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Evaluation Summary:

NewsSim: A News Reporting Simulation

Spring 2002 (last revised 04-21-03)

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Full Report: http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/evaluations/newssim.pdf
Summary: http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/evaluations/newssim_summary.pdf (this document)

Project Description: Background & Purpose

The News Reporting Simulation (NewsSim) is a digital environment for practicing news gathering and writing skills, and familiarizing learners with basic newsroom procedures and tools. Professors John Pavlik and Melvin Mencher developed it for the School of Journalism in collaboration with the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning.

The NewsSim may ultimately include several scenarios, each focusing on a different aspect of news reporting. "NewsSim: Reporting a Fire" is the first of these to be developed. It focuses on basic news reporting skills, such as paying attention to detail, asking pertinent questions, and knowing when to follow up; and writing skills such as selecting and organizing story elements, structuring the lead, developing editorial judgment, and probing beyond surface facts.

"NewsSim: Reporting a Fire" was specifically designed for students in Reporting and Writing I (RW I), a core course in the School of Journalism's Master of Science program.

RW I meets from 9 am - 6 pm, Monday through Thursday. It is comprised essentially of street reporting and deadline writing – going into the field and writing stories about events that unfold there. Instructors have traditionally used facts sheets and drills to simulate the pressure of severe time constraints.

In "NewsSim: Reporting a Fire" students play the role of a police reporter at the fictional *Freeport News* assigned to cover a fire in a local apartment building. Students have two hours in which to complete the simulation and file their stories.

The simulation is text-centered, but includes various video and audio clips, photographs, and other graphics. These play a prominent role in presenting the simulation's cast of characters.

The NewsSim has a linear structure — it is meant to be navigated in a single progressive direction. The sequence is strongly guided; incorrect choices are flagged and redirected. (The map component represents an exception to this general navigational style.)

The simulation opens onto a splash screen with a brief summary of the scenario. The screen contains links to an 'About This Site' page, 'Help' function, and 'Guide for Instructors'. It also contains links to the first section of the simulation, the Introduction. The first of this series of screens features video of a building fire and a fuller description of the scenario. Students are instructed to read several background pieces on journalism, the police beat,

fire coverage, basic grammar and math for reporters before proceeding.

Next, students are introduced to the editors at the *Freeport News*. A photo and an audio clip of the editors speaking directly to the viewer accompany each bio-sketch. One of the choices students face in this section of the simulation is which editor to visit next.

In the next section, The Police Beat, students visit the Freeport Police Station. A veteran police reporter explains how to decipher fire codes over the police scanner and how to cover a fire story.

Using the simulation's map and cross directory tools, students make their way to the scene of the fire and start reporting. They hear (and see) the Fire Marshal give an account of the fire and then interview him by selecting from a list of questions. Students may also listen to and question additional sources, including a hospital official, the building's owner, and a firefighter.

In the final two sections of the simulation, students are briefed on how to structure a lead story and provided space in which to write their own stories. Using the button at the bottom of the screen, students submit their stories to the *Freeport News* (their instructors).

Overview of the Evaluation Process

This evaluation sought to determine the effectiveness of the NewsSim as a teaching tool by understanding the learning experiences it promotes. To do this, we monitored participants' perceptions of and reactions to the NewsSim, especially in regard to its functionality and navigation. We also considered the degree to which its various features and activities achieved their learning objectives. Based on our findings, we recommend ways in which to improve the simulation.

We employed several research methods; namely, non-participant observation, interviews, a focus group, and a survey. Our subjects included five first-year journalism students and three students from the faculty partner's Exploring New Media class. All but one student completed the survey. The Journalism students were also observed and interviewed. The New Media students comprised the focus group.[1]

The faculty partner recruited one of the Journalism students. The other four responded to a mass e-mailing of first-semester journalism students. The ages and backgrounds of these students reflected the diversity common among students in RW I.

The three students from the faculty partner's New Media class were asked to participate by the faculty partner. None of these students is in the School of Journalism. Their purposes in testing the simulation therefore related more to exploring technology than to learning or practicing news reporting and writing skills.

These characteristics of the student participants are significant because they reflect a certain level of interest in and partiality toward the simulation.

Also important is that none of the students used the simulation as developers intended. The simulation was designed for use in RW I but had not as yet been introduced to the course. Because context critically shapes experience, the findings of this evaluation may not be generalizable to a classroom setting.

