



President's Message

By Blair Howes



Hello Faculty,

Well, the calm Fall certainly turned into full blown Winter this year, and I am thankful that the forecast is showing for some warmer weather over the holiday season.

First and foremost, I am pleased to announce Craig Coolahan, the SAFA LRO, has completed his first full year in the role. Craig started in April 2023 in his role with SAFA. We haven't scared him off yet, so that speaks volumes to his quick adjustment in labour relations in the post-secondary world. It is a different world from normal labour relations in the private or semi-private sectors.

Over the year, I have thoroughly enjoyed my daily conversations with Craig and the occasional debates with him over the nuances of our Collective Agreement. As I reflect on the year, we seemed to have found a real synergy to get the daily business of labour relations at SAFA completed in a timely manner, and to that end we have usually turned no win scenarios with management into dealings that have benefitted everyone involved.

Thank you, Craig, for your commitment to both SAFA and me over the past year.

– Blair

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Editorial Board

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1. The Editorial Board has the final say as to what is included or deleted from the newsletter.
2. Editorial Board decisions about newsletter material must be agreed to by consensus.
3. The newsletter will include a disclaimer stating that the views expressed in its content do not necessarily represent the views of the Editorial Board or SAFA.
4. All material included in the newsletter must
 - be signed by the author when submitted to the editors, but anonymity may be requested and granted for printing.
 - be based on "reasoned argument" if personal criticism is used.
 - not involve name-calling.
 - not include sexist, racist, or homophobic comments.
 - be related to SAIT, although this will be interpreted broadly.

The views expressed in SAFAGRAM do not necessarily represent the views of the Editorial Board or SAFA.

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Now on with the rest of the updates:

July and August were full of interesting things for me as I wrapped up my secondary role as President of ACIFA and now the Past President. I have kept an ever-watchful eye on the affairs of SAIT and SAFA as the employer was a little light on having qualified people on their side of the labour relations house but have seemed to work out those issues with some new hiring and advancements to their portfolio.

As I have stated at the end of the pandemic previously, this seems to ring ever truer today.

Where to start this message as we come out of the GOA restrictions and try our very best to return to what the perception of normal is, and like many people, normal will never be the same as it was pre-pandemic.

This reminds me of the pivotal shift we all managed at the start of the pandemic. This transformation is now ever shifting to match what student needs are and leaving Faculty with far more duties than what are included in the Collective Agreement. I believe this will be the new normal unless SAFA remains ever diligent over the issues.

The President's Council of ACIFA actively meet monthly with the 13 other colleges. All of these institutions are presently in collective bargaining.

As for our new Advanced Education Minister of the Province, she still remains laser focused on the university sector in Alberta and shows me that she doesn't understand her portfolio or simply doesn't care about the colleges and poly-techs in Alberta. SAFA must remain steadfast in our attempts to meet with the Minister in order to get clarity on her decision-making power for post-secondary education in Alberta.

As we round the corner of 2024 and brace for 2025, I want to remind everyone of the need for all SAFA members to send an alternate e-mail address to Kathie in the SAFA Office in case of a communication breakdown between SAFA and SAIT. Also, visit the SAFA website often in the new year for regular updates.

Below is a repeat of a reminder from a previous SAFAGRAM:

*That brings me to a very important update for all Faculty members concerning mutual agreement. As we all know, SAIT in the last academic year and with a large influx of foreign students scheduled classes for Faculty outside of the four corners of our Collective Agreement **without gaining the proper mutual agreement** with those affected members. That was a serious breach of the Agreement. Please ensure your Academic Chair is not proposing a blanket mutual agreement to cover off the entire academic year but is in fact gaining your agreement for each and every exception of the Collective Agreement. Please reach out to the SAFA office to set up a meeting to discuss if you think this is happening. (I have no issues with being a bull dog to your chair and will quickly correct these issues.)*

Again . . . I will list the descriptors (supplied by Employee Services) of the new form below and add my comment in bold. Please note that the part on the form that provides a fence of protection for you the Faculty members (comments section) has completely disappeared from the form.

