



## Teaching With LINKS: You Can Teach An Old Dog New Tricks



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### ***What course did you teach with LINKS?***

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I used LINKS in Principles of Marketing, an undergraduate course for Honors students. I have about 12 years of experience teaching, but the course itself was a new prep for me – a situation that turned out to be ideal for learning and incorporating a simulation into my teaching. You will need to devote some time as an instructor to learning LINKS but you are basically killing two birds with one stone when it's part of a new prep. To that end, the LINKS Train-The-Trainer course was very useful: I did it with a couple of my more advanced doctoral students (who wanted to learn the simulation for their own eventual teaching), and we even managed to have fun and make a little money!

### ***How did LINKS fit into the course?***

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I ran LINKS in the middle portion of the course. The course first covered the topics of Segmentation, Targeting & Positioning, Product, and Marketing Research. These topics segued well into the simulation, and afterwards I returned to the topics of Pricing, Channels, Promotions, and other topics. I thought this structure worked reasonably well: LINKS brought to life earlier topics in the course, and students could recall examples of their LINKS experience to bring later topics to life.

It might be worth moving up Pricing: students struggled a lot with price in the simulation and might have benefited from earlier coverage of the topic. On the other hand, they were very engaged in our discussion of price afterwards!

### ***What were the students like?***

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The honors course consists of about 30 high-caliber students – a class size that is a tad large for a one-industry simulation but worked reasonably well. The students are smart, hard-working,

and self-motivated students, who are also quite competitive – again, ideal for a simulation. There is really no downside with this kind of a class, except that struggling firms took things pretty hard! It was also interesting to me that students obsessed over small random variation in the starting point of the firms in the initial round, and several students were quite convinced that they had discovered serious flaws in LINKS (or the manual) – none of which panned out with investigation but were certainly a sign of competitive intensity. Most of the students in the class were not marketing majors but their feedback indicated that the hands-on marketing experience provided by the simulation was considered invaluable.

### *How did you implement LINKS?*

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The simulation covered about 4 weeks of classes, with 2 decision rounds each week. This approach is relatively compact, which brings with it a certain excitement and intensity (plus avoids any feeling of ‘drag’ near the end of the simulation). The major downside is that outside events can really interfere with team decision-making, and some students noted this issue in their feedback on the simulation. There is no easy solution here, I fear. It is simply not possible to work around all of the extracurricular activities of university life (e.g., Homecoming, Thanksgiving, THON fundraising ... and that’s not counting football).

During LINKS, I typically met with the students for a short tutorial at the start of each class and then the students broke off for team meetings and I circulated to coach. I believe the group tutorials were important: there was a fair amount of heterogeneity even in this honors class (e.g., knowledge of break-even analysis), and I also thought the students benefited from more formal tutorials on the interpretation and use of marketing research studies (after a round or two of discovery and coaching). Because I am a big advocate of using marketing research to inform managerial decision-making, that approach also fit in well with my general philosophy for the course.

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### *How did you evaluate students?*

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My evaluation of LINKS consisted of three components: their actual performance in the simulation, the team's class presentation at the end of the simulation, and the individual memo-to-my-successor. (I also took into account my observations during coaching, as well as their Presidential Review Meetings, as part of their participation grade, and I conducted peer evaluations and incorporated this input as well.) All of the components worked reasonably well but it will be necessary to provide more specific guidance next year. Some students 'got it' but others had trouble with the relatively open-ended nature of these assignments (perhaps unsurprising in hindsight as the students were sophomores taking their first business class at university). I also plan to auction off a couple of the best memos next year in the first round (eventually making them available to all teams), which might help provide a model for how to approach these assignments.

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### *Any final thoughts?*

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LINKS is a great way to incorporate hands-on marketing in the classroom, and I am seeing the benefits of LINKS even after the simulation is done. For example, I gave out 'LINKS souvenir gift cash cow key rings' (basically a cow-shaped key ring) to students in a later class as part of an in-class exercise illustrating pricing concepts (e.g., WTP/WTA and the endowment effect). The exercise worked just as I'd hoped – and the cash cows were very popular!