very little computer experience.
- **Automatic grading** of projects and exams in SAM, including detailed feedback, leaves more time for personalized feedback and coaching.
- **Efficient, user-friendly environment** reinforces key concepts, provides immediate feedback, motivates learners, and enables them to move through their assignments with minimal distractions. It is not necessary to have MS Office installed on the local computer in order to access the online trainings and assessments.

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Another challenge is more of a resource and timing issue. Many students do not have personal laptops or computers, the correct versions of the Microsoft Office software, or acceptable internet connection speeds at their homes. For this reason, it is important that students have the tools they need to complete assignments as efficiently as possible during class time or during on-campus computer lab hours.

THE RESULTS

Kathy uses the SAM proficiency-based assessment and training environment from Cengage Learning, in addition to textbooks. She has found that SAM helps to address the diverse needs of students who are at very different levels in terms of their Microsoft Office skills. The Training section of SAM enables students to observe the completion of a task while listening to a description, progress to the Practice mode and respond to the audio cues, and finally complete the task on their own, in the Apply mode. Kathy has found that the SAM Assessment features save her a lot of time — including the ability to quickly pick and choose examples for a new exam and to create make-up exams, just as quickly and easily. She has noticed an increase in the level of student engagement since she started using SAM. “When I assign a project or a set of exercises, students get right to work!”

The Projects feature in SAM enables students to complete and submit assignments from within each application of the Microsoft Office Suite. Students can obtain feedback on their assignments within minutes, including specific details on what they need to do to correct issues, helping to reinforce concepts that are still fresh in their minds. The automatic grading features also save time for Kathy, making it possible for her to spend more time providing personalized feedback and coaching to her students. Kathy allows students to correct their errors and re-submit assignments; she then averages all of the attempts in order to calculate the overall assignment grade. She has noticed that students now pay greater attention to the details because spelling errors and other typographical errors affect the grade for each assignment. “My students are learning to proofread!”

Kathy is looking forward to incorporating Microsoft Office 2013 and the new SAM 2013 features into her courses for the fall 2013 term. If there is one constant in the computer software industry, it’s that the technology keeps on moving forward. Kathy needs to keep pace with it so that her courses can continue to help students obtain the computer skills they need to compete and succeed — in school and beyond.

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