

# Piloted Online Training Module to Teach On-Site Safety in Engineering

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Change in Australian engineering industry has caused difficulty for engineering students to secure placements and engage with engineering practice. Consequently, universities are developing learning modules using digital simulations to expose engineering students to authentic engineering practice as part of their curricula. Many simulations use technology such as virtual reality that is not accessible to students off campus without significant resource investment. One of the important elements of engagement with practice is learning about safety in engineering. With the use of work integrated learning and distance education frameworks, this study developed and evaluated the effectiveness of an online desktop-based learning environment that students could access off-campus, in delivering safety education and awareness, and the benefits of online learning. Fifteen engineering university students (6 female) participated in an optional module using a desktop-based industrial site simulation. Pre and post testing were used to evaluate effectiveness of the module. Results indicated that the module significantly improved understanding and application of the job safety analysis technique and improved on-site safety awareness. The use of flexible online education is versatile and effective. Students benefitted from desktop-based simulation experiences incorporating authentic engineering scenarios and tasks that could be accessed online.

Keywords: interactive learning environment, safety education, engineering education, module

## Introduction

Many graduates lack employability skills (Graduate Careers Australia, 2015). Education and training are the main instruments available to governments and the community to prepare people for the increasingly demanding world of work (Singh & Gera, 2015), but university programs are not necessarily providing students with the skills to allow them to excel in the workplace. The traditional style of teaching, lectures, is still prevalent in universities across Australia with students graduating with strong technical backgrounds (Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015).

The structure of traditional engineering programs offers limited exposure to workplace culture and the professional skills required to function in the environment. The importance of professional skills such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and safety awareness are not necessarily explicitly taught in engineering programs, leaving graduates ill-equipped for the demanding workplace environment (Mills & Smith, 2014).

This study was part of an overarching project in Australia to address the challenges of engaging engineering students in practice (Male, 2015). The initiative focused on developing modules for students that can complement existing opportunities to work in industry. The modules created by the project were designed to support the development of the Stage 1 Competencies set out by Engineers Australia (Male, Cameron, & Pointing, 2016). An important aspect of the project was that students engage in simulated workplaces, meaning modules may be delivered in an online setting, not restricted to the classroom. This provides educators and teachers with flexible access to the modules.

This paper presents a pilot study of a computer-based training module which engages engineering students in completing an authentic engineering task incorporating a Job Safety Analysis technique. The training module utilised an established desktop-based interactive virtual environment. The study asked:

How does an online training module designed to teach safety and risk management procedures, assist university engineering students to develop on-site safety awareness and confidence to conduct a job safety analysis?

## Engineering Students

Face Issues Acquiring Sufficient Professional Placement Accredited engineering programs conducted by universities in Australia are required to meet national and international benchmarks. Programs must contribute to learning outcomes consistent with the *Stage 1 Competency Standards* (Engineers Australia, 2017, p. 2), which include; Knowledge and Skills, Engineering Application ability, and Professional and Personal attributes. To satisfy the learning outcomes, engineering students must gain exposure to engineering practice. This is commonly achieved in 12 weeks of engineering related work in the student's discipline. The process of securing a placement has traditionally been supported by universities through career events and guidance. However, the responsibility to acquire professional placements has been largely left to the student. Obtaining and participating in placements is seen as vital to their development as professional engineers. Students have reported these placements have effectively supported them in meeting Stage 1 Competencies, and increasing their motivation towards becoming engineers (Male & King, 2014).

Engineers Australia (2019a, p.13) reports the number of Australian engineering students has almost doubled in the last decade from 58,298 to 115,231 students. The rapid increase has been largely due to the influx of students from overseas, up from a total of 29.3% of enrolments in 2007 to 42.3% in 2017.

## Engaging Students with Engineering Practice through Distance Education?

Distance education (also now known as online education) refers to teaching or learning methods generally presented through electronic media (Bing, Pratt-Phillips, Gillen, & Farin, 2011). This varies from traditional learning where students meet face-to-face with teachers. Online learning has gained popularity with the advancement in technology, offering flexibility and cost effectiveness (Perry & Pilati, 2011).

