



A Two-School LINKS Competition

You joined together to put on a competition between your cross-town rival schools using the LINKS Supply Chain Management Fundamentals Simulation. Tell us about your school, the class, and the group that took part.



Chad Autry
Oklahoma City University



Tony Roath
University of Oklahoma

Chad: We are quite a bit different than OU – we are a small liberal arts-oriented institution that has a more “metropolitan” school of business...small classes and close ties with the business community of downtown Oklahoma City, which is only 2 miles away. There were fewer total students in my two sections (Undergraduate SCM and Graduate Supply Chain Analysis) than Tony had in his single MBA session. Our students are very diverse – we had 14 different nations represented on our eight teams, and they are a mix of working professionals and full-time students at both levels.

Tony: The University of Oklahoma is a public school and we are trying to develop and build the MBA program. The course that I have is a supply chain management core course that everyone has to take. There are about 67 people for any class. They are made up of all majors and a range from 2-3 years out to a lot of experience for different industries. My class was all part-time students and had at least 5 years work experience. They jumped on LINKS pretty good after the initial ramp-up period. They had spreadsheets and were very much involved and I think that was due to their work experience. They had the wherewithal to know they were part of the bigger picture but they still had to figure out their particular roles and responsibilities.

How did you get interested in using LINKS and how did the competition take shape?

Chad: This is my third or fourth time using LINKS. I am one of the academics who is “sold” on the product, and I passed the idea of using it and doing the cross-university contest along to Tony while we were planning our courses last summer. He had heard of the game, but did not know what it really entailed so I did a tutorial for him one afternoon in July. We decided to give the competitive format a try, even though his class was an eight-week MBA module and mine were 16-week traditional courses.

Tony: I heard of LINKS before but I never got a chance to jump into it until Chad spurred me on and encouraged me to try it out with both classes. We thought it was a good idea to give them competition, to give the MBAs a chance to get their feet wet, and give them the incentive and motivation to go after it. Chad also had a lot of backing from his Dean, and as soon as I mentioned it here, everybody jumped on the bandwagon.



VS.



How did you get involved and what did you do together to make this work so well?

Chad: We have known each other for a while and share a lot of ideas about teaching. This was just a natural extension of what we were going to do individually.

Tony: Randy is very responsive and Chad knew what was going on and had experience with LINKS. Chad and I talked back and forth all the time on how to adjust on the fly, and how to compensate for different things that were going on.

How did the logistics of the classes work out since one class was semester-length and the other was 8-weeks long?

Chad: That was a little challenging for my students. At the beginning of the term, our students were at the same place on the knowledge curve (somewhere near zero, based on the student profiles) but because his class went through the material faster. It gave them an advantage after about the midpoint of the simulation. On the other hand, I was pleasantly surprised at how my students worked ahead in order to make up the time deficit (they knew about the OU students' schedule and realized early on that they'd have to excel out of class to be competitive). At the end of our 16 week semester, our students were commenting that they could have done better in a rematch, but for the most part, we were within 10% of the OU students, and in one industry of the four we ran, we were actually ahead until the very last week.

Tony: One thing we would do better is to try and synchronize the classes--8-week classes vs. 16-weeks. We have already figured out how to do that. Chad also recommended that we teach the course differently as far as letting the simulation be the guide and that meant looking at forecasting right away and how you progress through the supply chain decisions.

What was the reaction of your students?

Chad: Oh, ours were really fired up about the chance to compete with the OU MBAs. It was one of the primary reasons, I think, that I saw them up here on the evenings and weekends with their laptops fired up. And they wanted to start each class session with the LINKS discussion rather than typical class notes, so I let them do that after the third decision period and on through the seventh week. We did need to work a lot more than we had anticipated on forecasting, so I adjusted to the students' needs when they asked for that.

Tony: There was lots of stuff going on but they were intrigued with the game. The package was daunting and a lot of work but they ran with it. I think it was due to their real-life work experience.

Did you have any input from your deans and did they become interested or involved?

Chad: Our Dean loves to compete with other schools at anything, so this was a natural for him. He frequently asked for updates and even told some of our students some of his old industry war stories about supplier selection.

Tony: One of the things they did was put up money. Prize money and money for the play-off venue, and Randy volunteered his time to run the links as a competition. They plan to do a write-up in the local paper, and we will write this up in our school newsletter.

Do you think you will run competitions again?

Chad: I know I want to – we got a little more motivation out of this than I typically see in courses like these.

Tony: I will do it definitely for the core courses, and may even do it for the logistics classes. We may add some complexity to it since those students will already have had the other simulation.

What was your conclusion as to how well this worked? How did the students react? What responses did you get from the students?

Chad: I think our students liked the ability to make hands-on decisions rather than simply learn from cases and readings. They got very competitive, and that lead to different sorts of questions than I usually get – they were asking some very detailed things about procurement and logistics that most students would not think of in more traditional exercises.

Tony: I think it worked pretty well. It gave them incentive that they were competing within the class, but also they competed with OCU. “You can’t let the undergrads beat you” was the war cry and lit their fires a little bit.

Did students ever get together for a playoff or get to meet their competition face to face?

Chad: That was our original intention, but it became impossible (when the OU 8-week class ended) to reconvene their members nearly two months later (as mine were finishing the course).

Tony: They never met face to face, it was all simulated. Some students said “I didn’t know these guys could affect me and my production over here.” It was an eye opener to look at integration and direct and indirect affects on your job and performance measurements.

Were there any problems that occurred and were they anticipated?

Chad: There was nothing out of the ordinary. We had our share of complainers about the workload needed to do well, but that happens every time in my experience. You get out of LINKS what you put in, and some don’t want to get much out.

Tony: Once the initial ramping up was completed so they knew what to do and what was expected there was nothing that came up. They had to think about the choices their competitors were making which resulted in them taking their business. They had to shift gears in their thinking.

Did you change your syllabus and teaching plan to adjust to LINKS?

Chad: This to me is one of the most important issues that should be raised with LINKS users. I find that LINKS has caused me to completely revamp the SEQUENCING of my course. Most of the textbooks have all of the material you need to know (at least at a basic level) to become a supply chain manager – but it tends to be presented in somewhat of a haphazard order (or one based on theory more so than practice, perhaps). LINKS has caused me and my students to think much more about the sequence of events that occurs in supply chain, and how the processes are interlocked. For example, it all starts with a demand forecast, and so now that is one of the first things I go through with the students in the supply chain courses. Only after that has happened do the other processes begin to make sense in the systematic perspective. So in fact, yes, I have really restructured my courses around the LINKS decision making opportunities –they reflect business practice much more accurately than my books do.

Tony: You have to look at the decisions you have to make. You look at marketing coming in before you look at the demand. Then you need to look at the supplier and how are you going to fulfill this demand. You walk through production along to the final goods to the consumer. It was an easy transition and LINKS backed it up because you had to make those decisions as you went along.

Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

Chad: It's crucial to anticipate student questions, and to spend at least a course period on startup even if your students are taking the quiz etc. I am building a library of "nuance issues" that I remember to tell them during this session each time, and it keeps growing and growing. If they don't start off well, students sometimes get very frustrated, but I am finding that I can mitigate much of that by doing a lively session early in the term that is LINKS devoted. It pays me back for the time lost on course material very well.

Tony: We are going to keep this going. It gives students a good hands-on feel. I am teaching to the masses so LINKS gets them started and is very good for learning.