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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT – AN ON-LINE COLLABORATION OF TWO CLASS GROUPS SEPARATED BY A 'SMALL POND' AND SIX TIME ZONES

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Abstract

An undergraduate course in Strategic Management seemingly provides similar basic content to students including the infamous SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threat) analysis along with the identification of functional level, business level, and generic strategies to enhance an organization's competitiveness. One of the most common resources for this type of course is the article outlining a theoretical framework "How Competitive Forces Shape Strategy" by Michael Porter [Porter, 1979]. This paper discusses the differences and similarities of teaching an undergraduate Strategic Management course for two different institutions located in different countries. Secondly, the paper addresses the logistics of connecting the two separate student groups for a collaboration project using an on-line platform. Additionally, the paper shares the experiences learned when students work in multi-culturally mixed groups to analyze an industry around Michael Porter's framework [Porter, 1979].

KEY WORDS: Strategic management, face-to-face and on-line education, hybrid learning model, methods of instruction, on-line collaboration, and pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Sometime ago, while discussing their teaching experiences, the authors found that they both were teaching, although in different countries, undergraduate Strategic Management courses which were identical in may ways. They decided to connect, via an on-line platform, students from both classes, geographically separated by a 'small pond' and six time zones. This paper examines the similarities and differences of an undergraduate Strategic Management course at National Louis University (NLU) located in Tampa, Florida, U.S.A. and Lund Institute of Technology located in Lund, Sweden. The courses at both institutions run over seven weeks and utilize a combination of face-to-face and on-line methodology. The paper also reviews a collaborative effort that united students in an on-line classroom. The paper concludes with an evaluation of what was learned through this experience and how similar collaborations could benefit students in the future.

HYBRID MODELS OF TEACHING

On-line higher education is part of the growing trend in lifelong learning [Conhaim, 2003]. On-line learning is the fastest growing segment of the educational marketplace today. According to a July 2003 U.S. Department of Education report [U.S. Department of Education, 2003], more than three million people were enrolled in on-line classes in 2001, and six million are projected for 2006.

Based on 2002 data, the 2003 Sloan Survey of On-line Learning [2003] found that 81 percent of all higher education institutions offer at least one full on-line or blended course and 34 percent offer one or more complete on-line degree programs. Problems encountered in the implementation of on-line learning are widely discussed in the literature. In an attempt to identify the differences in student's learning, comparisons are often made between on-line and face-to-face instruction of the same course. Under both approaches, students are required to know content (knowledge) and to solve problems.

Some studies have revealed that the student's ability to solve problems in an on-line class is highly dependent upon the methods being used by the instructor [Grollman & Cannon, 2003]. On-line learning methods have been implemented across most academic disciplines. Mixed results have been reported from these studies. Green & Gentemann [2001] reported that "no significant difference" outcome occurred in English courses taught on-line, while Morrissey [1998] suggested that student performance in Management did improve in the on-line setting. 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. A majority felt that student-professor interaction had the potential of being enhanced by on-line instruction.

The question arises as to the appropriate combination of face-to-face and on-line teaching to enhance learning. Some form of on-line learning is being accepted at most educational institutions and by the business [Jonassen, 1996]. Students taking courses at local institutions tend to appreciate hybrid classes that include a mix of face-to-face and on-line sessions. Students receive the benefits of both the face-to-face interaction with the instructor and their classmates along with the flexibility of completing a portion of their assignments in the on-line environment.

THE TWO INSTITUTIONS

National Louis-University, established in 1886 and headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, provides degree completion programs in its field location in Tampa, Florida, USA. The University consists of three colleges and one of the authors, Dr. Paula Jordan is a faculty member in the College of Management & Business (CMB). CMB provides both Undergraduate and Graduate degrees. The Bachelor of Science in Management (BSM) is an undergraduate degree in the College of Management and Business. Graduate degrees include the Masters of Science in Electronic Commerce (MSEC), the Masters of Science in Managerial Leadership (MSML), the Masters in Human Resource Management (HRM) and the Masters of Business Administration (MBA).

National-Louis University uses the cohort group approach to education. This means that the classes (groups of students) start together, move through the curriculum together, and finish together. The student body of the field programs at National-Louis University consists of adult students working full-time. The average age of a student in these programs is 35. The BSM curriculum has three terms; each term 17 weeks in length. Courses range between four and seven weeks in length, depending on the particular course. They are conducted in weekly face-to-face meetings and in an on-line class site using the WebCT platform. Face-to-face class meetings take place in the evenings and on weekends. Strategic Management is the last course in the BSM program and runs over seven weeks.

