



Szymon Machajewski

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SAM Helps Intimidated Students Gain Confidence and Proficiency with Computer Technology

Szymon Machajewski is an Affiliate Professor in the School of Computing and Information Systems at Grand Valley State University. An instructor for eight years, he currently teaches eight sections of Introduction to Computing annually. Szymon uses SAM (Skills Assessment Manager) — an interactive online learning environment that helps students master Microsoft® Office and other computer skills and concepts that are essential to academic and career success — in conjunction with the textbook *Discovering Computers*. Szymon discovered SAM in 2013 and saw the advantage in using a learning solution that gives students a self-paced, hands-on experience. “I was surprised at how successful SAM is at really bringing out what we’ve known now for a while, based on the research of Dr. Benjamin Bloom, that one-on-one instruction is most effective.”

THE CHALLENGES

While Szymon’s undergraduate students may be very comfortable with using technology in their personal lives, many have not used computers or technology in an educational setting — and are intimidated. The students who are more adept at using learning technology have tested into more advanced courses, so Szymon’s students are technological novices. This is a critical gap in Szymon’s mind, because he believes that “Going forward, in most things, professionals and students will be learning not from live teachers but from some kind of a computerized system.”

Another challenge Szymon faces is time, or the lack of it. He knows the value that learners gain from receiving individual guidance, but with nearly 300 students each year, providing such attention isn’t feasible. “I have about 35 students per class and cannot do that on my own,” he says.

Szymon also wants his students to understand that social media can be used to acquire new knowledge and make professional connections. He also wants them to realize that the real power of social media lies in its abilities to help them uncover new ideas and insights. As he puts it, “I want them to use it in a professional way, and what I mean by that is that students follow individuals who are in their industry and continually learn from them.”

THE RESULTS

Szymon noticed immediately upon implementing SAM into his course that students felt more at ease with using learning technology. Szymon also saw that SAM exercises are structured in a way that allows students to learn from their mistakes without becoming frustrated. “Within SAM a project is graded within five minutes so the student can correct and re-submit a project multiple times within a single lab session, and that’s invaluable,” he explains. “I think that experiencing failure is really how we learn best.”

continued

CHALLENGES

- **Novice computer users are intimidated by technology** in an educational setting, and need student-friendly learning resources.
- **Instructors often don’t have time to give students the one-on-one instruction** that they want and need, both inside and outside of class.
- **Learning computer applications and skills requires repetitive hands-on practice** and reinforcement.

SOLUTIONS

- SAM (Skills Assessment Manager), online environment for Microsoft® Office
- *Discovering Computers* by Misty E. Vermaat

RESULTS

- **SAM eases “performance anxiety” with a user-friendly interface** and projects that accommodate multiple learning styles while allowing students to work at their own pace.
- **Auto-graded assignments save instructors time** and allow them to focus on other important teaching activities and on students who need special assistance. **Immediate feedback on assignments and projects** tells students exactly what they did wrong and offers links to resources that encourage further practice and review.
- **SAM helps students develop practical MS Office skills** through real-world simulations and hands-on training. Ability to repeat and re-submit assignments allows students to practice tasks and learn from their mistakes, promoting proficiency and retention.



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To introduce his students to the use of social media as a learning resource, Szymon integrates YouTube and Twitter into his course. He employs a flipped classroom model — outside of class, students watch YouTube videos that Szymon has recorded to understand how to complete their assignments and projects in SAM. If students have questions they can reach out to him on Twitter. Students come to class already familiar with how to use SAM and use class time to work on their projects. This approach allows students to watch lectures and learn concepts at their own pace as well as have a more hands-on approach to completing their projects in class. It also allows Szymon to be available to any student who needs extra guidance.

Szymon uses social media in concert with Cengage content and learning solutions to spark an overall desire in students to become active learners. For example, in addition to using Twitter as a resource for answering questions about lectures, he tweets out links to current articles related to concepts in the *Discovering Computers* textbook, demonstrating Twitter’s value as more than a platform for interacting socially. “Students gain firsthand experience with how Twitter is a tool to expand horizons, and are motivated to consider and answer the question, ‘What is it that we should be learning?’”

Szymon believes that SAM is instrumental in showing students the many opportunities of learning with technology. “SAM provides them with the experience that learning from computers doesn’t hurt, and that they can be good at using them.”

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