



“The Value of Practice Rounds” Revisited

“Practice puts brains in your muscles.” - Sam Sneed

This renowned golfer won his last tournament in 1965 and still holds the all-time record for wins on the PGA Tour. In the quote above, Sam is speaking of the value practice provides in creating muscle memory for a professional athlete. I would like to explain how practice may significantly contribute to your students’ abilities to learn how to make better decisions in the LINKS setting.



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I have used LINKS in my SCM capstone course at Auburn for eleven years. My reason for using the simulation is probably similar to yours ... giving students an opportunity to draw on business concepts learned in earlier courses and experience decision-making and its outcomes in a complex environment.

LINKS has proven to be a great addition to the course over the years, but it comes with a learning curve. Early in my use of the simulation, I would give a demonstration of the simulation, ask students to read the user’s manual, maybe administer a quiz focused on key decision areas, and throw them right into the simulation where a significant portion of their grade (~20% most semesters) was based on their within-simulation performance. I quickly came to the realization that very few students were adequately prepared to make quality decisions and understand the cause(s) of their results at that point in time. Eventually (2-3 rounds into the simulation), the better teams began to catch on.

The students’ struggles helped me understand that LINKS comes with a definite learning curve each student must climb before they are ready to work effectively in the simulation environment. This led to my experimentation with practice rounds. After all, just as Sam suggests above, we all benefit from practice in most things in our lives.

I have tested one, two, and three practice rounds over the years and find all to be beneficial, but using at least two practice rounds seems to deliver the best results. Two practice rounds allow students to make adjustments based on first-round outcomes which is really valuable to their ability to connect specific decisions to consequences.

Three practice rounds gives students an extra cycle of this, but more importantly allows them to test out very different types of decisions. For example, they may learn about price elasticity in a region by setting a relatively high price one round and then a relatively low price the following round. Alternatively, students might wish to understand the impact on demand of changing market spending one period compared to price changes the following period.

What happens if I drop a product or choose to leave a 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.

Invariably when I debrief the simulation experience with students at the end of the semester, I hear that practice rounds are how they actually *learned* to make effective decisions. This aligns with a survey I have given to students several times over the years where practice rounds are consistently listed as the primary element that allowed them to understand the simulation environment. This compares to my earlier days when students often felt they were just *guessing* the first couple of rounds.

A funny conundrum is that each semester two practice rounds have been used I'll hear from several students that a third round was really what would have aided their learning process and allowed them to excel in the simulation. The next semester when three rounds are used I'll get feedback that two were plenty and the third round was a bit of a waste of time. Practice rounds clearly have diminishing returns as more rounds are added and I have used two rounds the majority of the time.

In summary, I like practice rounds for two 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 than 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 I encourage you to consider them. At current LINKS pricing, practice rounds are fairly inexpensive (\$4/round/student) and the payoff in learning is significant. I have used practice rounds with the basic LINKS Supply Chain Management Fundamentals Simulation, and I believe their use will have even greater benefit with more complex versions of LINKS.