A meta-analysis conducted by Means et al. (2010) on 50 studies covering the topic of online learning from 1996 to 2008 concluded that students participating in online learning performed better on average than those taking the traditional face-to-face learning. The effectiveness of online learning was seen irrespective of the content taught and competency of the students. Undergraduate students, post-graduate students and professionals all saw similar results. Engineering students are prolific owners and users of digital technologies (Cagiltay & Ozalp-Yaman, 2013; Johri et. al, 2014) indicating they are well suited resource-wise for engaging in online learning. Although there is evidence supporting online learning, a study from the United States showed that less than one-third of faculty members believe in the value of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p.12), suggesting there are challenges in the adoption of online learning.

The widespread adoption of online education provides an additional way for engineering educators to provide engineering students with the opportunity to learn skills which are important for engineering practice in a manner which is widely accessible, through specially-designed online modules. For example, students may learn authentic safety procedures or methods for identifying hazards which are used in engineering practice, by completing appropriate online modules.

## Safety Education in Engineering Curricula

Safety is a fundamental aspect of the engineering practice and has been identified as essential for graduate engineers to understand and possess skills in. This is reflected in the fact that safety aligns with Engineers Australia's Stage 1 Competencies and is essential to abiding by the Code of Ethics (Engineers Australia, n.d., p.3) and complying with industry codes. However, Hill (2016) states that there is a lack of safety education in engineering, leading to graduates that do not have adequate safety knowledge.

Typically, students in engineering education are only exposed to hazardous environments when conducting work in laboratories or in workshops. To conform to rules and regulations, most students are given an informal induction as the inherent risks are generally low. A study by Altabbakh, Alkazimi, Murray, and Grantham (2015) measured the attitude to safety culture in university design teams. Less than half of the students admitted to having formal laboratory training and could correctly answer general workshop safety questions. Engineering graduates need to be more aware of the consequences of neglecting safety to avoid a catastrophic mistake in their careers (Saleh & Pendley, 2011).

In the study reported in this paper, the lack of safety education in engineering education was addressed through an online safety module focused on teaching students how to conduct a Job Safety Analysis.

## Methodology

### Setting

The setting for the study was a research-intensive university in Australia. The study was not a part of the coursework for any specific engineering unit.

### Participants

The module was open to all currently enrolled engineering students at University A. Invitations to complete the module were circulated through online noticeboards and university emails to enrolled engineering students. Students who expressed interest were given access to the desktop-based virtual learning environment software, and instructions for completing the module. A total of 31 students expressed interest in completing the module of which fifteen of currently enrolled engineering students completed the online safety module.

**Table 1: Participant demographic information ( $N = 15$ )**

Gender		Degree-Level		Type of Enrolment	
Male	Female	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Domestic	Overseas
9	6	3	12	9	6

Participants were offered one hour towards their practicum for their engineering program and a \$20 AUD gift voucher for their participation. The study was approved by the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Virtual Reality Learning Environment

The software application used in this study was the desktop-based virtual learning environment developed by Norton et al. (2008). The application provides the user with a virtual environment of the (now closed) BP Refinery on Bulwer Island, in Queensland, Australia. The learning environment is interactive and allows a user to freely move between approximately twenty physical locations ('nodes') within the refinery. At each of the nodes, the application uses a collection of high resolution 360-degree images to allow the user to look around. This allows the user to be able to see the same as what a person who was located at the actual physical site would be able to see. The environment allows users to explore the processing plant and learn about various plant equipment. The BP Refinery VR can be run on any computer with Flash Player installed.

The software application has previously been used as an aid for teaching engineering students about aspects of engineering practice. For example, Maynard et al. (2012) used the learning environment in two undergraduate chemical engineering units to allow students to gain knowledge of industrial processing plants, maintenance procedures, and hazard identification procedures (among other reasons). Most students reported that using the learning environment increased their learning in comparison to paper-based case studies.

### Description of Online Job Safety Analysis Module

The module was designed to be able to be completed by engineering students outside of class. Although educators may choose to adopt the module into a course, the purpose was to create a flexible module which could also be completed in a stand-alone manner. The module takes approximately ninety minutes to complete.

Using the desktop-based virtual learning environment developed by Norton et al. (2008), an authentic engineering scenario was established. A past study by Maynard et al. (2012) successfully used the environment as a learning vehicle for Hazard Operability Studies (HAZOPs). However, the HAZOP is a technique predominantly used in chemical engineering. To create a module which was multi-disciplinary and could be used by engineering students from a large range of disciplines, the discipline-independent Job Safety Analysis (JSA) procedure was chosen as the focus of the module.

