University Induction Case Study

Overview

TPLD was approached by the University of Abertay Dundee to see if they could provide a solution to fit inside an existing undergraduate module for which the university was looking for innovative training technique.

The 'X' Module had been running in various forms for 3 years and each year had changed significantly, using new and improved components, its aim is to integrate groups of first year students, getting them used to working in teams and thinking about leadership and management skills; areas the University deemed essential for its graduates.

TPLD's Infiniteams training tool was selected to be a key component in the course. The software would fill a gap in the middle of the course after the groups had been introduced to the main concepts; teamwork and leadership. Infiniteams allowed the students to put these basic concepts into practise and explore the issues and challenges presented by their work.

Premise

In the previous year the university had used several tools to try and educate its students about teamwork. One example is the Zook-Kit, from the program BAMZOOKI. They were given the task of producing an Olympic champion Zook who could run, jump and push blocks. Overall, the students enjoyed this task and each team produced a fairly impressive Zook, but as a teamwork exercise it had failed. Every team attacked the problem in the same way, each student produced their own Zook and once complete they picked the best one. Only two of the ten teams actually thought about teamwork and managed to construct a plan where they had to communicate with each other. In conclusion, although the students enjoyed the activity, it proved to teach them very little about teamwork and its related issues.

Infiniteams has many uses, and whilst the main focus has been on leadership development and team building over the last 3 years it has also been put to use in a number of industry specific courses. This new and innovative solution places the team on a remote island and then lays out a whole series of challenges that the team must overcome if they are to achieve the main goal; escaping from the island. It is this proven flexibility that the University were looking to take advantage of with regards to the 'X' Module.

Planning

The initial idea of how Infiniteams could be applied was that the game would form the central part of the module being used across 4 separate 2 hour sessions in which teams of 4 or 5 students would discuss their progress from the previous weeks and then continue to play through a new part of the Island and further challenges. At the close of this section of the course the students would present their experiences to the rest of the group to allow the tutors to decide on a final grade.

Since Infiniteams had not been used in this setting before TPLD ran a 'training and brainstorming' session with the tutors to ensure that they understood the tool and were able to apply it to the

course effectively. Since the ratio between students and tutors was that much higher in the University, it immediately became apparent that it may not be possible to use Infiniteams in the same way it had been used for organisation development courses. The high student teacher ratio meant each group of students would not have a dedicated facilitator as was normally recommended. After discussing this issue the rough idea was put forward that some students could facilitate the teams, whilst the tutors facilitated the student facilitators, adding another layer of experience and learning to the course. Over the length of the course each student would have an opportunity to act as facilitator.

The Experience

The initial reaction from the students was one of surprise and anticipation, however, after the first session the anticipation had turned to enthusiasm over the challenge. Different students encountered different problems in the early sessions, and the best teams were those where people with different problems helped each other, as a team rather than a group of individuals. Later on some students commented that they would have become bored if their roles had not been switched about: this provides support to the premise that any extended use of serious games needs to be well structured to increase the difficulty levels, including progressive and planned use of the challenges and tools within system.

The tutors were pleased to see that even the mature students who were taken out of their comfort zones and placed in a scenario that was challenging, found the experience beneficial and provided a good base for discussion at later points. On completion, the aims of the module that had been targeted by Infiniteams had been covered extensively, these were, communication skills, problem solving and planning and the realisation that they didn't know everything. Tutors also pointed out that the course also gave the students an excellent basic understanding of teamwork - on which the University could build future learning in this area.

Review

The different groups of students had different reactions and experiences, whilst the mature students felt out of their comfort zone the most, the computing students tended to underestimate the problems they faced and often attempted to approach the problems from a computer games perspective not a team problem perspective; which resulted in predictable complications. The only non-computing students on the course, Mental Health Councillors, spent much more time discussing the problems than the others. Next year the university may consider mixing the students further to take advantage of these differences.

After reviewing the effectiveness of Infiniteams, the tutors, have agreed to conduct the course next year with the following 3 week schedule;

- Week 1: brief intro and get started. Team leaders allocated.
- Week 2: the leader would change and one of the members would facilitate.
- Week 3: the process would be repeated with different facilitators and leaders.

It is hoped that each member would have been either a facilitator or a leader during this 3 week session. The modules would be introduced in weeks 2 and 3. If the software were expanded with new modules etc. then there would be the possibility of considering a 4 week session.

Conclusion, from Dr. Euan Dempster, UAD

"The aim was to introduce students to teamwork in a friendly and fun way. TPLD's Infiniteams was ideal for this exercise. It forced the students to work in teams, to prevent a nasty demise in the game (running out of resources or eaten by the local inhabitants). It allowed them to freely explore and be creative, and have fun whilst doing so. The sight of themselves or their team mates being attacked by rats and lions never seemed to get old. As team leader the students realised that they had to coordinate their members and make sure that things were spread about fairly or deal with the consequences. The tutors found the student facilitator the most interesting which was approached in several ways, some who simply observed, taking odd notes, some deciding to influence the environment, either by helping the team by supplying goods or weapons or hindered the team by placing more modules in their way. Either way, the teams' reactions were varied and interesting. Infiniteams was more effective as a part of the X Module than Zooks was the previous year, and we are already considering ways to use it next, in the X Modules and beyond."

Achieved Module Learning Outcomes

1. To work from an identified problem to produce a relevant solution.
2. Learn about problem solving, working across disciplines, setting up and working in teams and working to deadlines.
3. To present ideas and arguments in a coherent way to justify a conclusion.

*Points one and two were covered in the actual task of playing the game and point three was covered by the students in their individual reflective presentations which were given after the exercise

Achieved Module Aims

1. Problem solving in teams - Work in multidisciplinary teams. develop an idea from concept to conclusion. Introduction to research, project management and reflective learning.
2. Case study analysis - Identification of key points from a problem scenario
3. Problem solving - Use of problem-solving techniques e.g. breaking down problems into sub-problems
4. Presenting the solution - Oral and written presentation of the development process and problems encountered