LEARNING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT: 
AN ON-LINE COLLABORATION BETWEEN USA AND SWEDEN

Carl Johan Asplund
Lund University
LUND, SWEDEN
Paula F. Jordan
National-Louis University
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, U.S.A.

Abstract

This paper is a report of the continuation and a follow-up of a research project started in the spring of 2005. At that time, two student groups from two separate institutions, as well as countries were connected in an on line platform for a Strategic Management Course. In this second iteration, the research is with a larger number of participating students and a longer interaction period between the students. This paper discusses the main effects of these changes in this collaboration project, along with the pre/post test responses from the students. Additionally, the paper will share the experiences learned when students work in multi-culturally mixed groups to analyze the global automobile industry.

KEY WORDS: Strategic management, on-line education, distance education, methods of instruction, on-line collaboration, multi-culturally mixed groups and pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

While teaching undergraduate strategic management courses in two different countries, at two different institutions, the authors noticed that in many ways, the courses were identical. Discussions led to the idea of connecting the students in these geographically separated courses. In the spring of 2005, the two courses were connected on a small scale and the results were reported in a paper [Asplund & Jordan, 2005]. This current paper is reporting the results of a larger collaboration project and the logistics of connecting the two separate student groups via an on-line platform. A pre/post survey reports the unique learning experiences of the students in this project. Additionally, the paper reports the main lessons learned when students work in multi-culturally mixed teams and ideas about enhancing further online collaboration at the university.

MODELS OF TEACHING

On-line higher education is part of the growing trend in lifelong learning [Conhaim, 2003]. Wide varieties of academics have discussed the issue of on-line instruction. On-line learning is the fastest growing segment in the educational marketplace today. The 2006 Sloan Survey of On-line Learning [2006] found 3.2 million students enrolled in on-line classes in 2005. Researchers have reported information on the challenges in implementing on-line learning. Comparisons between on-line and face-to-face instruction identify differences in students' learning. In both, face-to-face and on-line learning, students learn content (knowledge) and methods of solving problems. Students' ability to solve problems
in an on-line class is highly dependent upon the methods used by the instructor [Grollman & Cannon, 2003]. Nearly all academic disciplines are engaged in some type of on-line learning with mixed results. Green & Gentemann [2001] reported "no significant difference" of outcomes occurred in English courses taught on-line. Morrissey suggested that student performance in Management did improve in the on-line setting [1998]. Some research suggests [Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000] that students do as well or better in an on-line class, and that most aspects of learning could be met in the on-line environment. The majority felt enhanced student-professor interaction by on-line instruction.

Research findings of how brains work [Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000; Damasio 1999; Pinker 1997] are stimulating a re-examination of traditional principles of designing teaching and learning experiences. Current research about how students learn is surfacing due to the changing nature of learning environments. With the new high technology learning environments, face-to-face and online educators should review the teaching and learning processes an interaction between faculty and students and among students. New literature has emerged identifying core principles for designing effective learning environments [Boettcher, 2007]. This research places the student - guided by the faculty and available resources - at the center of all learning experiences. The student comes to the learning experience with a given level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. All learners have a "zone of development" that identifies the readiness to learn. All learners are not the same and, therefore, do not learn in the same way, nor do they learn the same amount in any given situation. The faculty's responsibility is to design and structure the course environment and to encourage and support the student learner. It is the responsibility of the faculty to provide a well-organized and helpful learning environment that addresses faculty-to-student interaction, student-to-student interaction and student-to-resource interaction.

THE TWO INSTITUTIONS

National-Louis University (NLU), established in 1886 and headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, provides undergraduate and graduate programs. The University consists of three colleges. Paula Jordan is a faculty member in the College of Management & Business (CMB). The College of Management offers a Bachelor of Science in Management (BSM), an undergraduate degree. The seven weeks Strategic Management course is the capstone course in this curriculum. National-Louis University uses a cohort group approach to education. This means that the cohort groups start together, move through the curriculum together, and finish together. Adult students (average age is 35 years) characterize the student body in this particular program at National-Louis University. The courses are taught at an on-line class site using the WebCT platform.

Lund University in Lund, Sweden was founded in 1666. The Lund Institute of Technology (LTH) is part of Lund University and is Sweden's third largest institute of technology and the third of its kind in Sweden. Carl-Johan Asplund is a faculty member of both the Lund Institute of Technology and The Executive Foundation at the School of Economics and Management. Undergraduate teaching and research are pursued in the fields of chemical, environmental, civil, mechanical, electrical and computer engineering, as well as engineering physics, industrial management & engineering, risk management, architecture, industrial design and surveying. LTH is also the only establishment in Sweden teaching the Fire Safety Engineering Program. The Institute of Technology includes the Engineering Faculty of Lund University, one of Scandinavia's largest establishments for higher education and research. The courses meet weekly, face-to-face and use an on-line class site with an IT-platform developed within Lund School of Technology. The Strategic Management course runs for seven weeks.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT COURSE

