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E-learning and LINKS in Corporate Education

How did you first get involved with LINKS?

Many years ago, when I was responsible for business process training for a major consulting company, I met Randy when he had a simulation product in the marketing area. As part of our Generate Demand School, we incorporated Randy's marketing simulation. In discussions with Randy, we talked about making a Supply Chain Management simulation. The work that we did together led to the first version of the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation.



What's E-learning? What are the advantages and disadvantages associated with E-learning?

E-learning is a broad category, basically, any web or internet-based learning can be considered E-learning.

The advantage of E-learning is that it is a very cost-effective solution for a large and geographically-spread audience. Also, it provides a training solution that is time and place-independent. The disadvantage is that E-learning is currently not the way most adults are accustomed to learning, but that is beginning to change quickly.

In your current work with corporations, how does E-learning fit into the educational programs you create?



All companies have similar goals—how to improve job performance through improving the skills and knowledge of their workers and they are looking to do this in the most cost-effective manner. The traditional approach to training has been classroom-based workshops but this type of training is costly both in terms of money (instructor fees, facilities, travel expensive, etc) and time away from the office, so they have been looking for alternative solutions. E-learning has proven to be a very cost-effective solution for developing certain types of skills and transferring knowledge. We are seeing companies moving from a classroom-based training program to a more blended program incorporating E-learning with traditional classroom programs.

What are the limits of E-learning? Are there occasions where traditional classroom sessions are superior to E-learning?

Not everything can be taught through E-learning. Complex skills are difficult to develop through E-learning. E-learning is a great way to convey knowledge and information and to build an individual skill. If one wanted to know how to calculate safety stock levels, I could teach you that pretty easily through E-learning. If I wanted to teach you a very complex team-use skill, like

motivation, and how to work in a team, those are very difficult to do in E-learning. You would want a lot of group interaction, so a traditional classroom setting would be better.

How can a LINKS event be enhanced/supported by E-learning?

The advantage of a LINKS simulation is the group of people working as a team, which would not be able to easily be done through E-learning, but for a LINKS event to be successful, all the students should have a similar base of knowledge. That is where E-learning comes in.

Participants in a LINKS events all have a different level of knowledge and background. LINKS is the application of a set of knowledge. In a simulated environment, it implies that the participants have the same base of knowledge before entering into a LINKS event. For example, if you didn't know the basic concepts of Supply Chain Management, then you couldn't actively participate in a LINKS event. You could do it, but you wouldn't get anything out of it. You would just be playing along.

What we are trying to do with our E-learning component is to prepare people from a business standpoint—from concepts and knowledge—to apply that knowledge to a LINKS simulation.



LINKS and E-learning are complimentary. LINKS allows the student to apply and practice the knowledge they gain through E-learning.

Most LINKS-users are university instructors using LINKS in their regular classroom-based courses in academic degree-granting programs. Obviously cost and time are key constraints in building effective E-learning modules into their courses. Are there any low-cost ways of embracing E-learning supplements to a traditional classroom-based course?

To build a web-based training program takes money. There is the technical cost to develop the web-based application, the cost to develop the content and there is a cost to deliver the content on the internet. The development costs for E-learning are much higher vs. traditional classroom programs. Corporate clients usually have thousands of people to train. They also have the technology infrastructure to deliver the training, so the costs associated with E-learning can be justified.



Most of LINKS is used by university professors so if I was a professor using LINKS and I wanted to use E-learning, to supplement LINKS I don't think I would have the budget to build anything. Also I don't have the expertise in E-learning development or a big enough audience to justify the expense. But, there are options. One option is to find a commercially-available E-learning product. This could be made easier if a vendor, like Randy, pre-packaged E-learning and made it available along with LINKS.



Another option is to use very "low tech" E-learning options like webinars and build them into a LINKS program. People need to remember the effectiveness of E-learning is more about the quality of the content vs. the technology used.

LINKS and E-learning for the Corporate Customer are under tremendous pressure to limit either expenses or time away from the office. Everyone is running lean on people power. E-learning allows a company to limit the costs of a LINKS event. As we noted earlier, to have a successful LINKS experience all the students need to have

the same foundational level of knowledge. If the students do not have this same level of knowledge, then you must either develop it as part of the LINKS program or you can do it through E-learning prior to LINKS. So you try to compress the actual live-event to the most efficient length of time by using E-learning. So with E-learning, prior to the class the students can take E-learning classes, to build their base level of knowledge. They can take them when they choose, when it fits into their schedule, and that shortens the simulation event, which means less time away from the office, but is still as effective as before. Also, if a student already has the necessary knowledge to successfully participate in a LINKS event then they would not have to take any of the E-learning courses, making it even more cost effective.



LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminar

July 6-8, 2010

LINKS Simulations Immersion Experience

Five Teleconferences and a Four-Round LINKS Simulation Event

Registration is available for the next three-day, intensive-mode Train-The-Trainer distance-learning seminar for the LINKS simulations. Randy Chapman, the LINKS author, leads these distance-learning events for academic faculty interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS. This intensive-mode seminar format includes 5-6 hours of work per day during the three days of the distance-learning seminar.

LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminars are offered for the enterprise management, marketing, services, and supply chain management LINKS variants.

Current LINKS instructors are invited to pass along this announcement to faculty colleagues and

advanced doctoral students who might be interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS.

Experienced LINKS instructors sometimes participate in a LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminar to refresh their memories of LINKS details just prior to teaching with LINKS or to explore another LINKS simulation variant for a future teaching activity. Such experienced LINKS instructors may elect just to participate in the TTT's four-round simulation event, ignoring the public teleconferences included in the LINKS TTT program. (PowerPoint decks are e-mailed to all LINKS TTT participants before each teleconference, so such experienced LINKS instructors may freely choose to participate in all, some, or none of the teleconferences as per their availability and interest.)

Details about LINKS Train-The-Trainer seminars may be accessed via these URLs:

- <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/TTT/EMttt.pdf> [Enterprise Management]
- <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/TTT/MSttt.pdf> [Marketing]
- <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/TTT/SMttt.pdf> [Services Marketing]
- <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/TTT/SCttt.pdf> [Supply Chain Management]

The Professor's Column

Online LINKS SCM

In the spring semester of 2010, I had a chance to teach an online Supply Chain Management (SCM) course for *EGOM* (Engineering and Global Operations Management) program at Clarkson University using the LINKS SCM simulation. Twelve students attended the class and worked in four teams. The students, with between 6 to 22 years of work experience in large multinational firms, came mainly from engineering and operations management background. LINKS-related activities and deliverables accounted for 40 percent of the course grade. Having used the sLINKS SCM simulation seven times in regular undergraduate and MBA courses, I do observe some differences when teaching LINKS online.



Chester Xiang (Clarkson University) is a long-time LINKS user.

1. Game kick-off is better with specific instruction. Initially, students in both regular and online courses will be overwhelmed by the complexity of the simulation and the volume of reading expected for the LINKS Manual. But regular course students can stop by the instructor's office for consultation, and they can chat about the overwhelming feeling and solutions in face-to-face team meetings. For an online course, students communicate with the instructor and among themselves through teleconference and email. They may set up meeting agendas in advance, and team members may utilize their area of expertise much earlier than in a regular course. Many vague issues and misunderstandings about the game may be hidden behind the formality of communications. For example, people are more reluctant to admit they did not read or understand the manual on the phone or in email. Therefore, it is important to make sure teams do not make naïve and large mistakes at the beginning. Personally, I do not use a practice round. I would rather have an additional team-based meeting prior to the first-round input to check students' understanding of the LINKS basics.

2. Decision rounds are smoother and questions are more in-depth. Though distance and communications formality make the start of the game harder, they make the remaining decision rounds smoother. One of the best suggestions we provide to any LINKS game participants is "read the manual". Online students naturally rely more heavily on the LINKS

manual. Even if questions arise, they are described more specifically, and the student can explain the actions they have already tried. As a consequence, questions are more in-depth and insightful since the simple ones have already been self-screened. In fact, I did learn a few subtle trade-offs that were not encountered by my previous experience. They were brought to my attention by student questions in the online course.

3. Always keep the peer evaluation—even with small-size teams and “grownup” students. I was wondering if with smaller teams (three-person) and more “grownup” students (these middle to senior-level managers who work hard and have busy full-time jobs, who don’t have to take this elective course if they are not interested), whether I should keep the peer evaluation. For regular classes, this evaluation is very important to ensure reasonable effort in game participation. Deciding to leave this differentiation tool open to the students, I told them I will not deliberately differentiate if they indicate they prefer identical grades on the evaluation form. To my surprise, most participants did differentiate their evaluations on their teammates’ contributions. For example, instead of criticizing someone as being “lazy”, which is most common in undergraduate courses, the major concerns about teammates in the online course are that they “don’t listen to others” or are “too bossy”. I would suggest leaving this peer evaluation access open to students to channel their opinions about teamwork. Please note: I do make sure students from the same company are not assigned to the same team.