In the module, participants take on the role of a graduate engineer at a risk consulting company. The task involved completing a JSA for the replacement of a motor shaft guarding for a Kerosene pump (804J) within the BP Refinery. Relevant information that is commonplace for similar jobs on worksites was presented. Participants

were introduced to the importance of the JSA, and that it formed part of the Permit-To-Work system for the BP Refinery. Instructions to guide students through the process of using the software application and conducting the JSA were also created. The instructions were 5 pages in length and included screenshots of the application.

## Procedure

Students who had elected to participate in the study were sent an email with a link to a location to download the Virtual Reality (VR) learning tool, a participation consent form, and the instructions for completing the module. Participants were informed that the module would take approximately 90 minutes to complete, although no time limit was set. Participants completed the module in their own time over a two-week period when data was collected during the first half of 2019.

Participants first completed a demographic questionnaire, and the pre-module questionnaire (Table 1). The demographic questionnaire, pre-module questionnaire and post-module questionnaires were all hosted using Google Forms. This allowed students to easily participate in the study without needing to engage with the researchers in a face-to-face manner at any stage. To evaluate the effectiveness of the modules at increasing students' ability to complete a JSA, a pre- and post-test quantitative approach was adopted, in addition to qualitative responses. Students completed questions 1-3 of the pre-module questionnaire again during the post-module questionnaire.

**Table 2: Pre-module questionnaire**

No.	Question	Question Response Method
1	How familiar are you with the Job Safety Analysis procedure (or similar)?	1 = <i>Have not used before</i> , 5 = <i>Used multiple times</i>
2	How confident are you with using the Risk Matrix?	1 = <i>Not confident</i> , 5 = <i>Very confident</i>
3	How confident do you feel in completing the Job Safety Analysis for your task?	1 = <i>Not confident</i> , 5 = <i>Very confident</i>
4	Have you had any experience working on-site?	Written response

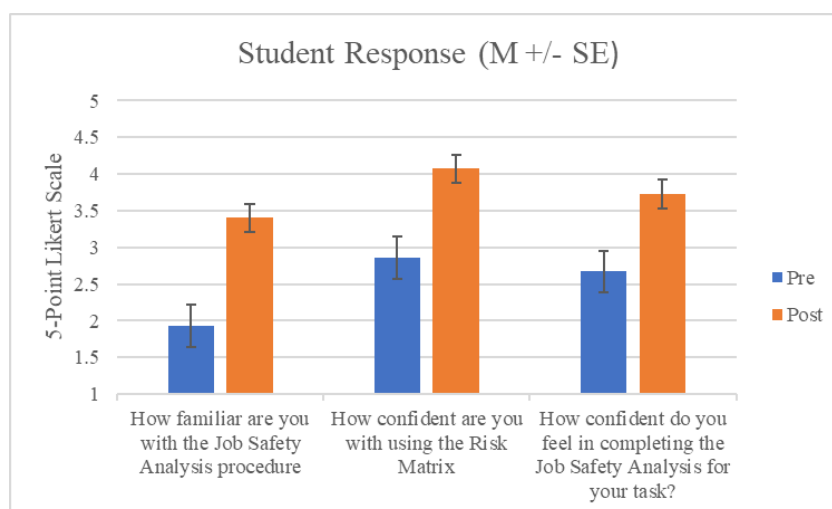
Following this, participants completed an incomplete JSA risk matrix by identifying hazards and mitigation measures. The BP Refinery VR learning environment was introduced to participants and they were provided with the instructions which informed them how to reach the location of work (i.e. which node location they needed to access in the software application). Participants were provided with an example which was designed to guide and inform them on the completion of a JSA. The instructions also included thought-provoking questions related to working on-site to stimulate hazard identification and mitigation measures. Participants were encouraged to navigate the VR model to identify risks.

After completing the JSA, participants used their completed JSA to answer the post-module questionnaire. Participants were asked questions 1 -3 from the pre-module questionnaire again to evaluate the impact of the module.

