



The Extreme LINKS User



Darin White, a member of the LINKS Instructor Hall of Fame from Samford University, is the only instructor who has taught with all four variations of the LINKS simulations and also participated in university-sponsored executive education programs with LINKS.

With your vast knowledge base what suggestions can you offer to new or existing professors?

Before you ever want to teach using LINKS, it is very important to become a participant. You first need to play the game. The Train-The-Trainer Seminar is a good way to do that. An analogy of that is if your dream in life is to teach college football, you would need the experience of playing the game before you can be an effective coach. It is imperative that you spend a significant time as a participant. Students are going to come up with more questions than you can ever imagine. By experiencing the game yourself you will have learned a lot of those answers.

When have you used all of the LINKS simulations?

It started many years ago in the '90s with BRANDMAPS teaching Strategic Marketing. Then when we transitioned over to LINKS, I used the Marketing Sim, teaching primarily at the MBA level. About three years ago, I was the director of research of the McAfee School of Business at Union University, and I moved to Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama to the Brock School of Business. They wanted me to teach the Capstone Strategic Management Class so I transitioned over to the LINKS Enterprise Management Simulation.

If you use the most advanced X-LINKS Enterprise Management Simulation [Extreme Edition], it has everything—every variable that is out there is at play. Making the move to the services or the supply chain management games wasn't that big of a jump because it was just cutting out things from the enterprise management simulation and emphasizing things you didn't emphasize as much.

There are a few differences, such as in supply chain management which includes postponed production which is not available in enterprise management, but pretty much everything else is. If you know how to run extreme enterprise management, making that transition over to any of the other three is not tough.

Have you also been involved with corporate executive education programs?

Yes, that is how I made the transition over to the services simulation. A very large service industry firm hired me to do some executive education work for them. The service simulation was the platform that their people needed.

Was there anything specific that you found using LINKS simulations that you felt students learned best because they were using LINKS?

I used marketing strategy for many years for my MBA students and there were advantages of using the simulation versus a case-based class. In case-based learning, the student makes recommendations and argues the points but never gets to test them out and they don't know whether they are right or wrong. In the simulation, they go through the same process, but then they actually implement their choices and have to live with the results generated. Suddenly the student is more accountable for their arguments and the analysis that they do to come up with their final recommendations is more important. When students use LINKS, their motivation for the class is greatly heightened over any other pedagogy that I have tried—from real world projects, to cases, to lecture-based, to outside speakers, to field trips and all the different ways you can teach. The simulation raises their level of interest to a whole new plateau.



Students have pride in their company, they want to look good amongst their peers, and they want to perform well. They have a competitive spirit in them that is driving them to spend the time necessary to learn that tool to be successful. This is much more similar to how it is in the real world. Once you graduate from an MBA program and you are running a company, division or department, you realize you are lacking a skill, you are going to take the time on the weekends, at night or whenever, to learn that skill on your own, not because someone is giving you a grade but because you need that skill to be successful in the marketplace. LINKS creates that sort of environment to compel students to learn at a completely different level.

If you use the X-LINKS Enterprise Management Simulation [Extreme Edition], it incorporates the entire services game, the supply chain is embedded into that, and the marketing game is embedded into that. With four or five members on the team, one or two persons will have to run the services because that is a component within your company. Learning this simulation makes it easy to transition to the other three.

If you run the services game, Randy just turns off the supply chain stuff, or the marketing stuff. However, the services game is the most unique game of all of the four. You are dealing with a service as opposed to a tangible good. The volume drivers are different.

Have you changed your teaching strategy over the years since you first started? Do you stress anything more for the students to focus on now that you have used all the LINKS simulations variations?

The thing that I push with the students is having a detailed understanding of the cost side of their organization. When they are making major decisions there has to be a detailed cost-analysis performed before they implement those decisions. These are fact-based decisions. Students sometimes just want to go with their “gut”, so they don’t want to do this. LINKS is not very forgiving. If you make poor decisions related to the cost structure of your organization, you are going to pay the price.

The second thing I encourage them to do is to be very creative in how they use the information that is available to them. LINKS is rich with research information. I encourage the students not to take the information they have at face value but combine it in some way. They may create excel decision models. They plug different information from different studies and financial documents and try to understand the driving behaviours of the customers.

I tell the students before they make their first decision, “if you are going to spend five hours working on your first decision, you should spend four and a half hours specifically discussing what research studies you are going to order.” I say “if there is any doubt in your mind if they need a research study or not—order it!” And then not only order it, but use it...squeeze it for all that it is worth.

The worst thing that could happen is if you don’t order the right research and your competitor does, he has an informational advantage over you. A famous strategist once said, “The only true sustainable advantage is your ability to digest information at a faster rate and use that information effectively.