Findings

All the students responded positively to the NewsSim. They considered it worthwhile, interesting, and fun. In

[1] Also interviewed were the project's faculty partner, a RW I professor, and the CCNMTL Project Manager. The comments and suggestions of another RWI professor were obtained at a group meeting.

particular, they appreciated its thoroughness, incorporation of multi-media, and integration of different sections and resources. The scenario and the tasks appeared to be both attractive and motivating to them.

More specifically, students valued the NewsSim's audio and video components for setting the scene and enhancing the realism of the experience. They said the audio components helped them practice gathering facts by listening to sources. Students especially appreciated being able to replay sources' comments, comparing one source with another, and asking sources to repeat themselves. Students and professors alike valued these aspects of the simulation for their realism and relevance to news reporting. The two-hour time limit received similar praise.

Some students expressed a desire for more video and/or photos of the fire scene. As one student commented, a comprehensive view of the fire scene and surrounding area is crucial to coverage:

> If you are a reporter on a beat, the physical place where you find yourself, in my mind, is the most important thing. That and who to talk to, of course…I mean, there was an example there where it said the fire gutted the building or it de-strayed the building -- you can't evaluate that without seeing it.

Navigation

Students found the simulation's linear architecture easy to navigate but also somewhat frustrating. Difficulties arose particularly when students were writing their stories and wanted to go back and check facts. Returning to the map or a specific interview proved cumbersome at best. Students also lost precious time when they discovered that doing so caused their stories-in-progress to be wiped from the screen. To remedy this unfortunate situation one student suggested,

> ….have[ing] an extra bar over here (left margin), where, if you started to write your story, you [could] get back individually to whichever of these people you want to talk to so you don't have to go through all to get to the fire chief...The fire chief was the most important interview, [and] I think…the first interview…. But it was difficult to go back to him.

The map feature was likewise a source of both possibility and some difficulty for students. One problem was that it represented a significant shift in navigational style. Some students found the map screen's format confusing. Others spent an inordinate amount of time using it. For instance, one student identified her present location and the one she wanted to reach, then plotted and studied the route before proceeding. While an authentic use of a map, this was not the best way to move around the site.

Still, students valued the map's more exploratory navigational style for allowing them a measure of control over their use of the site.

Learning Objectives

The NewsSim had varying degrees of success in regard to its learning objectives. Survey results (n=7) indicate that it was most successful at conveying the importance of fact-checking and paying close attention to details. Students said they used the map to confirm and correct names and addresses.

Students thought that listening to and taking down information from the police scanner was especially constructive in this regard. As one student stated, "I thought the scanner was good…it was useful for the codes and having to listen [for] the really important [information]."

Students also felt that the NewsSim taught them what sources to consult in covering a fire story. As one student described:

> I learned to go to the fire marshal first…Kind of the chain of events…If you were at a murder scene

> you would probably need to find the police chief as opposed to just running around and just trying to chaotically grab somebody [to interview].

The majority of students also felt that the simulation was effective at building investigative skills. At the same time, their remarks reveal a desire for even more practice this area. For example, one student recounted wanting to pursue an alternative lead:

> That would have been very interesting, extremely interesting…I wanted to talk to somebody who worked in arson investigation,…[but] couldn't do it…So that's a whole line/set of communication that is just shut off….

Another student cited a need for additional sources of information, such as a news archive:

> One thing that could be useful [and] that…is not here…[is] be[ing able] to call up clips, consult, do a search on this building, like if there was a fire[there] a year ago, that kind of thing.

A third student discussed the possibility of visiting other locations on the map:

> ….If you look in that directory (included with the map), that would be a little unrealistic because if there is a fire in their building they (the neighbors) are not going to be home, so, it would be a problem…to contact them. I might go to the shelter, the Red Cross…[It]…should have popped up (when clicked on in the directory) because that's where people would be….

All but one student considered the simulation an effective tool for practicing writing skills. When asked to describe their writing experiences, students recalled the difficult decisions the simulation required them to make. For example, most students cited the importance of learning to decide where material should go in a story; all said they had struggled with this task. Indeed, students were observed to spend considerable time wording their leads, often reviewing and revising them repeatedly.

The writing activity also required students to practice using editorial judgment. One of the more frequently cited aspects of the learning experience was deciding whether to include a firefighter's suggestion of arson, which is contradicted by the fire marshal. As one student explained:

> I think the cause of the fire was an interesting thing. The fire marshal, who is the official source, was saying that arson is not suspected, and then you have two sources, including a firefighter, saying that arson *was* suspected. I thought that the contradiction in the cause of the fire was very good because that is very common.