The Strategic Management course is the last course in the BSM curriculum at NLU. It is a capstone course bringing together pieces of all other courses in the curriculum. In Strategic Management students are provided with an opportunity to experience the critical role of strategic planning in the organizational decision making process. Strategic planning within organizations is necessary because of the complex nature of the marketplace and the impact geo-political and global economic forces have on corporations. Organizations need managers who can develop and enact strategies that lead to success. Therefore, the focus of this course is on understanding organizations from the perspective of senior managers who are
responsible for orchestrating comprehensive organizational strategies. The objectives of the course include the following:

- Understand how a company can compete effectively in an industry;
- Understand the role psycho-social forces play in strategy formulation and implementation;
- Examine the impact of organizational politics and conflict on strategic choice;
- Design a basic strategic planning system;
- Demonstrate an understanding of how strategic management involves designing the correct set of organizational arrangements for controlling a company’s strategy;
- Analyze the long term prospects and competitive strengths and weaknesses of a company’s various businesses;
- Examine the different strategies that companies pursue to maximize their value;
- Identify the opportunities and threats that exist in the external environment;
- Identify and use SWOT analysis;
- Identify and analyze trends in an organization’s external environment;
- Make decisions in an atmosphere of limited data, environmental uncertainties and risk.

The Strategic Management course at LTH focuses on business understanding, organizing, decision-making, including advanced business administration knowledge, bringing together knowledge from previous courses on industrial economy in the curriculum at LTH. In Strategic Management students have the opportunity to experience the critical role of strategic management in different firms: small and large, national and international, for profit and not for profit. An increasingly complex and changing business environment requires the development of knowledge about strategic management, leadership and networking within and between organizations. In the Strategic Management course, the focus is on understanding the core of the business model and especially the differences between productivity and efficiency, i.e., between what to do (i.e. the “business”) and how to do it (i.e. the organization).

The Objectives of the course include the following:

- Understand how a company, private and public, can compete in an industry;
- Understand the vital role internal and external forces play in strategy formulation, choice and implementation;
- Examine the impact of organizational values, business models, politics and conflict have on strategic formulation and choice;
- Give an understanding of how strategic management involves designing the “right” set of different organizational arrangements including people and technology for fulfilling a lasting company’s strategy;
- Identify and analyze the opportunities and threats that exist and emerge in the macro/societal environment;
- Identify and analyze the competitive strengths and weaknesses of a company’s various businesses environment;
- Examine the different generic strategies that companies and organization can pursue in order to optimize value for themselves and other key stakeholders;
- Identify and analyze long term scenarios;
- Make decisions in an atmosphere of limited data, environmental uncertainties and risk;
- Examine managing and changing large and small organizational systems.

**LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

The Strategic Management course at NLU operates in an online environment. There are no face-to-face meetings between these students and the instructor. The WebCT platform provides several tools to enhance the learning process. There is a course email function, a discussion board for ongoing discussions, a resource area to post the syllabus and other resources the student might find useful, and a synchronous chat function, should there be a desire to meet. The Strategic Management course at National-Louis University integrates case studies on many levels. Each week one major case study
bridges the students understanding of the topics covered in the weekly sessions and readings. In addition, students select one major company and perform a complete strategic management analysis as a final project, which becomes a significant portion of their final course grade evaluation.

The Strategic Management course at the LTH meets face-to-face three times a week for a two hour lecture and once a week for a case seminar for case teams of twenty students. Seminars of three parallel cases run for four weeks. The cases address key issues of the course curriculum. Guest speakers from industry and academic guest lecturers complement the discussions. The course begins and ends often with a live case presented by executives from local and global organizations. Current research is also presented by speakers from Sweden and abroad. Small student groups discuss the material presented and connect the course to real life. In the face-to-face meeting sessions, a variety of teaching methods are used. Each class session starts with a short introduction addressing the main points of the day called “The question of the day”. The lecture serves as an arena to clarify difficult models and concepts as well as to respond to any questions students might have about the material. The class is divided into teams of four students each. These groups, each week, work on one case study, that illustrates and provides application of theories, models, and concepts covered in the discussion periods of that week. Cases from the different parts of the world are used. An on-line web site stores course documents and information such as course program, assignments, information about guest lectures, added case material, the question of today and Power Point slides on the lectures. The students also work with a special case project during the seven weeks. This project accounts for 40% of their final course grade. The main purpose of this task is to encourage the students to integrate theories and concepts and enhance their analytical ability through the application of real life events. At the last face-to-face meeting session, the professor presents additional literature sources and students are assigned an individual examination case as a final examination (60% of final grade).

COLLABORATION

A total of 21 students from two class groups were recruited - seven from NLU and fourteen from LHT - and linked through online in a collaboration project during the month of March. All students were assigned to one of three teams composed of Swedish and U.S. students. The Swedish students were given early access and completed three tasks to allow them to become familiar with the online WebCT classroom sponsored by NLU. Each Swedish and American participant read and responded to the emails received. Then the students were asked to introduce themselves on their team discussion space. Team members were encouraged to interact with each other to become better acquainted their team members. Finally, each Swedish student was required to complete the pre-participation survey and return it to the instructor. Quality standards of what constituted a brief response and a more elaborate discussion reply were communicated to all student, were set early in the process.

