ABSTRACT

Incorporation into construction engineering and management curricula of tasks that improve the abilities of students to manage the complex dynamics, pressures, and demands of construction sites is becoming critical to meet the demands of the construction industry. These goals are, however, difficult to incorporate using traditional educational tools. This paper reviews the role, in construction engineering and management education, of computing and information technology in general and of simulation in particular. The paper provides an overview of a Simulation Based Interactive Construction Management Learning System currently being developed at Western Michigan University (WMU) as part of a three-year project funded by the National Science Foundation and Western Michigan University.

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Preparing students for the challenges of managing large construction projects is an important responsibility and a difficult task (Tatum 1987). The instruction methods used in majority of construction engineering and management curricula rely, for the most part, on traditional methods such as exposing students to applied science courses. These traditional teaching methods, however, are often not fully capable of providing students with all the skills necessary to solve the real world problems encountered in construction (AbouRizk and Sawhney 1994) or conveying complex engineering knowledge effectively. Also, curricula often convey knowledge in fragments in a series of courses (Fruchter 1996 and Fruchter 1997).

Ideally, visits to construction sites or site training would constantly complement the more conventional classroom instructional tools. However, there are various complicating issues that make it impossible to rely on the sites. Foremost, the instructor cannot control the availability of a project at the necessary stage of completion. Also, visits of larger groups to construction sites may not be welcome, involve risk, and are unpractical (Echeverry 1996). Finally, the high cost of site training is a further impediment to its extensive use for construction education (AbouRizk 1993, AbouRizk and Sawhney 1994). Computing and information technologies in general and simulation in particular have the potential to act as excellent tools to complement construction engineering and management education.

2 CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY THE RESEARCH

The challenges of education/instruction are manifold and range from issues related to the enhancement of the learning abilities of students to curricula integration and the inclusion in the curricula of hands-on, real-world experiences. The following paragraphs describe some of these challenges as well as some potential solutions to shortcomings.

• The improvement of the learning abilities of students: Generally, one of the most important findings of research efforts directed at identifying features that enhance student learning is that students learn more effectively and permanently when they can actively participate in the learning process (Chi et al. 1989). It is thus important to provide possibilities for the students to actively use and explore the new concepts as they learn them. Computing technologies such as course material on floppy disks or CD-ROM and the Internet can be helpful in complementing the instruction. Further, computerized (simulation) games that can respond to the user’s actions allow for a learning experience to take place (AbouRizk and Sawhney 1994).

• Knowledge fragmentation: Current curricula do not give students a holistic view of their field of study. A
typical undergraduate program in civil engineering includes curricular components such as mathematics and basic sciences, humanities and social sciences, engineering sciences, civil engineering design, and civil engineering core courses (ABET 1993). Also, the conventional civil engineering curriculum, implemented at most U.S. universities, focuses on unlinked and independent core and support courses that convey knowledge in fragments. Often students neither retain nor are able to utilize knowledge acquired in previous courses (Bertz and Baker 1996). To address these shortcomings, there is the need to develop curricular instruments that will require students to pool their knowledge to solve authentic real-world problems. Project-based learning, where learning evolves around real-world projects that span various disciplines, can also be implemented to address these shortcomings.

- Providing hands-on experience: The incorporation of a practical element in construction engineering and management is of foremost importance. However, as discussed above, several factors complicate or even prevent the use of extensive site training. Computer-based games that simulate the environment of construction, with all its complex and dynamic relationships between different factors, can, however, bridge the gap between the classroom and the construction site by allowing the students to take actions and learn from the responses to these actions.

The research being conducted by the authors’ will lead to the development of an integrated educational framework for the construction engineering and management program at Western Michigan University, which will be ultimately applicable to civil and construction engineering programs at other universities. Figure 1 shows the proposed integrated educational framework in relation to the civil and construction engineering program. The Interactive Learning System will be used as an instructional tool for the key courses identified in the figure to introduce practical construction management concepts. The proposed framework will address the challenges listed above.

While the Interactive Construction Management System integrates both the Internet and simulation, the projects and systems found in literature can generally be distinguished by their use of either the Internet or simulation. The following paragraphs briefly summarize recent developments in the area of application of Internet and simulation for construction engineering and management education.