**Table 3: Post-module questionnaire**

No.	Question	Response Method
1	How familiar are you with the Job Safety Analysis procedure (or similar)?	1 = <i>Have not used before</i> , 5 = <i>Used multiple times</i>
2	How confident are you with using the Risk Matrix?	1 = <i>Not confident</i> , 5 = <i>Very confident</i>
3	How confident do you feel in completing the Job Safety Analysis for your task?	1 = <i>Not confident</i> , 5 = <i>Very confident</i>
4	Did you identify any risks that were unexpected?	Written response
5	What do you feel is the most important thing to consider when working on site? Why?	Written response
6	What was your most significant learning regarding safety on-site?	Written response

## Results



**Figure 1: Student responses to questions about technical application**

1. How familiar are you with the Job Safety Analysis procedure (or similar)? (1 = *Have not used before*, 5 = *Used multiple times*)
2. How confident are you with using the Risk Matrix? (1 = *Not confident*, 5 = *Very confident*)
3. How confident do you feel in completing the Job Safety Analysis for your task? (1 = *Not confident*, 5 = *Very confident*)

Analysis showed that participants gained more familiarity with the JSA technique, were more confident in using the risk matrix, and were more confident in completing a JSA after completing the module. The mean response increased substantially for each respective Likert-scale question (Figure 2) with a small standard error. A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank two-tailed hypothesis test was conducted on all three Likert-scale questions with  $\alpha = 0.05$ , to evaluate whether there was a statistically significant difference between pre-module and post-module results.

**Table 4: Test of statistical significance and effect size between pre- and post-module Likert scale questions**

Question	p-value	Z value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
1.	0.002	-3.0594	1.60
2.	0.003	-2.9341	1.49
3.	0.006	-2.7118	1.42

**Table 5: Common themes for short answer responses**

Question	Common Theme	Quotes
Did you identify any issues that were unexpected?	The module contextualised hazard identification on-site. Hazards such as spills and leaks that would not be evident in paper-based studies.	“Trip hazards in the form of puddles and wiring” “Foreign objects may fall into motor assembly”
What do you feel is the most important thing to consider when working on site? Why?	Safety was identified as the most important aspect of site work. Safety of employees is essential to ongoing process production.	“Safety. There are so many hazards that are present on site, and they all pose a risk to us and people around us. Hence why safety and considering all the hazards are vital.”
What was your most significant learning regarding safety on-site?	Site work is inherently dangerous, insignificant hazards such as tools pose as life threatening risks.	“Site work has many hazards that could possibly be life threatening. However extensive use of tools and techniques such as the JSA and risk matrix should

Question	Common Theme	Quotes
	It is up to the employees to utilise safety procedures to identify and mitigate risks.  Technology could possibly aid in hazard identification	be used to allow for safe work for years to come.”

As shown in Table 4, all  $p$ -values were less than  $\alpha$  meaning the null hypothesis was rejected and the difference between mean values for each of the three questions were statistically significantly different. The magnitude of the significant difference was quantified by analysing the effect size. Cohen's  $d$  was used to analyse the effect size between data (Cohen, 1977). The value of Cohen's  $d$  indicates that for all questions the effect size was considered very large ( $> 0.80$ ), suggesting that the module had a considerable effect on the learning of students.

Table 5 highlights common themes present amongst responses to the post-modules written questions. Students articulated a range of themes highlighting the importance of safety on-site.

## Discussion

### Efficacy of the module

Analysis of the results from Figure 1 and Table 4 demonstrated that there was an improvement in student knowledge of the JSA technique and risk matrix usage as a result of completing the module. After completing the module, participants reported that they were more confident with using the risk matrix (a mean increase from 2.86 to 4.07) and completing the JSA technique (a mean increase from 2.67 to 3.73). Moreover, the difference between pre- and post-module responses were statistically significant with large effect-sizes, suggesting that the online module was effective for allowing students to learn the JSA procedure. As expected, students' familiarity with the JSA also increased as a result of completing the online module. The fact that the mean familiarity response increased from 1.93 to (only) 3.4 may reflect that students perceive that they require additional opportunities to apply the JSA technique to internalise the technique and become more proficient at applying it.

In addition, analysis of the qualitative feedback showed that all participants reported an improvement in awareness of on-site work. Participants stressed the importance of the safety of employees conducting work on-site, commenting that “ensuring safety as a top priority is important for employee wellbeing. Reducing the risk of injury can increase productivity on site and the overall quality of work” while another participant identified that there was a “degree of influence people have to safety on site and people being a safety risk themselves”. Students also articulated the importance of using risk assessment techniques to identify and manage risks.