Lund Institute of Technology (LTH) is part of Lund University which was founded in 1666. LTH is the third largest institute of technology in Sweden and is the third of its kind in the country. 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 a 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. For the most part, teaching is carried out in Lund, but some departments are located at the Helsingborg Campus, and courses are also given in

Markaryd (pulp and paper technology). The academic year is divided in four phases with the exception of summer. Courses are conducted in weekly face-to-face meetings, with the aid of on an on-line class site using an IT-platform developed by LTH. Face-to-face class meetings take place at various times during the week. The Strategic Management course runs seven weeks.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT COURSE

The Strategic Management course is the last course in the BSM curriculum at NLU. It is a capstone course, uniting elements of all other previous courses in the curriculum. In Strategic Management, students are provided an opportunity to experience the critical role of strategic planning in the organizational decision-making process.

Strategic planning within organizations has become necessary due to the increasingly complex nature of the marketplace and the impact of geo-political and global economic forces. Successful organizations are those whose managers can think and act strategically. Strategic managers are concerned with the future direction of the organization, and strategic plans are typically designed in a complex and dynamic environment.

In this course, the focus is on understanding organizations from the perspective of senior managers who are responsible for orchestrating comprehensive organizational strategies. These strategy makers are concerned with creating overall plans that link the organization's competencies and both its internal and external environments.

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 the 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 Lund Institute of Technology (LTH) focuses on business understanding, strategizing, organizing, and decision-making. It develops an understanding of more advanced business administration knowledge, bringing together the previous courses on industrial economy in the curriculum at LTH and the technological courses that constitute the different engineering programs.

In Strategic Management, students are provided with the opportunity to experience the critical role of strategic management and organization in different firms, small and large, national and international, for-profit and not-for-profit. It has become necessary to develop knowledge about strategic management, leadership and networking within and between organizations due to the increasingly complex and changing nature of societal and business contexts. This is especially true when it comes to the engineers that are the main target group for this course.

In the Strategic Management course, the focus is on understanding the core models of the business idea and the differences between productivity and effectiveness. Other key concepts are the business model, management and leadership, stakeholder mapping and managing change. The strategic management course also addresses the two leading key perspectives on strategy research, i.e. the position and resource perspectives; the latter focusing on how the organization's resources and capabilities address and sometimes change with the external milieu and contexts.

The Objectives of the Course include the following:

- Understand how a company can gain and maintain competitive advantage 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;
- Analyze and understand different kinds of large, medium, and small companies and organizations in various industries.

METHODS OF LEARNING

As stated earlier, both courses are offered through a hybrid model of learning, with a face-to-face and an on-line component. The course at National Louis University meets face-to-face once a week for four hours and has an on-line classroom site using the WebCT platform. Students are required to participate in both the face-to-face meetings and the weekly on-line discussion board. In the face-to-face meeting sessions, a variety of teaching methods are used. Each class session is started with a short lecture touching upon the main topics of the weekly reading assignments. Students are provided with examples and clarifications on more difficult concepts as well as answers to any questions they might have about the material. The class is often divided into smaller groups. Each group is assigned a short case study that illustrates the topics of discussion for the week. These smaller groups report theirs analyses to the entire group, identifying each group's approach and resolution of the issues.

The on-line WebCT classroom is used in a number of ways. Often it is used to bridge the learning from one week's topics to another. Having the students connected on-line and engaged in a discussion is often a way to continue a discussion that might have been started in the face-to-face session. The use of an electronic discussion board provides a natural framework for teaching critical thinking. It captures the best of both traditional writing assignments as well as in-class discussions. The on-line classroom can also be used to introduce the next week's topics and provide questions for thought as students prepare for the next face-to-face session.

In the Strategic Management course at National Louis University, case studies are used on many levels. One major case study is assigned each week for the students to practice the topics being covered in the weekly sessions. In addition, students are expected to select one major company and perform an entire strategic management analysis as a final project. This project represents a significant portion of their final course grade. The final form of student evaluation consists of a large-scale behavioral simulation. Each student is assigned the role of a top level executive of a global firm and is required to simulate management of this organization for four hours while his performance is assessed by trained observers.