4. Final presentation participation needs to be encouraged. Teams in regular classes chat about their LINKS performance all the time. Therefore, the curiosity and excitement levels for the final presentation are naturally high. Teams in online course rarely talk to each other beyond lecture time, though they do care about their comparative LINKS performance. Some encouraging measure should be taken to increase the curiosity and excitement levels. For example, a summary of the development of the game can be created and shared before the final presentation. Each team would then try to reflect its own role in the story line and become curious about the impact of others.

I observed these differences during the last semester, and they can be explained by the communication differences of the online course, but it may also be (at least partially) explained by the student-body characteristics. However, part-time study by busy people with full-time jobs and family responsibilities is quite representative of those with abundant work experience, and a strong motivation to learn, not only in my class, but to many of the recipients of online education.

To summarize, online course students rely more on the LINKS manual, work harder, and make decisions in a more detailed and quantitative manner. Therefore, teaching LINKS in an online course is quite pleasing, as long as one pays attention to overcoming the communication differences incurred by the lack of face-to-face meeting.



Coaching, Learning Curves and Evaluation

Discussions with course participants revolve around important strategy issues and that is one of the special things about teaching with LINKS. This can be a lot of fun for both the instructor and the student, certainly more fun than standard case-related discussions. The instructor wears many hats during a LINKS exercise. Perhaps the most important role is that of coach.

Randy Chapman has a baseball-style hat with the label "LINKS Coach" that he uses during private presidential review meetings with teams.



LINKS participants often come by the course instructor's office a lot (if the instructor is accessible), and much of the interaction is in the style of using the instructor as a sounding board for current thinking about various strategies and tactics. As a coach, the instructor is required to listen, to make helpful comments and suggestions, and to reassure students that their thinking seems sound (or, at least, is not obviously flawed).

Randy takes the stance in LINKS that he is the president of all LINKS firms. His presidential attitude is that the LINKS management teams are fully responsible for all aspects of managing their firms' activities. Adoption of this presidential role facilitates on-going strategy discussions. He typically requires several outside-of-class presidential review meetings during a course, to ensure that students are held accountable for their performance. These formally scheduled meetings can provide students with a regular opportunity to meet with the course instructor to discuss a range of issues. These private presidential review meetings can be scheduled in lieu of regular class sessions, so that everyone fully understands that they are expected

to attend and participate in these meetings. These review meetings are private with only the team members attending, not the rest of the class.

As things evolve in a LINKS exercise, the instructor may deliberately seek out poorly-performing teams. By encouraging such students to attend additional meetings, it is possible to intervene at an early stage before poorly-performing students get too far off track and lose their interest in a LINKS exercise.

There is a steep learning curve with a rich and sophisticated simulation like LINKS. It takes several rounds for participants to become fully familiar with all aspects of LINKS. This is a universal problem



associated with complex simulations. Given such a learning curve, it is crucial to include a relatively large number of simulation rounds within a LINKS exercise, so that early learning difficulties may be amortized over a number of simulation rounds. The real payoff from participating in a simulation occurs when participants design and implement programs and then receive market feedback. Feedback is very special and should motivate the participants like no other teaching tool. Students write a strategy

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New LINKS White Paper

A new LINKS white paper has joined the evolving “White Papers” collection on the LINKS website and the “LINKS Papers” collection in the Instructor Resources section of the LINKS website: “Coaching Throughout the Business Simulation Lifecycle”

The full set of LINKS white papers includes:

1. “Best-Practice Teaching With Business Simulations”
2. “Extreme Customization With LINKS Simulations”
3. “Practice Rounds in LINKS Events”
4. “Adding Ethical Dilemmas To LINKS Events”
5. “Individual Performance Assessment in Business Simulations”
6. “Designing Effective LINKS-Based Courses: Required, Recommended, and Optional Elements
7. “Advice To My LINKS Successor”
8. “Coaching Throughout the Business Simulation Lifecycle”



The “LINKS Papers” collection includes articles, presentations, and white papers about the LINKS simulations.

