

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.



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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.

