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Instructor Tips His Hat to SAM for Microsoft® Office

Dr. Steven Mark Sachs (a.k.a. Professor Steve) has worn many hats in his 35-year career at Los Angeles Valley College (LAVC) — he has taught psychology, counseling, and computer applications office technology. Although officially retired, Steve still keeps his finger on the pulse of his fields and teaches courses that most interest him. Lately, that includes teaching Microsoft® Office. He uses the Cengage Learning *Shelly Cashman Series* of textbooks, supported by SAM (Skills Assessment Manager), resources which he says he has used with great success. “When I compared the online support programs of other companies’ textbooks, SAM was the one that tipped me toward Cengage,” says Steve. He likes SAM — an online learning environment for Microsoft Office — because it’s more robust than other programs that he has used, with a better selection of simulations and a “cleaner,” easy-to-use interface. “It’s a better system,” he says.

COURSES AND PARTICIPANTS

LAVC offers hundreds of courses in a wide range of subjects to help students learn fundamental skills, earn an associate degree, transfer to a four-year college or university, or complete career/technical education training. It offers online, hybrid, and seated courses.

Steve has used SAM for three semesters in his online, hybrid, and seated Office classes. His students represent an assortment of ages, abilities, and English skills. Most of them are between 18 and 30 years of age, although a quarter of them are older. Some speak English as a second language. Classes typically have between 20 and 45 students.

Steve requires students to take SAM trainings and exams. He uses SAM projects as not-for-credit training supplements, and encourages students to complete them.

THE CHALLENGES

Steve’s online students are typically computer literate, and are urged to enroll only if they are computer proficient. Still, varied proficiency is the norm. “Some begin the course believing that they are experts, and some don’t know what a computer mouse is,” he says.

Students’ challenges tend to be related to technical issues, many due to the way they’ve set up their computers. In the pre-SAM days, Steve and his students were sometimes frustrated by glitches in their software solution. “Any time there’s a glitch, such as an exam question that doesn’t operate properly, it creates problems. If the software indicates an error, students worry that they won’t get credit for what is often an inadequately recognized, correct response,” says Steve. When students insisted that their project was graded incorrectly, it took Steve hours to deal with it because he wanted to be sure that they received appropriate credit.

CHALLENGES

- **Students with varied computer backgrounds and learning needs** require an environment that accommodates all proficiency levels.
- **Software glitches can cause inaccurate grading** of assignments, frustrating students and instructors. When students don’t realize they have erred and think they have been graded incorrectly, instructors typically have no simple way to determine the truth.
- **Manual grading of assignments is time-consuming**, and the lack of automated reporting tools makes it cumbersome for instructors to monitor individual and class progress.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager), online environment for Microsoft Office
- Shelly, Gary B. and Misty E. Vermaat, *Microsoft Office 2010: Introductory*
- Shelly, Gary B. and Jeffrey J. Quasney, *Microsoft Excel 2010: Complete*

RESULTS

- **SAM addresses multiple learning styles** with a student-friendly interface and three modes of learning (Observe, Practice, Apply). Students work at their own pace as they develop practical Microsoft Office skills with real-world simulations, hands-on training, and instant feedback.
- **A SAM 2013 feature, Academic Integrity Manager, makes it easy for instructors to show students exactly where they made mistakes on exams** by providing videos of each step they took to complete exam tasks, and highlighting the incorrect clicks.
- **Instructors save time with auto-graded assignments** and easy-to-use tools for generating reports on students’ performance.



“[SAM is] automated, so it saves me time on grading and other activities. It’s more robust than its competitors, and it’s easy to operate from an instructor’s perspective. As far as I’m concerned, SAM is the best automated testing alternative for Office.”

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Tracking and monitoring student progress was also more time-consuming when he used other companies’ learning solutions because their reporting functions were cumbersome.

THE RESULTS

SAM has a user-friendly interface and students work at their own pace, accommodating diverse levels of computer proficiency. SAM addresses multiple learning styles as it guides students through interactive trainings, projects, and assessments. Trainings encourage learning via reading, watching, and receiving guided help — students observe, practice, and then apply new skills via real-world simulations that duplicate the Office environment. Projects ask students to use Word, Excel®, Access®, or PowerPoint® to communicate, solve a problem, or make a decision, providing feedback along the way. Assessments evaluate proficiency of textbook concepts.

Support is available if students need help. “Students must be doing well with SAM technical support, because if they weren’t, I would certainly hear about it,” says Steve. “There were more problems with other programs that we used, so I’m happy with SAM.”

Steve saves time by not having to hand-grade assignments. “SAM is faster and simpler to use from an instructor’s point of view, and I understand that SAM 2013 is going to be even better. I’m told that a new feature [Academic Integrity Manager] will capture all student actions during an exam, so if a student says ‘I didn’t click that,’ we can determine the truth. The ability to play back a video that verifies what the student did will be a great time saver, and will enhance the fairness of grading,” he says.

SAM has reporting features that make it easy for Steve to generate performance reports on his students. Instructors can monitor performance across sections and create frequency analysis reports that help to identify knowledge gaps at the class and individual level. For students (at the instructor’s discretion), SAM automatically generates a study guide for exams and projects that lists the skills the student performed incorrectly along with direct links back to the relevant SAM trainings for additional practice. In addition, the report remediates to the appropriate sections in the embedded MindTap™ Reader (an optional interactive eBook) for additional information about the topic.

Steve’s sense is that his students perform better than those who took the course without SAM. “I tell students that if they nail the trainings and go through them several times, the exams will be a breeze. The bottom line is that they do very well — they learn how to use Microsoft Office.”

“I would absolutely recommend SAM,” says Steve. “It’s automated, so it saves me time on grading and other activities. It’s more robust than its competitors, and it’s easy to operate from an instructor’s perspective. As far as I’m concerned, SAM is the best automated testing alternative for Office.”

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