CONTROVERSIES IN TSE

By JC Fawcett (Owner Defensive Driving School & President PDSA)

ISSUE: Driving Simulators for Automotive Safety

I felt that this topic would be an easy one to research as I believed there would be loads of information about simulators on the web. I was hoping to find information comparing students who had used a simulator early on in their basic driver training vs. those who only had behind-the-wheel practice. I learned a great deal of useful information but not the specific information I was seeking. It was easy to find sales pitches from companies wanting to sell their driving simulation products, but hard to find independent research that has any type of study on driving simulation for new drivers.

Driving simulators have evolved from flight simulators for aviation training. The simplest driving simulators resemble video games. However, an advanced driving simulator actually uses a real car, like a Ford Taurus or Chevy Malibu. Another advanced simulator is a dome hexipod that moves laterally and longitudinally on a 64 foot by 64 foot electric rail. Some of these very detailed simulators are excellent for giving drivers experience in dangerous driving situations. They can also give researchers the opportunity to study drivers in a safe and controlled environment where they can evaluate impaired drivers, distracted drivers, etc.

While I'm aware that a number of high schools used simulators many years ago which consisted of watching a film strip while a computer measured a driver's ability to time the turn signal and move the steering wheel, the film wouldn't change if you were to turn the wrong way. Schools have gotten away from the use of simulators. I believe this is because it is cost prohibitive to keep up with the latest technology and spend the time needed with students in a simulator. Most facilities that offer simulator training for new drivers require direct supervision by an instructor (as opposed to just letting a student get into a simulator booth and being left on their own.

In Washington State, a traffic safety program can substitute 1 hour of driving for 4 hours of simulation. A few years back, the Department of Licensing allowed commercial schools to use a software program put out by AAA to meet the simulation requirement. This was done at the time the BTW hours were increase from 4 to 6. At the DOL 2011 Fall Conference, a wonderful demonstration was given on how to utilize the AAA Driver ZED program. I feel it is a useful tool to make students think about various situations and how to respond to more complex driving scenarios.

This topic has been one of controversy as there are those who feel that going through these driving scenarios is not actual simulation and therefore should not be used to replace a student's behind-the-wheel time with an instructor. The argument from those favoring to keep the status quo feels that these scenarios give students the opportunity to experience many more tricky and dangerous encounters with

this software. I agree with both arguments. I believe that the software should be used in the classroom and that it will enhance any classroom curriculum. On the other hand I do not feel that removing a driving lesson is in the best interest of the student.

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Ahmad, Omar. Senior Team Leader at the National Advanced Driving Simulator. Personal Correspondence.
Center for Intelligent Systems Research. "Driving Simulator Laboratory." George Washington University.
University of Iowa. National Advanced Driving Simulator. http://www.nads-sc.uiowa.edu