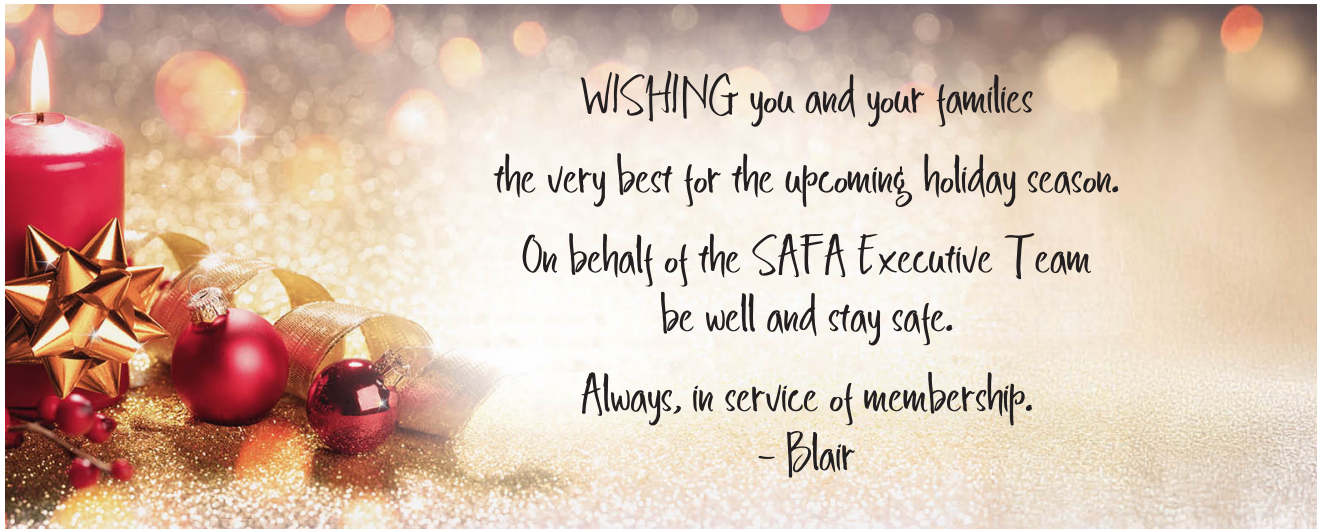
The descriptors from SAIT Management are:

- a. **Instructor conflict** – SAIT has courses where there is only one instructor who can teach the class—there may be a time when this causes a course to be scheduled outside of Section 36.
- b. **Resource constraint** – In some courses the room is the constraint—it could be a specialized lab etc.
- c. **Student scheduling conflict** – this is mostly in LAS, the core courses are sometimes difficult to schedule.
- d. **Program requirement** – **this should be a discussion at JAC—I am working with the associate deans to communicate what program requirements are in advance of using this as a reason.**
Still No reasonable explanation has been made to SAFA on what program requirements are.
- e. **Scheduled overload.**
- f. **Instructor request** – this is to capture when the requests has come from the instructors themselves.

My message again this year still rings true. I cannot stress enough that maintaining your conversation and social contact with your colleagues is very important these days and through the holiday season. Although some “shop talk” is required, I would also encourage other conversations of mutual interest other than work.

I remain dedicated to Faculty and remind everyone that I continue to meet with the other Faculty Association Presidents throughout ACIFA and CAFA (universities) to ensure we have current and up-to-date information as to what is happening at the other institutions. Notwithstanding but ever present a potential change to LAPP.

In closing, I would like to wish everyone a very safe work from home and work from campus experience in 2025.



WISHING you and your families
the very best for the upcoming holiday season.

On behalf of the SAFA Executive Team
be well and stay safe.

Always, in service of membership.
- Blair

Labour Relations Officer Report



By Craig Coolahan (LRO)

Hello SAFA members,

This was my first full calendar year as your Labour Relations Officer, and it continues to be a busy, dynamic work environment.