Reflecting upon the research question, the outcomes demonstrate that the module allowed students to enhance their awareness of on-site safety, and to gain confidence using the JSA technique. The positive increase in proficiency aligns with elements of Engineers Australia Stage 1 competencies; in order to complete the JSA, participants must be able to identify and manage technical, health, environmental, safety and contextual risks as well as addressing constraints, such as human factors. Overall, the findings suggest that online modules may be an effective alternative method to in-class instruction for teaching engineering students about safety education.

### Using technology to teach safety in educational settings

Several previously conducted meta-analyses have demonstrated that computer simulations and virtual reality technology can have tangible benefits on learning outcomes over traditional classroom instructional approaches (Merchant, Goetz, Cifuentes, Keeney-Kennicutt, & Davis, 2014; Smetana & Bell, 2012; Vogel et al., 2006). In a manner which reflects these outcomes, interactive learning environments can be invaluable as a pedagogical tool for teaching safety-related concepts.

The results of the study contribute to the existing literature which suggests that engineering students can gain valuable exposure to aspects of engineering practice, such as safety, through use of learning environments which allow students to experience and use virtual work sites. For example, Maynard et al. (2012) utilised the same desktop-based VR learning environment (as used in this study) in a 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate engineering unit for teaching hazard identification. Maynard et al. (2012) concluded that the majority of students were able to identify more hazards when using the VR learning environment compared to a paper-based approach, and that the learning environment was useful in enhancing their knowledge of industrial plants. Several participants of this study also recognised that VR can provide a powerful way to conduct risk and hazard identification, stating

“viewing a model of the location can expose overlooked hazards”. The outcomes of this study add further evidence that the selected interactive learning environment is an effective pedagogical tool for engineering educators.

Another study which used VR technology to teach engineering students about a safety hazard identification tool, CHAIR (Construction Hazard Assessment Implication Review), reported that use of VR technology had enabled students to use the tool more effectively compared to being provided with still images of the worksite location (Male et al., 2018). Although the studies were similar in nature there are a few key differences, notably the study used Head-Mounted Display (HMD) VR technology instead of desktop-based VR technology. There are key differences between HMD VR technology and desktop-VR technology. For example, one study found that while HMD VR technology has been found to be more intuitive by users, users actually performed more effectively using the desktop version (Santos et al., 2009). Building upon this, a systematic review by Jensen and Konradsen (2018) concluded HMD produced no significant advantages in learning when compared to technology with less presence (such as desktop-based VR). In some cases, it proved disadvantageous due to technological challenges and cybersickness. This idea is further reinforced in a recent study which concluded that increased immersion increased users’ presence, but also overloaded and distracted the learners, leading to less opportunities to learn (Makransky, Terkildsen, & Mayer, 2019).

Moreover, not all studies show that use of immersive technology is useful. Leder, Horlitz, Puschmann, Wittstock, and Schütz (2019) compared immersive VR and PowerPoint as methods to deliver safety training. They concluded that the learning achieved through using the PowerPoint method was similar to the immersive VR, suggesting that the improvements in learning from using the VR were not sufficient to justify the costs. However, a key benefit of virtual reality and interactive learning environments is that they can provide users with the opportunity to experience situations or worksites where they may otherwise be unable to do so (Freina & Ott, 2015; Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016). In the context of teaching safety to tertiary students, this is highly important as experiencing the respective worksite may be imperative to understanding key aspects of safety.

These outcomes are important for educators because they suggest that investing resources in HMD VR technology may not always be appropriate or effective, and that desktop-based interactive learning environments which are more readily accessible to a larger number of students (such as that utilised in this study), may be a more effective approach. In order to provide students with the opportunity to participate in learning activities which can enhance their engagement with practice, educators may therefore wish to spend more effort focusing on desktop-based learning environments unless there are clear, tangible, and specific benefits to using other technologies such as HMD VR or Augmented Reality.

### **Considerations for teaching safety through online education**

There are important challenges when considering the use of online modules, especially if the modules are not integrated into curriculum. While students that participate in online learning generally achieve better results than students in traditional courses (Means et al., 2010), students must learn independently and be more self-motivated to learn the material. The increased flexibility in student learning also has its downsides; higher rates of attrition have been experienced for students in online education (M. Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007), suggesting that students may be less likely to complete the module than if it is delivered in-class.