Three key assignments were given to the students over a 21-day period. On March 12, the weekly assignment asked students to identify and describe three to five key events that best illustrated what has happened in the global automobile industry in the last five years. On March 19, the assignment asked students to identify the key competitors in the automobile industry. On March 26, the assignment asked students to apply the Michael Porter article and theoretical framework to the global automobile industry. After eighteen days, the discussion ended. The twenty-one participants posted 359 discussion points during the three-week period.

STUDENT LEARNING

All students completed a pre-project survey before the project began and completed a post-project survey after the project was completed. The questions asked in the pre-project survey were the following:

- What do you professionally and personally want to achieve (i.e. learn) through this international project in Strategic Management?
- What do you expect will be the advantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus the more classic i.e. face-to-face learning?
- Have you ever before at the University or any other school used the on-line classroom technology as a learning tool? If yes, what is your opinion of this pedagogical tool?
Prior to the start of the project, when asked what they wanted to achieve, the responses revolved around wanting to gain more knowledge in the area of strategic management, achieving a more intercultural perspective on the subject and methods of analyzing issues, learning how to interact with a multicultural group. The Swedish students also saw this project as an opportunity to practice their English language skills. Advantages of online learning listed included flexible hours and lack of geographical boundaries, the ability to work with people all over the world, the ability to take in more information and having time to reflect before responding. One student identified that there were no advantages, just disadvantages to overcome such as the geographical distance and ability to make an international project like this possible. When asked about disadvantages of learning via the on-line classroom, students responded with concerns about the impersonal nature of this type of interaction. Discussions might lose some dimensions without the face-to-face interaction and ability to get to know your group members. Other potential disadvantages included the need for self-discipline to stay connected to the online platform and the additional challenges with writing versus speaking as a mode of communication. One student commented, “it is difficult to get help from the teachers if you get stuck on a problem” as a disadvantage. When asked whether students had previous experience using the on-line classroom technology as a learning tool, ten indicated some previous experience, and eleven indicated no previous experience. In additional comments, students displayed enthusiasm in looking forward to this project and thought it would be “fun and interesting.”

The questions asked the in follow up, post-project survey included:

- What did you professionally and personally learn through the international on-line project in Strategic Management?
- What do you now consider to be the advantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus more classic i.e. face-to-face learning?
- Were there some disadvantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus more classic i.e. face-to-face learning?
- What were the main items you learned from the discussions about the global automobile industry?
- What do you think about the time period that was used for the three discussions?
- Would you recommend other professors at the university to use the on-line classroom technology as a learning tool for other courses?
- If yes, in what kind of courses? When surveyed at the end of the project, the students reported learning a great deal about the global automobile industry.

Students reported a strengthening of their research and writing skills, as it was important to be concise in the writing of their postings for others to understand. Students pointed out the benefit of seeing different points of views from different cultures. “It is very interesting to see similarities and differences in opinions of people from different cultures.” “Can interact with people/students from all over the world” and “different cultures bring new ideas to a discussion” were comments from the participants. Students also reported the flexibility and independence of work as advantages. Students liked the ability to do ‘real-time research’ while being connected to the internet and the ability to easily document the discussions to have that information for later use. Several students noted as an advantage that everyone in the group actively participated versus a face-to-face classroom where some might sit back and not participate. The post-participation survey also asked for the disadvantages of online learning. “More time consuming than a face-to-face course because one needs to do research on the topic”, “the additional time to communicate concisely your ideas”, “not being able to make a personal connection or see body language” and “a time lag with the discussion responses” were all identified as disadvantages of this type of learning. Students reported having learned a great deal of information about the global automobile industry after participating in this discussion. When asked about the length of each discussion period, students felt the time was just right. There did not appear to be any stagnation of the discussions and students commented, “When an issue had been covered thoroughly, the facilitators were able to re-direct the discussion in a different direction and kept the interaction lively.”
CONCLUSION

In the first iteration of this research project during the spring of 2005, the post-participation survey identified key areas for improvement. These key areas included providing more timely and effective feedback to the students and clearly establishing posting guidelines. In addition, students reported needing more information about the special mode that is unique to online learning and realization of the importance of individual research by each student. Another challenge was to support a more personal connection link between the students. There are a variety of pedagogical methods available to bridge this gap and the project will continue to address and discuss areas for improvement and enhancement in this type of learning format and learning environment in the future.

As the interaction progressed, it was very apparent that those students who had never participated in an online learning platform improved noticeably their discussion skills with each interaction, most likely, because they became more familiar and comfortable with this type of interaction.

The authors found overwhelming student support for “all types of courses where it is possible to have discussions”. Additionally, students seemed to appreciate the international exposure, the dialogue and found it interesting and beneficial to learn the opinions and thoughts of students from other parts of the world. This type of learning has the potential of developing students’ multicultural interaction skills and of broadening their knowledge base of the subject under study (i.e. strategic management). Combining online courses of universities in different countries will strengthen the networking and cooperation between universities around the world.

REFERENCES


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