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Fox Valley Technical College Adds 8th Press Simulator

December 2010 - Fox Valley Technical College in Appleton, Wisconsin, part of the Wisconsin Technical College system, has discovered an expected characteristic of press simulators. They are addicting.

Fox Valley is the largest educational user of Sinapse print simulators in the United States. It has two flexo simulators, and five offset simulators — one Heatset (WebSim-Heatset) and four Sheetfed (SheetSim - SHOTS) — and is currently in the process of installing SHOTS number five. It uses the simulators to train students in problem-solving and troubleshooting, as well as to reinforce the live press experience.

Press simulators, available from Sinapse Press Simulators, recreate the experience of running a press much as a flight simulator recreates the experience of flying a plane. They allow students and other trainees to experience a wider range of press conditions than they see on a daily basis on a live press. They are also able to make adjustments on "press" and see the results without incurring actual production costs.

Teaching Problem-Solving

Dale Drake, an instructor in Fox Valley's Printing and Publishing program, was exposed to the simulator as a training tool for pressmen. Ultimately, however, he justified the purchases based on its value for troubleshooting and problem-solving.

"A lot of problems we see on press are hard to recreate because it's bad materials and such," says Drake. "In our programs, I believe in setting students for success, so we use very good plates, ink, and paper. I try to build confidence by making sure that students aren't fighting the press. Consequently, there is not a lot of opportunity to build troubleshooting skills. With the simulator, I can give them scenarios they don't get on a live press."

The other justification is that, like most educational institutions, Fox Valley doesn't have enough presses for every student. The school offers two press courses and has seven small-format offset presses. The students pair up on press, so printing classes are limited to 14 people. "Eventually, however, students do projects on their own, so one works on press and the other on the simulator," says Drake. "So it's also a lab management issue."

Fox Valley has a total of 6,000 students. Approximately 60 of these are in one of its three printing programs: a two-year associates degree in Printing and Publishing (offset) or one-year technical diploma or two-year associates degrees in Package and Label Printing (flexo).

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In the first semester, each student spends 8-10 hours on a simulator. At this time, they learn basic skills, such as ink/water balance and registration. In the second semester, they spend five to six hours on the simulator learning advanced issues such as color and quality control. In the Printing and Publishing program, heatset is introduced in the second semester, as well.

“On the simulator, I can expose them to more advanced press work without having to expose them to raw materials,” says Drake. “It also eliminates the issue of safety on press.”

Real-World Preparation

Not only does the simulator help students learn and apply information, but Drake is convinced that it helps them with job placement, too. “What makes us one of the better recognized schools is the equipment we have,” he explains. “If someone hires out of a school. They ask, how much time do you have on a machine? Everyone knows the equipment is very expensive, so the simulator provides additional learning opportunities. Students may not be on a machine, but they are still in a problem-solving environment.”

Not surprisingly, graduates have a reputation for moving into press operator positions very quickly. “In the industry, it’s standard for someone to be a press assistant five to seven years. We’ve had students make press operator in a year,” says Drake. "They’ve never come back and said SHOTS made the difference, but there is no question that having the additional troubleshooting has helped. It gives them the skills to work through problems in a real-world environment.”

Simulators are not just learning tools. They are also just plain fun. Most of Fox Valley’s students are right out of high school, and there is the video game element to the training that they enjoy. “At the same time, you have to watch to make sure they don’t just solve problems by pushing buttons,” Drake says. “You need to ensure that they are actually attempting to solve the problems.”

Learning Cost Management

Another powerful benefit of simulators is the real-time cost calculator that runs while students are “on press.” This teaches them the value of materials and how their decisions impact their employer’s bottom line.

“Every time you touch the press, there is a cost associated with it,” says Drake. “For example, one of our students was printing a four-color job on the simulator and thought one of his blankets was bad. Rather than take the time to check each blanket individually, he changed all four. All of a sudden, the counter jumped by $800! The counter teaches students that you can’t just throw money at the machine. As an employee, a big part of your job is to make sure you don’t waste materials. The simulator helps them become conscious that their decisions cost money.”

The simulator also prepares them for quality control procedures on press. In first semester, even though students are printing only one-color jobs, Drake introduces the concepts of monitoring and maintaining color on the simulator. By the second semester, when students start doing multicolor work, they have already seen color measurement on the simulator. This speeds the learning process.

"I'm big on repetition—in class, in SHOTS, and then on the press," says Drake.

Ask about the one thing that surprised him the most about the simulator, Drake says it was the realism that it brings to the process. "A press is heavy iron and it's different. But I think Sinapse Press Simulators has done a great job making it as realistic as they can on a computer," he says. "It's a great tool. I'll definitely be using these simulators in the classroom until I retire!"

Sinapse Print Simulators manufactures press simulators for heatset (WebSim-Heatset), coldest (WebSim-News), sheetfed (SheetSim-SHOTS), gravure (PackSim-Gravure), and flexo (Pack-Sim Flexo) printing.

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This picture is available from Sinapse Print Simulators in Higher Resolution

Students at Fox Valley working on 3 of their 8 simulators