As there was no time limit in completing the module (as would be expected for an in-class situation), participants could set their own pace for completing the module. This is especially relevant for overseas students who are more likely to speak English as a second language and possibly have difficulty with English, allowing more time to understand the content.

### **Practical Implications**

The results suggest that an authentic online learning module can significantly improve student knowledge on the application and appreciation of on-site safety tools. Specifically, the usage of the JSA technique and risk matrix was significantly improved post module. Appreciation and understanding of on-site safety were also noted as a common theme amongst participants, aligning with Engineers Australia’s Stage 1 Competencies.

In addition, desktop-based VR experiences can be as (or possibly more) effective than HMD VR in terms of learning, while reducing resource cost in implementation. The flexibility of desktop VR allows educators to deliver content online, further increasing availability and accessibility. The online component provides numerous advantageous to students such as flexible delivery times and provides educators with desirable reduction in time investment in holding workshops for equipment-based VR.

Caution should be taken when implementing online delivery due to problems with attrition (Allen & Seaman, 2010). However, the benefits of online module learning outweigh the disadvantages due to its versatility, the modules can easily be implemented in credit bearing courses, or act as stand-alone module to students who are interested. As the BP Refinery learning environment used in this module has been used to teach hazard identification in this study and HAZOP in other studies with positive results, it may be robust enough to teach other engineering concepts.

### Limitations

The number of participants ( $N=15$ ) is not large enough to make wide generalisations about the effectiveness of the module. Further study will increase the sample size. Furthermore, as this study incorporated online learning, a comparison of results between online and face-to-face would be desirable. Although a similar face-to-face study has been completed, the module incorporated a different engineering technique, scenario, and visual tool to aid in student learning (authors blinded). Additionally, as the module could be completed online, participants that encountered issues only had email correspondence to troubleshoot issues. This proved difficult on numerous occasions in comparison to face-to-face contact where issues could easily be rectified.

Engineers Australia (2019a, p.13) indicates 42% of currently enrolled Australian engineering students are from overseas, the percentage of overseas students for this study is 40% showing a similar representation to engineering students overall. However the number of female students was higher than expected, Engineers Australia (2019b) quotes 12% of engineers in Australia are currently female whereas this study consists of 40% female participants. Studies have shown that females are more likely to respond to online surveys (G. Smith, 2008). The high number of postgraduate students in proportion to undergraduate students may have contributed to the positive results. Engineers Australia (2019a, p.13) reports 16.5% of currently enrolled engineering students are in their postgraduate degree whereas the current study, 80% of participants are postgraduates.

### Future Work

The flexible nature of online modules allows educators to embed additional on-site safety concepts (such as the Take 5 and Permit-To-Work systems) into curricula in a way that could greatly benefit graduating students. Recruiting industry professionals to reflect with student participants on completion of the JSA would also provide further opportunities to understand the application of JSA in engineering practice. This could be conducted via online communication boards allowing flexible responses from both students and industry professionals.

Analysis of the presence which students experience may be evaluated as there is little emphasis on the benefits of changing presence in the desktop based VR, as even a previous study with PowerPoint VR proved just as effective as equipment-based VR (Leder et al., 2019). As the sample size was limited, incorporating the module into engineering curriculum for testing would allow for a larger sample size of students to validate the effectiveness of the module. Further testing for undergraduate students should be explored as the current study featured a small sample size of undergraduates. Future research may also evaluate the level of students' proficiency in completing a job safety analysis after completing the module, to provide a more accurate representation of the level of learning which was achieved.

### Conclusion

This study presented an online training module developed to address the gap in safety education in engineering curriculum, and to increase students' opportunities for exposure to engineering practice. The module was piloted by engineering students at University A to evaluate the effectiveness of the module at teaching the Job Safety Analysis risk management procedure. Results suggest the usage of a desktop-based virtual reality learning environment of an authentic engineering worksite greatly improved understanding and application of the job safety analysis technique, and enhanced awareness of safety concepts on industrial sites. Online accessibility provides students and educators with the possibly of increased flexibility for completing the safety module. Educators may benefit from the findings as the findings inform design concepts that may be easier to implement for virtual reality education purposes. Learning environments with desktop-based virtual reality can significantly contribute to student learning and may be as effective as HMD VR. Furthermore, online education can easily be implemented, allowing for versatile usage within credit bearing courses or as stand-alone modules, bringing along positive increases in learning for students.



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