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Developing a framework for designing an Events Management Training Simulation (EMTS)



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ABSTRACT

The study aims to develop a conceptual framework for assisting tourism educators to construct an Events Management Training Simulation (EMTS) educational tool. The simulation consists of two parts: a simulated event management game that is based on scenario planning; and an interactive e-learning platform providing educational material and student support for completing the game's decision-making tasks. The educational goals of the simulation are to enable the students to acquire and understand subject specific knowledge, but also to improve their generic management skills related to planning, budgeting, decision-making, and team work.

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1. Introduction

Technology applications have been diffused in various industries during the last few decades and the tourism industry is not an exception (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Advances in virtual world technology and simulations have also become a popular educational application, because of their affordances in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the latter's benefits in enhancing the educational processes (Guttentag, 2010; Wang, 2011a; Sigala, 2013; Sigala, 2004). By using simulators, the users are immersed in environments that give them the feeling of direct participation in a world that looks and behaves like the real one. Today, simulators are some of the most advanced tools in education, as they enrich the learning processes through the usage of complex software and rapid computing (Chittaro & Ranon, 2007; Hsu, 2012; Cronan & Douglas, 2012). Educational simulators are applied in numerous industries, such as in the military, the automobile industry, the medicine and health (Anderson & Lawton, 2009).

Although training simulators have also been developed for the tourism context, they mainly focus on the hospitality sector and only very few applications simulate event management operations (Feinstein & Parks, 2002; Martin & McEvoy, 2003). Due to the dynamic and complex nature of the tourism industry, tourism students are required to understand and be able to manage complex environments and situations (Kendall & Harrington, 2003). It is therefore necessary to expose them to first-hand industry experience by embedding them within natural or artificial business environments in order to build their industry specific knowledge and more importantly, to enhance their business understanding and management capabilities (Sigala, 2013). As students and educators cannot always access and experience real tourism industry environments, the development and integration of simulated business environments within tourism educational practices becomes very critical. This paper focuses on the fast growing sector of event management and it aims to develop and propose a simulated environment that can allow the students to

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better understand the industry context and operations of events management by participating in an educational game that combines theoretical knowledge with industry specific management activities. As students do not always have the possibility to participate in the organisation and implementation of real events during their studies, their participation in event management simulated worlds can significantly help them to understand and learn how to perform in real industry environments.

In this vein, the purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for designing an Events Management Training Simulation (EMTS) educational tool. To that end, the paper first reviews the concept and the educational benefits of simulations in (business and tourism) education by analysing the related literature and describing the design and the learning aims of some of the major simulation tools. Later, research related to the pedagogical principles and the design elements of business management simulations are reviewed, while an online research is conducted for identifying the learning aims of courses on events management. The implications of these two fields are applied for developing the conceptual framework of the EMTS. Analytically, the learning aims of the EMTS are first specified according to the skills and knowledge that management courses on event management aim to achieve. Then, the theoretical principles used for developing the design framework of the EMTS are presented and used for further describing in details the design elements of the EMTS. Finally, the paper shows how the design elements of the EMTS can contribute to the achievement of its educational/learning aims. The paper concludes with implications to educators and technology developers alike in terms of further testing and improving the design of the EMTS.

2. Simulations in education

2.1. Definition, educational benefits, advantages and disadvantages of simulators

Advances and applications of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) affect all areas of life. The continuous increase of computational power and memory capacity of computers, as well as the development of user friendly human - machine communication interfaces have afforded the development of numerous technological applications with excellent user interaction affordances. Education represents one of the sectors with the greatest number of such human-computer interactive applications (Vogel et al., 2006). ICT became the most popular pedagogical tool, since they do not only support and enhance, but they also transform the traditional teaching and learning processes and consequently, they provide enhanced educational benefits in terms of learners' abilities and skills to acquire, understand and apply knowledge (Sigala, 2002; Sigala, 2013).

Amongst all educational ICT applications, simulations are considered as the utmost user interactive application, as they enable numerous user-computer and user-to-user interactions (Vogel et al., 2006; Vos, 2010). Indeed, the ultimate simulation is seen as an online computer-based world, which allows users to actively interact with one another. This is a process which enables the users to participate in an abstract space, but still allow human-beings to represent, manage and interact with highly complex data in a real and natural manner (Foster, 2011). In the simulated environment, the users perceive events and objects as if they are in the real world. Simulations are also proved to provide greater educational benefits than traditional learning methods (Cronan, Léger, Robert, Babin, & Charland, 2012; Ferreira, 1997; Coffey & Anderson, 2006). For example, survey findings from student assessment tests revealed that medical students participating in an educational simulator achieved higher performance results than students who only used printed educational material (Grundman, Wigton, & Nickol, 2000).

Table 1 summarises the literature discussing the major educational advantages and disadvantages of simulators. The key advantage of simulations is that they allow the users to experience and interact with an environment that is identical to the real world, while it is also safe and provides a degree of control that is difficult to achieve in real conditions. For that reason, the application of simulators has been very popular in military and medical science, since the simulation enables the users to create and test different scenarios for training purposes without risking any actual economic or human losses (Schulzke, 2013). For example, doctors and nurses can improve their knowledge and decision-making skills in simulated specialized surgeries and other medical scenarios without risking the life of patients (Schmitt, Agarwal, & Prestigiacomo, 2012). Similarly, simulations are also proved as effective educational tools in driving schools and flight simulators, where students learn to interact, collaborate and lead in a simulated world without taking any real risk (Parker, Shoop, Coutermarsh, Wesson, & Stanley, 2009; Petrakou, 2010; Wang, 2011b).

Overall, simulations are found to provide positive learning outcomes across all three of Bloom's domains of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning (Hsu, 1989). Indeed, previous research reveals that simulations enable learners to cognitively, affectively and behaviourally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes (Agnello, Pikas, Agnello, & Pikas, 2011). Cognitive learning is reflected on the learners' understanding of basic facts and concepts. Simulations also make learners to perceive that they learn, to hold positive attitudes and satisfaction, which in turn reflects good learning outcomes on affective learning. Simulations also positively influence behavioural learning, because by engaging learners in simulated tasks and requiring them to formulate, assess, select and correct decisions or actions, (Agnello et al., 2011) they improve their problem analysis and solving, as well as decision-making and collaboration skills (Hermens & Clarke, 2009).

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