What are the key factors that you would point out to a new user of LINKS to be successful with their classes?

Number one...you want to spend sufficient time before the game starts making sure that the students have read the manual and understand it thoroughly. I take three class periods where I lecture on the material in the manual. We break the manual into three parts, and I have a quiz at the beginning of each class, so the students have to read it before class. We have a detailed discussion of what is in that part of the manual. If they haven’t read the manual prior to you lecturing on it, you might as well be speaking Swahili. They are not going to have any clue what you are saying. It is a waste of time. So you have to force them to read it. Then you lecture about it, have open discussions and answer questions. Following those three classes, I then give a major test on the whole manual. I also use the tutorials online. Having to work through the tutorials is a significant part of their grade.

If you start the game and they do not have a sufficient knowledge base of how the game works and how everything fits together, including cost structures, they are not going to be successful. They are going to be miserable. And you are going to be miserable. You have got to spend time on the front end making sure they are prepared.

The second major piece of the puzzle to make sure you have a successful event, is to dedicate 'group time' to the class. I do this when the students are making their first few decisions. First, I take roll, then send each team off to separate rooms. Then I move around to each team privately for 15-20 minutes, and discuss what they are doing and why they are doing it. I want to see their analysis. I want to see what their thinking process is and to be a sounding board for them. I don't tell them what to do, but just make sure that they are processing things logically. I do that until I am confident that they have got it. It may take two, three or even four decisions before they get to that point.

The third point is to make yourself available to have coaching sessions with each team outside of class—through office hours, online, or my cell phone. As an instructor in the simulation environment, you are a coach...helping them run a business and all that comes with it.

Another point I feel is very important is that the teams create the right kind of culture within their company. We always have a CEO of each company. The CEOs are selected by me and other faculty. It is an honor to be a CEO. They receive a letter of congratulations from the Dean. We copy that to the parents.

I meet with the CEOs individually, and as a group to discuss how they are going to structure their company. They determine what lines of accountability need to be set up. This is not a project the team is doing. Each group needs to function like a real company with true lines of authority, with job responsibilities, with deadlines, and with expectations.

I require that my CEOs do an individual performance review with each person in their company at the end of each year of the three-year run of the game. There is also a peer review evaluation instrument that we use that is very robust and detailed. Everyone does this anonymously. They know that a significant portion of their grade is going to be tied back to that. I put that in my syllabus on day one—Here are the questions your peers will be evaluating you on. See what they are, and don't think that if you don't perform in this environment, they are going to cover for you. They are not going to. There is a lot of work to be done and they will let me know if anyone is not pulling their weight.



You said that you choose the CEOs. Do they go out and pick their own teams or do you make up the teams for them?

No, they make their own teams. I have tried it different ways, and this seems to be the best way. We have a day when each individual gets to do a speed interview with each CEO. They get two minutes. Ask any questions they want. Take notes. Everyone provides a personal bio with background information. The CEOs read a couple of articles on “How to build a high performing team”. Prior to this interview process the CEOs decide what kind of personalities they want, and what kind of traits they need. After the interviews, the CEOs get by themselves in an NFL-style draft. They go round by round and they can even trade at the end of the round. LINKS money can be part of that. It is very flexible. The rules are there had to be a minimum of three people and a maximum of six on their teams. It is a lot of fun. I even leave a 24-hour window open afterwards for trades. They have the ability to build the team that they want.

They realize that at the end they may end up with some low-performing people in their teams. Usually the slackers will be the last ones selected. I stress to the CEOs that the key to success is not how well your number one or number two draft picks perform, but it's whichever CEO can get the most out of their bottom two picks—that's the team what will probably win. Because if you can find a way to motivate them and find something for them to do that will contribute to the team, you will be way ahead of the game versus those companies that are being run by two or three people. We talk about how to motivate a low performing person and bring it to the next level. This is great experience and mimics what is going on in the real world.



Can anyone be fired from the team or can the CEO be fired?

Yes, they put a firing memo together that is due two days after the teams are finalized. All must agree to this contract and sign it and turn it in to me. I have done that from the very beginning, although, in fifteen years I have only had two people fired. The threat is enough. I tell the whole class, if you get fired you are going to be doing an independent study with me and I promise you I will make your life miserable. I will bury you and you are going to wish you were playing that simulation game.

Do you do anything differently at the end of the course?

I just started doing this...I tell my CEOs “You have been running this company for two years and you have one more year left to run the company. There is a group of Russian billionaires that are flying in and want to invest a half- billion dollars into this industry. They are willing to invest this capital into this industry, so you must get up and give a presentation to these investors as to why your company should get this money and what you are going to do with this money if you get it.” This is more of a financial presentation. We then make a decision and insert that money into the industries who deserve it based on their presentations, so companies that do a great job with this presentation get an influx of cash that they can compete with.