SAIT made a couple of changes that have had an impact on when and how our members work. They continue to add more courses to the summer semester and introduced a Fall semester break. These two changes have meant that some members are working through the summer (which is generally their choice), and as a result of the new break are having exams on weekends in the Fall semester.

Although there were more courses this summer, it was less busy at the SAFA office than in the previous year. I attribute this to both sides having worked out some interpretational issues in the Collective Agreement.

Several grievances were filed this year. Some were resolved and a few others may be heard in front of an Arbitrator in the near future. We will keep you posted.

SAIT hired a new Director of Labour Relations who started this summer. With the exclusion of a few months, this position has been vacant my entire time at SAFA. By not having this position filled, it was problematic for SAFA. We need to have experienced people who have worked with unions and understand the art of negotiation, not only at the bargaining table, but also with grievances. We are very pleased with the new hire, and we look forward to building a good relationship.

This year the Government of Alberta has made two announcements that are concerning for SAFA members. The first was the dismantling of the AIMCo (Alberta Investment Management Co.) Board. AIMCo is responsible for investing the LAPP—Your Pension! The Chair was replaced by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and following dissolution, some board members were hired back.

This is not the GOA's or AIMCo's money to backstop oil and gas companies, grow the Heritage Saving Trust Fund, or create an Alberta Pension Plan. This is your retirement money. ACIFA (Alberta Colleges and Institutes Faculties Association), of which SAFA is a member, was one of several signatories to a demand that post-secondaries are awarded board positions on AIMCo. We will continue to monitor the situation.

The other was an announcement from the Minister of Advanced Education that she is commissioning a study of post-secondary financing in the wake of declining international students that will begin to have an impact on all post-secondaries as early as next year. We must await the conclusion and recommendations of this study. Best case scenario is an increase in Provincial funding; worst case is the opposite. The latter could lower the GOA's offer at the bargaining table.

Well, there's a lot happening, we are always here to help all SAFA members with anything of concern.

Wishing you a wonderful holiday season and a Happy New Year!

Using Two-Dimensional (2D) Virtual Reality (VR) Simulations to Improve Persuasive Communication Skills among Accounting Students

By Steve Janz, *Instructor, Business*

Imagine your students are able to communicate their ideas with no filler words such as umm or ahh, listen well, ask and answer questions professionally, and ultimately convince their clients to trust and believe in them.

Since 2021, I have been training (with Mursion) SAIT accounting students to improve their communication and reasoning skills. Why do I do this? In the 2019 Workplace Learning Report from LinkedIn Learning, employers reported creativity, persuasion, and analytical reasoning as the first-, second- and third-most in-demand soft skills for companies to cultivate in their employees. In addition, artificial intelligence (AI) has changed the way accounting is performed. Companies, such as Xero, have made the accounting process extremely efficient, thereby providing opportunities for accountants to provide additional value added services to their clients. To obtain these additional revenue generating services, accountants will have to be skilled and confident communicators.

In two of my courses (a second-year computer accounting software course and a fourth-year advanced information systems course) I implement a three-part 2D VR simulation training process:

Part A: Pre-Simulation Training

During the three-hour pre-simulation training workshop, students:

- are provided with specific details of the simulation and shown a visual demonstration of a Mursion conversation between a participant and an avatar.
- participate in in-person role-playing learning exercises that focus on reducing filler words, implementing “the pause”, and integrating the six principles of persuasion.
- answer persuasion strategy questions related to the context of the scenario.
- begin working on a detailed two-page summary (for marks) of their simulation preparation notes.

Due to the high cost of this training, I want to make sure students take the learning process seriously.

Simulation Context

I designed the simulation experience based on a real-life challenge within the accounting industry: persuading a current client to consider switching from their existing accounting software system, which they have used for years and are comfortable with, to an accounting software system recommended by the student called Xero.

Part B: The Simulation

The simulation is designed as a four-person group simulation. Two students, the instructor, and the host/client (represented as avatars) are involved in the simulations. The aim of the group simulation design is to provide each student an opportunity to

- participate in facilitating discussions with the host avatar after each simulation attempt,
- receive encouragement and ideas from their peer during the simulation,
- engage in vicarious learning by observing their peer’s two simulation attempts,
- provide encouraging feedback and ideas to their peer during the simulation, and
- have the instructor provide support, encouragement, and coaching throughout the simulation to both students.