Did You Know?

There are at least 49 different course syllabi samples for your review, including six on Marketing Management, 14 on Marketing Strategy and 18 on Supply Chain Management. The resources on the website are there to make the instructor’s job easier.

Check them out at the **Instructor Resources** link and click on Course Syllabi.



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review or plan within the course, and a major portion of the course grade is based on performance in LINKS, so the effort requirements align with the formal and explicit reward system.

Performance evaluation and grading are obviously significant issues in academic degree-granting programs. In addition to within-simulation performance evaluation, “external” evaluation via assignments, reports, presentations, and

examinations are all relevant. There are 16 questions in the LINKS Instructor’s Manual designed to be used as a final exam at the end of the LINKS exercise. They are generally complex enough so that they can be used on take-home exams, if desired. All of these questions require thoughtful discussion. They are not just simple recall questions. Instructors may even hand these questions out for prior study and review, and advise students that questions such as these would be fair game for examination purposes.



Reminders

LINKS Passcode Retrieval:

Convenient LINKS passcode retrieval for a LINKS participant (student or instructor) is possible via the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” link on the main LINKS webpage (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>). Executing the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” operation e-mails the firm’s passcode to the participant’s official e-mail address as currently recorded in the LINKS Simulation Database.

E-Mail Address Management:

LINKS instructors submit their students’ e-mail addresses (grouped into teams) as part of the information-set provided to initialize a LINKS industry. Often, these are institutional rather than personal e-mail addresses. Since some participants prefer to use a personal e-mail address rather than an institutional e-mail address for LINKS, it’s possible for participants to update their official e-mail address as recorded in the LINKS Simulation Database.

Participant updates of official e-mail addresses as recorded in the LINKS Simulation Database are possible only after initialization and publication (via e-mail to all team members) of each LINKS firm’s passcode. Using their LINKS firm’s passcode, LINKS participants may change their official LINKS e-mail address after LINKS initialization via the “E-Mail Address Management” button in the LINKS Simulation Database. Confirmations of e-mail address changes are e-mailed to the old and new e-mail addresses.

Student Payment Timing:

The published LINKS price (the discounted price) is in effect until the first round of LINKS is complete. Then, the price is increased 25%. This means that we can initialize your LINKS simulation event (and advance LINKS through to its normal starting point) and students can continue to pay at the discounted price until the first scheduled round. Before initialization can occur, we do need to receive your game-run schedule and the students’ e-mail addresses (grouped into teams).

It is not necessary for your students to pay before LINKS begins to have access to the discounted LINKS price. Students must only pay before the first official game run on your game-run schedule to receive the discounted price. Thus, student payments can occur simultaneously with the beginning of your LINKS simulation event.

Student payment with a personal credit card is via the “Pay For LINKS” link on the LINKS webpage.

As a practical matter, a final warning/reminder will be e-mailed to those students who haven’t paid by the first game run, before implementing the non-discounted price.

LINKS Resources:

- **LINKS Website Resources:** LINKS website (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>) links provide convenient access to all LINKS simulation variants, to the LINKS Simulation Database, to passcode-protected instructor resources, and to user interaction contact points such as "Pay For LINKS", "Payment Questions?", and "Retrieve LINKS Passcode"

- **Printed Manuals:** LINKS manuals are freely available for download via the LINKS website. However, some LINKS instructors prefer to have publication-quality printed manuals provided for all of their students, rather than relying on their students to individually download/print the participant's manual from the LINKS website. We're happy to provide this service for LINKS instructors. The all-inclusive additional cost for participant manuals varies from \$18/student to \$28/student depending on the LINKS simulations variant. We normally need three weeks advance notice to arrange for production and shipping (to the instructor) from our on-demand printer.

- **LINKS Instructor Resources Access:** You may access the evolving LINKS Instructor Resources via the LINKS webpage. Contact Randy Chapman (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com), the LINKS author, to obtain the relevant access parameters (username and passcode).



The LINKS-Simulations Newsletter is a monthly newsletter for current and prospective LINKS instructors and for LINKS friends. Please e-mail questions, comments, suggestions, and other contributions (e.g., LINKS teaching tips) to Winkler@LINKS-simulations.com.



Editor: Cyndy Winkler

Access this edition: <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/newsletter.pdf>

Access previous edition: <http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/newsletter-previous.pdf>



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