



Compressed LINKS

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Will you explain what Compressed LINKS is?

Compressed LINKS is essentially changing from the traditional one-decision per week event to two decisions for the students each and every week. We compress the amount of time it takes to complete the entire LINKS event and compress and reduce the amount of time between each decision cycle.

What is the main reason for making this change?

I went to this approach about a year ago, when I began working with one of our sponsor companies to create a custom case activity for the class. I needed to insert a rather substantial amount of casework into the class and so I needed to reduce the amount of time that I had allocated to LINKS. Traditionally, I had run the LINKS activity across the entire semester. I didn't want to have LINKS assignments crossover with the complex case that I was giving them. So I needed to shorten-up the LINKS window in the semester and that's what drove me to do this compressed format.

Did you find strengths and weaknesses of LINKS to doing it this way?

An obvious strength of LINKS is the ability to complete the LINKS event more rapidly, allowing time for other activities like this case example I'm talking about. The greatest strength I have heard directly from my students has been the shorter time between decisions keeps them more connected and more into the simulation itself. They have a better feel for where their team stands and what decisions they made during the last period. In the once-a-week decision schedule that I had used previously, I believe the students put the simulation on the back-burner for four or five days between decisions and then they had to bring themselves back up to speed and re-learn where they were regarding some of these decision elements in the game, time and time again.

Do the students like compressed better?

The feedback I've gotten has been overwhelmingly positive. I surveyed the students this semester at the end of the LINKS event and 70% said that they preferred the twice-a-week decision cycle.

My students are all seniors. As far as their feedback regarding weaknesses of this approach, they typically have multiple team-based activities across the other senior level courses that they are taking in the college of business. A lot of these courses have once-a-week assignment activity cycles and they get together with their teams. They are used to meeting this way and scheduling across with all their various teams. As I've gone to the multiple-times-a-week decision cycle, it has forced them to find multiple times during the week to meet with their LINKS team for my class. Some of them have complained that it is a complex scheduling problem for them because they feel they don't have enough time to get it all in ... which is nonsense, but that is the feedback I have gotten.

The thing I tell my students is that "you are more in control of your free time today than you will ever be once you start to work. Just remember what you are telling me because you are going to look up six or twelve months from now and say 'gosh I wish I had that much time in my schedule'."

What did you need to do to set up the program in this way?

I always do a number of what I call "up-speed activities" early in the semester to help students come up the learning curve. These activities help them understand all the ins-and-outs of LINKS and be prepared to start making decisions. I've added a number of these things over time as I've done LINKS more and more. A couple of these assignments generally take place during the first few weeks of live-decision making.

With the compressed schedule, in an eight-decision simulation, the game would be halfway through while you were still trying to reinforce some basic concepts. It really forced me to be focused on my early schedule in the semester and get these learning curve activities done before launching in to making LINKS decisions.

There's always that "ah-ha" moment that I get from my students when they say "it's all starting to come together for me" and I'm doing these things early in the semester to make that happen in the first couple of decision rounds rather than the last couple when it's too late to have an impact.

Are there any other challenges, except for the scheduling problems, that the students face because of this change in format?

There are a couple of assignments that they have to do in conjunction with LINKS in the middle of making all these decisions. One of them is the competitor analysis, where they have to gather data from the research studies and attempt to determine what a key competitor is doing. They

then try to figure out what that competitor's strategy is, and why are they successful. And then decide how that knowledge should impact the way this team is making decisions.

That takes a lot of forethought and effort, to gather reports over multiple decisions cycles, and analyze it properly.

In the compressed schedule this is a little more difficult to accomplish, just because there is less downtime to actually focus on doing that kind of analysis.

So there may be several that get chosen to be analyzed and some that don't get analyzed, is that right?

Absolutely. Each team gets to choose the competitor to evaluate. You might have a dominant firm that runs away in an industry and most of the teams will pick that team. "They're killing us all, so let's look at that one", they say. Sometimes there will be two or three teams that are neck-and-neck at the top in the industry. In that case you'll see the students pick more of a variety of competitors.

Does the team that's being analyzed get a chance to look at the results of this report?

We have a discussion when the activity turned in and spend class-time talking about what each team found. That's interesting. You have all the teams talking about each other's strategy. That's where some of the best learning actually occurs. Students have to keep up with what's changing in the industry. That's one of the fun things that happens. Because a team will say that Team One was doing X, Y, and Z so we're going to follow their lead, and Team One says "oh yeah, we did that for the first two periods but we changed a little bit." So the analyzing team then realizes they were not really up to date and they didn't know as much as they thought they did.

Do you feel this compressed format works better for you?

I was full of trepidation, the first time I did this. A few of years ago, when I was still doing all of my decisions once-a-week, I had some challenges with the way that the semester was laid out. I had a couple of hard dates that I had to work around so I knew I could either reduce the number of decisions in LINKS to allow for some of the special activities that were going to happen or I could compress some of the decisions and reduce the time between decisions.

I took a couple of weeks and put two decision dates in there. I thought I was going to get a lot of complaints. But to my surprise, I got a lot of positive student feedback saying they liked that. They were able to stay in the middle of LINKS and not have to restart it on the once-a-week basis. So that got me thinking along these lines.

What key points would you give another instructor who might want to try this process?

I would encourage others to do this, test it out and see how it plays in their situation. Maybe take one week out of a 6 or 8 week LINKS event and go to multiple decisions in that week and see how the students respond.

It's valuable just because there's a lot of activities that I want to accomplish across the course of the semester with my seniors. It's our capstone class and I view it as a very critical class to their success as they move out into the working world. I think it is really helpful to maintain the learning they get with LINKS but add some other major elements and schedule non-LINKS elements in their own block of time versus having to overlap these activities.

The other option is that you are running LINKS throughout the course of the semester and dropping in a case here or another activity there, which has nothing to do with LINKS. I don't think that's as effective and it may become confusing to some students.

Do you change LINKS parameters around and add different options?

I'm adding the customer service component so the students can have greater control over the customer service aspect of the simulation.

I have always added a fourth region about halfway through. I always throw a couple of shocks into the event; whether it's an air cargo strike for a period or two, or an economic jolt where the demand decreases for a couple of periods, or a vendor goes out of business and is not available anymore. There's always something like that.

I try to make it a little different from semester to semester so that students don't know quite what to prepare for.