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## Academic Papers

# Contributors to hospitality students' knowledge enhancement

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a computer-based business simulation on learning enhancement taking account of prior work experience, realism of the simulation and self-efficacy. Prior to and following their participation in a Hotel Operations Tactics and Strategy (HOTS) business simulation course, 207 international students were surveyed on-line, in order to measure the enhancement of their knowledge and ability based on the key skill sets embedded in the simulation. The findings indicate that knowledge and, in turn, ability enhancement acquired through the HOTS experience is greatest when students' self-efficacy is low.

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## 1. Introduction

The taxonomy of learning developed by Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) presented educators with a structured plan for creating learning goals from which an instructional strategy could be developed (Lowe & Holten, 2005). The function of educators is to take their students along a cognitive path, designed to develop their ability to process information, in order to enhance their knowledge and ability and so achieve pre-specified learning outcomes. As part of the learning process in vocational education, such as hospitality, it is imperative that a realistic impression of the industry is created (Chen & Downing, 2006). Such realism can be achieved to some extent by computer based business simulations which they are modelled on, and intended to replicate, real life scenarios (Ezz, Loureiro-Koechlin, & Stergiloulas, 2012). Computer technology, as a tool, is designed to stimulate and enhance learning so facilitating a higher level of understanding, within a particular subject area or discipline, than the traditional lecture or even case study (Tompson & Dass, 2000). The advent of new technology has therefore had a great influence on education, instructional delivery and the ways in which students learn (Lowe & Holten, 2005). Overall, it is acknowledged that information technology has changed approaches to teaching (Abdullah, Hanafiah, & Hashim, 2013) and, in turn, extended learning opportunities.

From both the educational and training points of view computer-based business simulations try to mirror real life scenarios based on contrived situations in order to encourage realistic responses. Business simulations need to be realistic as the overriding goal is to bring experiential learning into the classroom (Chen & Downing, 2006; Gopinath & Sawyer, 1999; Lewis, 2005) in order to enhance knowledge and ability. If simulations are not realistic then students will fail to see the link between the theory and the simulation experience (Thompson, Purdy, & Fandt, 1997). It is likely that those simulations which replicate the 'real world' environment will stimulate a student's desire to embrace the subject in which the simulation is being used. Apart from realism, there is a number of contributory factors that influence the learning achieved by students from a business simulation. Findings prior to the commencement of the HOTS simulation, indicated that, in

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general, self-efficacy, which determines how people think, feel, motivate themselves and behave (Bandura, 1997), is influenced by work experience and task specific self-efficacy is influenced by prior knowledge and year of study (Ineson, Jung, Hains, & Kim, 2013). In turn, the present paper, which compares participants' pre-simulation results to the outcomes obtained post-simulation, focuses on determining the influence of realism, work experience and the perceived learning influence of self-efficacy on enhancement in learning (knowledge and ability).

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Experiential learning

Experiential learning is characterised by a high level of student involvement and it embraces cognitive, affective and behavioural processing of knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes (Hoover & Whitehead, 1975); its process transforms experience to create knowledge (Kolb, 1984) and the learners process information in an active, immersive learning environment (Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2002); the fundamental principle is that learning occurs when an individual is engaged with concrete experience. Kolb's (1984) cyclic model of learning, considered the most popular and most frequently cited (Henry, 1989), begins with a concrete experience (CE) which is task orientated (doing), leading to reflective observation (RO) and evoking the 'why' question then abstract conceptualisation (AC) applies CE and RO to test existing concepts or to form new ones (Saunders, 1997). The final stage of the cycle, active experimentation (AE) is putting what has been learned into practice. Each time the cycle recommences, the learner enters at a higher level of "cognitive functioning" (Kolb, 1984 p. 23) and so the learning cycle follows an upward spiral during the learning process (Saunders, 1997). Kolb and Lewis (1986) suggested that simulations offered the best support for AE learning. Maier and Thomas (2013), p. 19 highlighted the importance of Kolb's theory of experiential learning in particular in hospitality education by revealing that benefits of experiential learning include "creative and critical thinking skills, practical experience for career development, the integration of various coursework elements, and improved interpersonal skills and self-confidence".

### 2.2. Business simulations in education

A number of researchers (for example, Akilli, 2011; Avramenko, 2012; Vuksic & Bach, 2012) have stressed the value of implementing simulation games into education on the premise that using real-life scenarios prepares students well for their careers. Unlike the Baby Boomers (1946–1964) the 'digital immigrants', and Generation X (1965–1979) the 'digital adaptives', Generation Y (1980–1994) has been exposed to digital technology from birth hence the phrase 'digital natives' (McCordle & Beard, 2007). It is this subgroup that has grown up in front of electronic screens – television, movies, video games, computer monitors – which dominate post-secondary education currently (Akilli, 2011; Weiler, 2005). Ezz et al. (2012) pointed out that the learning style of this new virtual young generation is highly focused on interactivity and problem-solving. In fact, Akilli (2011), p. 152 revealed that today's "game generation" (as he refers to them) want to be active participants in the learning process as opposed to just receiving content verbally. Instead, students "want to be treated as creators and doers". Therefore, increasing demands are being placed upon educators not only to keep abreast of technological developments, but also to incorporate them within the classroom environment. It has been suggested that Generation Y learners are "primarily visual learners, a style which research has shown will almost certainly conflict with the learning style and habits of almost any instructor." (Weiler, 2005, p. 51). In turn, recommendations related to maintaining students' interest and information retention include a reduction in formal lectures and an increase in applied activities, instruction by raising questions and encouragement of discussion (Weiler, 2005). As they are typically applications of 'real world' scenarios that promote both a questioning mind and active discussion, the use of computer-based business simulations in class would therefore seem to appeal to Generation Y learners. Particularly within the hospitality industry, educators are advised to focus specifically on problem-solving skills through online simulations due to strong interaction with customers on a daily basis within the customer-centric tourism and hospitality industry (Nicolaidis, 2012).

Computer-based business simulations are tools that bridge the gap between learned information and experiential learning. Gopinath and Sawyer (1999) note that they help to achieve desirable higher level learning outcomes of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (cf. Bloom et al., 1956). The mid-1950s saw the use of the first business simulation in a university class and by 1998 research indicates that 97.5% of the member schools of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) used simulations in their programmes dominated by the business disciplines (Faria, 1998). Benefits noted in early studies using hospitality management (HM) simulations included high levels of student motivation, development of technical and interpersonal skills, experiential motivation and leadership development (Chase, 1983). Later studies suggested that simulations could improve students' self-efficacy (Tompson & Dass, 2000) and teach timing and balance, something not possible through traditional classrooms, film or books (Aldrich, 2004). In addition, Vuksic and Bach (2012) concluded that the concept of "learning from mistakes" is an important aspect of experiential learning through simulations and therefore helps students to enhance their problem-solving and managerial skills. Thus, more organisations are bringing complimentary simulations into their curricula to improve both the effectiveness and appeal of formal lecture programmes (Aldrich, 2006).

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