

The Professor's Column



Five Lessons Learned Teaching LINKS Online

Carol Scovotti, D.P.S., Associate Professor of Marketing, University of Wisconsin - Whitewater, is a multi-occasion LINKS instructor.

Last semester, I ran the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation in a graduate-level online course. While I had previously incorporated LINKS in the “on campus” version of the course, this was my first attempt to use it in an environment where teammates never met face-to-face. It was definitely a powerful learning experience for all involved, including the instructor!

Online courses add complexities and logistics not experienced in the classroom. In the online MBA courses offered by UW-Whitewater, students typically work asynchronously with instructors and classmates. In fact, flexibility for a student to work within a personal schedule is considered a distinctive competency of the program. What that ultimately means, however, is that course materials (lectures, handouts, etc.) must be prepared weeks in advance. There are no opportunities for periodic, informal discussions as is possible in the classroom. Having to respond via written communication (emails, news posts, etc.) also take considerable time.

Here are some key lessons I learned as a result this experience. What I learned last time has shaped how I am approaching the assignment for next time I teach this course online.

1. Set up teams in Week 1 of the semester.

I included a table on the LINKS team sign-up sheet so students could identify when they typically schedule study time. To eliminate time zone issues, I used the Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) system. Students were also asked to provide a brief introductory statement that would be shared with their

teammates. The sign-up form was accessible online using a popular survey platform. The criteria used to establish teams included: (1) similar study times; (2) specific classmates with whom they wanted to work; and, (3) the business discipline(s) they were pursuing.

2. More teams with fewer members are better than fewer teams with more members.

Teams with four or more members are problematic in the online environment. In addition to scheduling issues, online teams with fewer members become more cohesive and productive. Next semester, I will establish two- and three-person teams unless students specifically indicate they want to be on a four-person team.

3. Have individual meetings with students via Skype to insure their technology works.

I tried to schedule preliminary meetings with the entire group last time but ran into problems. If one student had a connectivity issue, it negatively caused all the teammates to waste time. Yes, it will take more effort on my part, but confirming that each student has the necessary webcam and software facilitates future meetings.

4. Schedule the bulk of simulation activities towards the end of the semester.

The lack of face-to-face meetings eliminates the opportunity to informally address questions about content that will be formally covered later in the semester. It is important for students to have been exposed to all the marketing issues they must address prior to the start of the simulation rounds rather than learning as they go.

5. After the final round, encourage all students, regardless of team or industry, to share experiences and ask questions of each other.

Normally, online discussions with more than 12 people become disorganized and unmanageable. However, students were so curious about how the other teams functioned that all 50 of them participated. They also requested that the discussion forum be left open so they could go in and read the comments of their colleagues through to the conclusion of the semester. This was, without a doubt, the most interactive discussion we had during the entire course.