Students found the simulation less helpful for learning to recognize when a fire is worth covering. The scenario only involves one fire, so there is nothing for students to compare it to. Also, students are told which police code to listen for on the scanner, thus eliminating the need to consider the relative news worthiness of any other code.

The simulation also fell short in developing students' interviewing skills. Survey respondents explained that knowing how to formulate interview questions is a critically important news reporting skill but that the simulation only requires students to choose the order in which they are asked; all said that they asked each source every question on the lists they were presented. As one student opined:

> I don't think it really did help with my interviewing because I wasn't forming the questions. They were being formed for me. I know this would be a higher level of technology but if the reporter could form the questions that would be important because that's the key, knowing what to ask…The reporter needs to be thinking about what do you ask in this situation and that is something that you can't get here. Actually, having to listen to what [is] said is actually more useful than the questions. The fire marshal, he was talking fast, he was hard to quote and a couple of things that he said were a little confusing, which is realistic. So that, in a way, was more realistic than the questions.

Students also felt that the simulation should have offered them more opportunity to direct the course of the investigation. One student suggested including,

> ….choices like, "Where do you want to go next? Who do you want to talk to next?" You [could] have this list of people and…choices like, "Do you want to look for phone numbers in the directory,…go to the scene of the fire,….go back to your office…?"

A number of students felt that the NewsSim should allow users to make mistakes and to face the consequences of doing so. As one student elaborated:

> I think that in terms of teaching the actual skills, that if there were more opportunities to make mistakes I think there would be more opportunities to learn. Because a lot of the time, as [student 2] had said, if you clicked the wrong button you would go to the correct screen anyway…Particularly when asking the questions, when you are interviewing the people, like maybe [have] someone [get] upset or offended or something and [say], "I am not going to talk to you anymore," or something like that. And then kind of you lose your source or your source doesn't talk anymore. I mean, it makes the site a lot more complicated but I think the students would learn more….

The NewsSim's Potential for Enhancing RW I

All five journalism students thought the NewsSim would be helpful in RWI. They suggested using it early in the course, or targeting it to students coming to journalism from other disciplines. All considered it most appropriate for those who know less about journalism than they do. A couple students thought it could be used at the undergraduate level.

An RW I professor added that the NewsSim might be helpful to students for whom English is a second language. He reiterated that one of the purposes of the course is to put entering students, whose backgrounds and experiences typically vary, on more equal footing with one another.

Recommendations

The NewsSim proved to be an innovative tool for practicing news reporting and writing skills, one that student testers universally valued. At the same time, however, we found a bit of a gap between what students regard as the fundamental tasks of news reporting and the tasks the NewsSim involves.

Students felt that the simulation's interviewing component did not provide enough opportunity to make decisions. This element of the simulation should be restructured so that students have a greater hand in determining what questions to ask, and when. One way to do this is to make the lists of questions longer and impose a selection constraint, such as a certain number or amount of time (e.g., "This source only has time for three questions…"). This would require students to decide what questions are most important at a given point in time. Such a change would enhance the simulation's realism and also make it more engaging.

Students also wanted to be able to pursue leads that are not currently available in the NewsSim. We suggest exploring the possibility of developing additional plot lines, even if they are false under the scenario. Doing so would encourage students to pay even greater attention to detail. It would also test their beliefs and understandings. Finally, it would allow students to make mistakes, something they wished the simulation could do.

A less linear design could also be applied to the simulation's information resources and expository sections. Specifically, we suggest making the Background Readings available throughout the simulation so that the learner controls the timing of their support functions. Similarly, the writing space should be a non-sequenced element. Students could then begin planning and organizing their stories at the outset of the simulation.

In addition, the background readings could be made more accessible by including subheadings on the menu. This relates to the earlier point about allowing students to draw upon resources as they need them in practice, not as someone else thinks they should. Students roundly rejected the idea that the background readings constituted

lessons to be learned prior to beginning the simulation. Having background readings exist as independent resources within the environment would also provide professors more flexibility to customize the NewsSim, as its developers intended.

The content of the background readings should also refer directly to the scenario. For example, most of the students appreciated the math reading but were puzzled when the scenario offered no opportunity to apply it.

Students expressed a desire for additional resources, such as databases and news archives, citing their central importance to working journalists. Including such resources in the simulation would give students an opportunity to practice using them in a realistic context. Although it is aimed at beginners, we feel the NewsSim would benefit through the incorporation of increased resources, greater complexity, and more challenges for the learner.