Each student has two opportunities, subject to a time constraint of 10 minutes per attempt, to influence the client avatar to consider the student’s idea.

Part C: Post-Simulation Reflection

During the post-simulation reflection workshop, students watch their recorded simulation attempts and complete

a reflection assessment (for marks) of their efforts. This workshop is intended to provide students with a reflective opportunity to identify areas they can improve, and gain confidence in their performance efforts.

Perspectives of the Training Process

I conducted three surveys (pre-simulation, post-simulation and 3 to 12 months post-simulation) of my students. A sample of key discoveries, analysis and recommendations are below:

The Student

Communication Apprehension - Using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension survey (PRCA-24), 32% of the students (20/63) indicated a high level of communication apprehension. The responses showed that 16 of the 20 high level communication apprehension students reported English as a second language and 19 out of the 20 were computer accounting software course students.

Analysis: Students taking the computer accounting software course generally aspire to become bookkeepers and accounting clerks (not CPAs), and some of these students may perceive this career pathway as one that does not require strong communication skills. Unfortunately for these students, artificial intelligence is reducing the need for bookkeepers and accounting clerks and to be successful in accounting, graduates require enhanced skills in other areas, such as communication.

Impact of COVID-19 on the student's overall level of confidence - The survey showed that 38% of the students (23/61) reported a decreased level of confidence. A sample response is: "COVID-19 has had a very negative impact on me, personally. The reason why is because English is not my first language and even though I can speak it very well, my communication skills and self-confidence have not improved very much since we stopped having face-to-face interactions with other students."

Recommendation: Knowing this, as educators we need to create or re-introduce activities that provide students with multiple opportunities to build their confidence and communication skills in safe and supportive environments.

The Simulation Experience

Interest – In the pre-simulation survey, 84% of the students (53/63) reported a positive perception (exciting and interesting) of this training opportunity.

Representational Fidelity – The high ratings for the representation fidelity questions indicated that most students felt their experience was real, safe, allowed for genuine feelings and beliefs during the simulation, and the virtual reality learning environment was engaging.

Avatar vs Human – The researcher found it interesting that the avatar vs human role-playing preference question received a relatively low rating.

Analysis: This result suggests that some students (typically a student with no gaming experience) struggled making the transition of communicating with an avatar and were uncomfortable during the initial stages of the simulation journey (attempt #1) or even throughout the entire simulation journey (attempts #1 & #2).

Recommendation: I recommend setting up a brief "break the ice" communication opportunity with the avatar before the simulation session to help students feel more comfortable in the VR environment.

Motivation Levels – Many students were not pleased with their first simulation attempt (low rating), whereas most students were pleased with their second attempt (much higher rating).

Analysis: A key design feature of the training experience is participating in the simulation twice. This provides each student time to adjust to this new virtual environment, participate in a reflective facilitation and coaching session, and observe a peer perform their simulation attempt(s). As one student said, "On the second attempt, I said the story that I didn't include on the first attempt and connected it to the call to action. Now, I was able to elicit Gabrielle's interest. I did a better performance in my second attempt."

Cognitive Load – The results imply that cognitive overload is not occurring and is at an acceptable level for many of the students as the extraneous rating is low, the intrinsic rating level is medium, and the germane rating is moderately high.

Analysis: This is very important as high immersion virtual reality training sometimes suffers from cognitive load issues as participants are overwhelmed with the learning environment and learning may not be occurring.

Vicarious Learning – Student responses indicated that vicarious learning occurred. A sample response is: "I think

one key insight that I observed from my peer was how he was able to use the avatars response to a question as a way to transition to another topic. I adopted this into my approach for when I interacted with the avatar, and I felt it was quite useful.”

Communication Skills – Student responses indicated that asking questions in a conversation, eliminating filler words, and implementing “the pause” were the most improved communication skills.