Recently researchers have started exploring the instructional opportunities provided by the Internet. Fruchter and Krawinkler (1995), Fruchter (1996), and Fruchter (1997) describe the development, implementation, and testing of a new and innovative computer integrated Architecture Engineering Construction (AEC) course that takes a multi-site, cross-disciplinary, project- and team-oriented approach to instruction. Dymond (1996) portrays the use of WWW in undergraduate civil engineering education at the University of Wisconsin –Platteville. A notable effect of the use of the WWW for instruction, the author mentions, is the increased enthusiasm of the students.

![Figure 1: Proposed Integrated Educational Framework](image-url)
construction bidding game for construction engineer training and for experimenting with various bidding strategies. Ferose et al. (1994) present the design, development, and implementation of two simulation-based computer-assisted instruction modules. The first illustrates the principles of fluid flow between two reservoirs, while the second simulates the typical tendering and project management situation. Samek and Landry (1997) describe the use of software packages, including simulation, to produce a series of models of simple but descriptive nature, to be used in entry-level courses or as review in follow-on courses to aid students in visualizing certain principles.

3 OVERVIEW OF THE CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT LEARNING SYSTEM

The Construction Management Learning System is an Internet based system that makes use of simulation and practitioner involvement to incorporate practical experiences in the construction and civil engineering curricula. The Interactive Learning System uses an interactive and adaptive learning environment to train students in the area of planning of construction processes. The system is process oriented and mimics the challenges faced by a construction manager on a real life project. It allows students to apply their knowledge of construction materials and methods, estimating, scheduling, resource allocation and utilization, fleet size determination, productivity and cost calculations, and decision making in relation to construction processes. Thus, with this system, adequate experience of the complexity of the dynamics of a construction site is provided to the students.

While the Interactive Construction Management System integrates both the Internet and simulation, the projects and systems found in the literature can generally be distinguished by their use of either the Internet or simulation.

Figure 2 provides the conceptual model of the Interactive Construction Management Learning System. The key features of the proposed Interactive Learning System are:

1. The system uses Internet as its launching medium. Students utilizing the World Wide Web (WWW) browser will be able to undertake interactive sessions of the learning system from remote locations. The internet-based approach will also result in effective dissemination of the system.

2. The system internally utilizes discrete event simulation, gaming, and stochastic methods to provide an interactive system that mimics the real construction processes.

3. It also utilizes multimedia databases to provide students with an interesting view of the selected construction processes and equipment.

4. Practical content relevant to construction processes and equipment is included in the system. Practitioner involvement clearly allows students to learn more about the construction management profession.

Figure 2: Conceptual Model

One of the key features of the Interactive Construction Management Learning System is the utilization of Internet as a launching medium. The authors’ believe that this feature will allow successful utilization of the tool by construction and civil engineering students.

Figure 3 provides the implementation details for the system. The three main databases of the system are implemented as part of a single relational database management system (RDBMS) that complies with the object database connectivity (ODBC) protocol. The RDBMS is connected to the main program with the help of JAVA database connectivity (JDBC) to ODBC bridge drivers. The actual database features of the system are programmed using the JDBC Application Programming Interface (JDBC API) and JDBC manager. The construction simulation modeling toolkit and output module is programmed using the JAVA programming language—a programming language for developing Internet applications. The research team plans to utilize existing process interaction based discrete event simulation engine such as JavaSim (Buss and Stork, 1996), SimJava (McNab and Howell 1996), or JSIM (Nair et al. 1996). The
benefit of this approach is that these engines have been
developed using JAVA programming language and as such
can be directly linked to the main program, thus providing
seamless integration. Web clients (students or users
accessing the Interactive Learning System) will connect to
the main JAVA based application through the hyper text
transfer protocol (HTTP) over the internet by using
standard WWW browser such as Microsoft Internet
Explorer, Netscape Navigator, Mosaic, and HotMetal. The
main program will process all transactions between the
WWW clients and the Interactive Learning System.

