



LINKS @ Queen's University



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What kind of a course is LINKS used in at Queen's?

We call this the capstone course. It's the course at the end of all the required courses. This starts in the second week in December. The students go right into the simulation which is used as the final integrative part of the required course section. We do a lot of integration during the required courses but not as much as they do in this simulation. One of the things we tout about is the integrated nature of our MBA program. It fits perfectly into that time before they go into their elective courses.

What's the profile of the students in the course?

This is a one-year MBA program and these people have been out working for several years. There is a work requirement and other types of prerequisites for applying and being accepted. A lot of them are specialist in certain areas. We get a lot of engineers. We get a lot of people from the technical side of businesses that haven't seen the whole picture—the accounting and finance and the marketing side of things.

How does the course work?

I have the students full-time for the week. They get their first decision before we start. Instead of doing a course intro, I have them review a power-point presentation online, with 6 or 7 snippets of information and voice-over going through the routine of what we will be doing the following week. They are told to review the online information and read the manual. By the time they get their first output, just before we start, they are familiar with the general nature of what is going on and at least they are familiar with things they see on the output. They may not yet know how to use the information, but nothing on the output is a surprise.

I have them do two decisions a day—one is due around noon and another at dinner time. They go through a lot of information in a short amount of time. They don't get the results until the next morning, so they have the evening to themselves to do what they want. They also get a one-hour lunch break before the results are back. Otherwise they would be working on it 24/7.

It's pretty hectic while I am consulting with all the teams, at the beginning. As they go along, they look at more and more things. We had 18 teams this past year, so there was a lot of running around at the beginning of the sessions. I make sure that I answer their questions and check that everything is on-track and give them some advice on the decisions they are making.

Between five and seven are in each of the teams. Part of our MBA is to help them understand how teams work. These are teams that are formed in May, so they have been together for about seven months at this time.

Which version of LINKS do you use and why?

We use the LINKS Enterprise Management Simulation—Enriched Edition, because it covers all of the different aspects of an Enterprise. We didn't want to focus on any one aspect—on marketing or services—we wanted something that was broad-based, and covered just about everything, and is a true integrative experience.

It is a challenge for the instructor because you have to refresh yourself on finance, accounting, and operations. My area is marketing, so it takes a little while to get back into the swing of things at an enterprise level rather than at a specific functional level.

We run three industries of six firms each but students are compared only within industries. At the end of the simulation, each industry is given an award for net cumulative profit.



In addition to the game run deliberations that the teams do, what other LINKS activities occur?

For each decision that they make, the team has to write a one-page memo to justify their decisions and how it fits into a long-term strategy. One of the things we focus on throughout the whole simulation is to make sure that they think long-term and not just have a tactical reaction. They have to justify and have a reason for what they are doing at a long-term level. At the end, they have a final report that they provide. It's a report that goes over all of their decisions and justifies why they did what, to convince me that they are in great shape for the long run. They are to think of me as someone who is thinking of acquiring their firm, and among all of the other firms why should I acquire their firm above the others?

How is student performance determined for both teams and for individuals?

The teams do a lot of team-evaluation within their team so there are no slackers. Different teams arrange their teams in different ways. Some of the teams will have someone "in charge", other

teams will break up functionally, and then come together. Some teams just hash it out with each other with nobody leading the group. I will give them the pros and cons of different types of organization methods if they ask me.

How do the students react to LINKS in this format?

I think they enjoy it. Early on, they may not be sure of how things go. Once the fourth or fifth decision comes along, they are very into it. It gets very, very competitive. Everybody wants to win. Over the years, there have been very few teams who have been so out of it that they didn't have a chance of winning, so most of the teams still have a chance and keep trying to improve until the end.

They start to understand how things integrate and the interactions among the various decisions at that point in time. The decision-making becomes extremely complex. At the beginning, their decisions are very isolated, independent and almost functional. Then they start to realize some of the interactions, and start to realize that when you change one thing in one area, something in some other area is going to be affected. The nature of the decision-making becomes far more complex. Part of the reason we wanted to use the enterprise simulation was that it gives them an appreciation of the complexity of the number of decisions that have to be made.




They are not learning in the classroom at this point, they are learning by doing and learning by experience and through the feed-back I give. I may raise questions like "Have you thought about your marketing? Why don't you figure out how to make it more effective?" I leave them thinking about some areas so they can figure out what's happening.

They have to be very familiar with the manual. I charge them a consulting fee anytime I have to answer a question that's in the manual.

Since you've done this for a number of years now, do you have any particular advice for other instructors teaching with LINKS in this kind of format?

The type of instructor is important and their attitude too. I walk into this knowing I am going to learn something myself during the session about interactions and the nature of decision-making. So an open-mind with a very broad perspective on business is most suited for the Enterprise Management Simulation.

There are a lot of different questions that come at you from a lot of different angles. You have to be prepared. Get a good week's sleep beforehand. A positive attitude throughout the whole thing is important. Take the time to understand the outputs of the simulation.



And talk to Randy. Randy is the biggest help and the reason why we decided to go forward with the simulation. He is magnificent to work with. He is always there and has answers to the questions. I think he has been through it a few times. He really understands the nature of this and he's been faced with the same types of questions any professor will be faced with.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

This is probably one of the best experiences that the students have when they are here. It wasn't set up to be that. It was set up to have some type of integrated exercise at the end but all the feedback and all the positive comments, and even students who come back a few years later, talk about the simulation and what they did in it. It may have been the first time they were working consistently with a team in such intense times of decision-making. It helps them to realize all the training they have had and how to apply it all.