Persuasion Skills – Student responses indicated that the call to action was the most improved persuasion skill.

Analysis: Students knew they must have a call to action based on the training materials, but very few were able to successfully complete this during their first attempt. Due to this failure, a substantial portion of the feedback process after attempt #1 focused on how to deliver the call to action properly. Many students, in their second attempt, focused solely on improving or implementing their call to action.

Transfer of Knowledge to the Workforce or Education Environment

These responses indicated a transfer of learning occurred for a small number of students. A sample response is: “I have had the opportunity to convince others to embrace my ideas at work, and this experience has helped me improve my persuasive skills. Whenever I present my ideas, I always provide strong evidence to support them. I make sure to explain my thoughts clearly and in a way that is easy to follow.”

Key Consideration

While the simulation sessions are designed to be safe, it is critical the course instructor is present to provide extra support and guidance when needed. During the sessions, I observed six students having a negative experience. Most of the time, as their trusted instructor, I was able to “calm the waters” and create a positive experience for them.

Conclusion

Implementing a 2D VR training process is challenging, time consuming, and expensive. However, the benefits of students improving their communication skills and increasing their self-efficacy outweighs this additional effort and cost.

Acknowledgements

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For further information (including a copy of the full research report), contact the author at SAIT, 1301-16 Avenue NW, Calgary, AB, T2M 0L4, Canada. Email: steve.janz@sait.ca

Funny winter quotes

1. “In winter, I plot and plan. In spring, I move.” -Henry Rollins
2. “Winter is not a season, it’s an occupation.” -Sinclair Lewis
3. “And some places you been before are so great that you don’t ever mind going back. Some places you been before you don’t ever want to go back, you know, like Montreal in the Winter.” -Morgan Freeman
4. “Winter is nature’s way of saying, ‘Up yours.’” -Robert Byrne
5. “Never take a job where winter winds can blow up your pants.” -Geraldo Rivera
6. “It was so cold I almost got married.” -Shelley Winters
7. “As winter approaches – bringing cold weather and family drama – we crave page-turners, books made for long nights and tryptophan-induced sloth.” -Sarah MacLean
8. “Nothing burns like the cold.” -George R. R. Martin
9. “Even in winter an isolated patch of snow has a special quality.” -Andy Goldsworthy
10. “The problem with winter sports is that – follow me closely here – they generally take place in winter.” -Dave Barry



I would like to recognize Blake Kanewischer for his many accomplishments since becoming Academic Chair in Academic Services. He has been supportive of any new and challenging initiatives that I have brought forward personally. He has been extremely open when meeting with the entire Faculty about our current state within the SAIT community, how he hopes to change that, what implications that will have, and how we can benefit from the changes. He always has an open-door policy for comments, questions, and intrusions; and he communicates clearly, quickly, and concisely about anything that might be, or could potentially be, a concern for him or the school generally.

Blake is an incredible advocate for staff, and a supportive colleague and boss. He deserves to receive worthwhile appreciation for all that he has done.

David Carlgren



Kerry Kijewski has been a wealth of support, guidance, and information as I have sought assistance teaching STCS 255 and previously DYNA 265 for the first time. He has offered materials and suggestions, support for problems, and guidance from his own learned best practices with these courses. He is always open to questions and responds quickly and with complete answers to everything. He was also willing to step in and help me cover a class when my daughter was having surgery. I cannot thank him enough for the sense of relief and support that I felt being able to be with my daughter when she needed me.

Kerry is an outstanding human being with a big heart centered on doing the right things for his colleagues and I appreciate him very much.

David Carlgren



Recognition of Judy Lang's Mentorship

I would like to recognize Judy Lang for her exceptional mentorship during my first semester as a SAIT Instructor. Her clear explanations of course details, thorough training on Brightspace, and constant availability whenever I needed guidance have been invaluable.

Judy's support has made my transition into teaching smooth and rewarding, and I am deeply grateful for her guidance. She is an outstanding mentor, and her dedication has left a lasting impact on me. Thank you Judy.

Milana Polskikh



Season's Greetings

from the SAFA Editorial Board

