The Value of Practice Rounds

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This semester marks the seventh semester I have used the LINKS Supply Chain Management Fundamentals Simulation in my senior-level "capstone" class. A major purpose of the class is to get students used to making business decisions. The LINKS simulation and case studies are the primary tools used to achieve this objective.

In my experience with LINKS, students develop an understanding of how to use the system over a period of time. The first couple of times LINKS was used in this course, I asked students to prepare for the simulation experience by reading the manual, taking the quiz on the web-site, and attending an overview presentation given by another instructor who had used LINKS several times. It became obvious once students began making live (e.g., graded) decisions that they did not understand the simulation well enough to make quality decisions. However, after 2-3 decision periods, the better teams began to catch on.

I have tried several strategies for getting my student teams *up to speed* on the simulation. The most beneficial alternative to date has been the use of practice sessions. This has seemed to help the most students learn how to use the system before being faced with live decisions. Over time, I have increased the number of practice sessions from one (in one semester) to two (in three semesters) and ultimately to three this semester. Three practice rounds appear to be the point of diminishing returns and I don't foresee adding additional practice rounds in the future.

This semester, I took a survey of my students between the 2nd and 3rd decision periods. At this point in time, they had input and analyzed their decisions five times (three practice rounds plus two "live" rounds). One question dealt with their experience learning to use the simulation (see Figure 1 on the next page).

58% of students listed practice rounds as the most useful tool. 24% said reading the user's manual was most helpful. Another 6% identified both these options as a combination method that provided the most benefit. So, almost two-thirds of students (64%) identified practice rounds as the best option available for learning the use the simulation successfully.

Figure 1

Which of the following has helped most in your understanding of LINKS?

a) Reading user's manual
b) Knowledge quiz available on LINKS website
c) Other tools available on LINKS website (tutorials, etc.)
d) In-class overview of LINKS (1st week of class)
e) Decision-making presentations (2nd week of class)
f) Practice rounds
g) Something else (describe: _____)

The survey result validated my faith in practice rounds. LINKS presents a complex decision-making environment to students, many of whom possessing little or no experience balancing numerous competing decisions before. The use of practice rounds give students an opportunity to test drive the simulation without fear that these decisions will harm their grade. Further, students can grasp the inter-connectedness of supply chain decisions to a greater degree than is available from reading the manual or being told by their instructor.

The more insightful students use the practice rounds to test out unorthodox (i.e., higher risk) decisions to gauge the market's reaction. What happens to demand if price is increased or decreased a large amount, say $100? What will happen to operating costs and profitability if all product is moved via the higher cost air option? Can my firm be more profitable by closing down 1-2 regions and focusing on a single region? Some of these learnings carry forward into robust strategies in the live simulation decisions. Others are found to create terrible results and are avoided at all costs. Without practice rounds, I have found most students will be very conservative because they do not know what to expect from the simulation environment. That lack of experience makes them cautious.

In summary, I like practice rounds for two simple reasons. First, practice rounds provide students a path up the learning curve. Having students gain a better understanding of the simulation before they have to make live decisions makes them more informed users. It's better to have the "ah ha" experience before starting the live simulation that to experience it mid-way through the graded decision period. Second, practice rounds give students the opportunity to experiment and try out decisions to see how the simulated market environment reacts. This promotes the creation of more cohesive strategies simply because students understand the impact certain decisions can have.

If you have not used practice rounds to this point I encourage you to consider them. At current LINKS pricing, practice rounds are fairly inexpensive ($3/round/student) and the payoff in learning is significant. I have only used practice rounds with the basic LINKS Supply Chain Management Fundamentals Simulation, and I believe their use will have even greater benefit in more complex versions of the LINKS.