3. Construction Scenarios Database: A number of real-
world scenarios are provided for the interactive
simulation and gaming mode of the system. This
database is linked to the Construction Process
Database.

4. Construction Simulation Tool Kit: This element acts
as a controlling module for the system. It provides
support for the development of the simulation model
during an interactive session, executes the simulation
model and provides the result of the simulation study
to the students (user).

5. Output Module: The module is used to provide the
user with the response of the system.

5 UTILIZATION OF THE INTERACTIVE
LEARNING SYSTEM

A critical factor in the success of the Interactive Learning
System is the student interaction process. The system can
be utilized in the construction materials and methods,
construction estimating, construction scheduling, and
construction project management courses. Additionally, the
system will be utilized in other civil engineering courses,
introductory pre-engineering courses and demonstrations to
prospective transfer students. Figure 4 provides overview
of the student interaction process. As seen in the figure the
Interactive Construction Management Learning System
permits the students to use it in three different modes:

1. Mode 1: Browse through the construction process
database. This will permit students to learn about
construction technologies and methods, equipment and
material usage, and the underlying tasks and their
sequence.

2. Mode 2: Equally, the student can also browse through
the construction equipment database and obtain
information regarding the general specifications of the
equipment, performance factors, equipment use and
technology.

3. Mode 3: This mode is the interactive simulation and
 gaming mode. The system provides the student with
real life construction scenarios, and permits him/her to
develop and implement a solution, study the response
of the system, and then iteratively improve the
solution. A number of steps have to be followed by a
student in this mode. At the outset, the student selects
a problem scenario from the existing list displayed by
the system. The system then provides the user with
detailed explanations and data related to this scenario.
In a second step, the student will then proceed to
collect data and develop a solution for the chosen

4 INTERNAL STRUCTURE

As can be seen from the above section, a few key features
distinguish the Interactive Construction Management
System from those described in the literature. These
include the use of the Internet and simulation, a
combination of active learning technologies and increased
practitioner involvement. Interactive Construction
Management Learning System is composed of the
following components:

1. Construction Process Database: The repository
contains a number of construction processes from
residential, building, heavy engineering, and industrial
construction. Visual as well as textual explanations of
the processes are supplemented with multimedia
elements.

2. Construction Equipment Database: This component
contains information pertaining to equipment
specifications, productivity, operation use, and
manufacturer.

Figure 3: Implementation Plan

JAVA based
Simulation Engine

JDBC-ODBC
Bridge Drivers

Java Based Application

ODBC

JDBC API and
Manager

Output Module
Construction Simulation
Modeling Toolkit

DBMS

Construction Process

Construction Equipment

Construction Scenario
Simulation Based Construction Management Learning System

scenario. This can be done using the construction process and construction equipment databases. The following step requires the user to implement his/her solution by developing a simulation model. The Interactive Learning System utilizes the Cyclic Operations Network (CYCLONE) modeling methodology (Halpin 1976) for the development of the simulation model. Finally, in the last step, the student collects the information generated by the execution of the simulation model. Steps 2 and 3 can be repeated to improve and eventually optimize the solution. Alternatively, the student can select an altogether different construction method as his/her solution and then proceed with steps 2 to 4.

3. Two-year Transfer Degree Programs in civil and construction engineering

6 CONCLUSION

The summary of the ongoing efforts and applications of computing for instruction clearly show the trends in education using computing and information technology. These trends are altogether understandable given the challenges educators and students face in instruction/learning nowadays. The Internet Based Interactive Construction Management Learning System also clearly caters to these needs by providing a system that permits active and interactive modes to improve learning effectiveness, a multi-disciplinary approach including knowledge on construction equipment, construction processes and techniques, construction simulation and the various interactions to reduce fragmentation and improve the students’ use of their knowledge, and simulation to improve the students’ understanding of the dynamics and complexities of the construction site. The value of such a tool in the current engineering environment can clearly be recognized, especially if one considers the simultaneous use of practitioner involvement from which students can profit in manifold ways ranging from guidance to improved industry knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was supported, in part, by the National Science Foundation (Grant No. DUE 9752425). Opinions expressed are those of the authors’ and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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