The Strategic Management course at Lund Institute of Technology, meets face-to-face three times a week for two hours of lectures. One day involves a case discussion of a group of twenty students. Three parallel case seminars are held four weeks in a row. The cases that are chosen address key issues in the course curriculum. Guest lecturers from industry and academia with close connection to the curriculum supplement the offering. The course often begins and ends with a live case presented by executives from

local and global organizations. Swedish and foreign researchers and scholars present new research findings to the students. The material presented is subsequently being discussed in the small student groups. This connects the course to reality where strategies are formed and pursued.

The face-to-face lectures are voluntary for the students. In these meeting sessions, a variety of teaching methods are used. Each class starts with a short introduction addressing the main points of the lecture. This short introduction is called "The question of the day". Students are provided with a variety of examples from different local and international businesses. 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 groups of four students and these small groups are assigned one case study per week, which illustrates and provides application of theories, models, and concepts covered in the discussion for the week. The course uses cases from the U.S.A., Europe, Asia, and Scandinavia. The course uses an on-line web site as storage containing course documents and information, e.g. course programs, assignments, information about guest lectures, added case material, the question of the day and PowerPoint slides on the lectures. Students are required to participate in the face-to-face case seminars. If they miss more than one, they are assigned extra individual and collective assignments from a case in the literature.

Students also work with a special case project during seven-week course. The focus of the special case project changes every year. This year they worked with nine different "industries" that included transport logistics, graduate education, wine industry, fast food, sport cars, and biotechnology. The main purpose of this task is to encourage the student with the integration of theories and concepts by applying them to real life events in order to enhance their analytical ability and judgment. At the final face-to-face meeting session, students are again presented with the literature and are assigned to one last individual examination case. They work in small groups to investigate what kind of issues/questions can be addressed from a strategic point of view. At the end of the course, students individually write a final examination on the literature.

COLLABORATION

A total of seven students from two class groups were recruited, three from National Louis and four from Lund Institute of Technology, and were linked up in an on-line collaboration project during February and March of 2005. On February 27, the Swedish students were provided access to the on-line WebCT classroom sponsored by National Louis University. During this first week, the Swedish students and instructors were given a chance to familiarize themselves with WebCT. A private area was created on the discussion board for them to practice and participate in informal discussions.

On March 6, all students were provided access to the class site and assigned to two culturally mixed groups (U.S. and Swedish students). Group members were asked to introduce themselves using the on-line discussion board with a short background of their education, experience, and outside interests. Students were encouraged to interact with each other, in essence getting to know their team members. The students received reading requirements, assignments, guidelines and clarification on the "code of conduct", i.e., of how a discussion reply could be evaluated. To set the appropriate quality standard for interaction, from the very beginning, students were told what constituted a more elaborate discussion answer versus what might be considered a more surface level discussion response.

Three key assignments were given to the students over a 14-day period. On March 9, students were asked to identify and describe three to five key events that they thought best illustrated what had happened in the global automobile industry in the last five years. On March 13, students were asked to identify the key competitors in the automobile industry. On March 16, students were asked to apply the Michael Porter article and theoretical framework to the global automobile industry. The discussion ended on March 20, two weeks after it began.

LESSONS LEARNED

Students were surveyed before the project began and 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) with this international project in Strategic Management?

- What do you expect will be advantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus a more classic approach, i.e. face-to-face learning?
- What do you expect will be disadvantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus the more classic approach, i.e. face-to-face learning?
- Have you ever before at the University level or at any other school used 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, student responses centered on wanting to become a better researcher, gaining knowledge and increasing their analytic abilities. Students identified the possible advantages of this type of learning as representing a more efficient use of their time ("able to log in anytime, anywhere"), and having the ability to practice a different mode of communication skill without the benefit of seeing body language and making eye contact.

Potential disadvantages identified by students included missing the "personal aspect" of learning and more time spent discussing the issues, as "one might have to wait for someone to respond to a post." One student was concerned about equity issues indicating, "It might be easier for some group members to not do as much work." When asked whether they had previous experience using the on-line classroom technology as a learning tool, three indicated no previous experience and four indicated previous experience. Additionally, students commented that they were looking forward to this international collaboration as a chance to not only use the on-line classroom learning technology, but also as an opportunity to converse with a different culture and gain different aspects of an issue.

Questions asked at the conclusion of the project included:

- What did you professionally and personally learn with this 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 approach, i.e. face-to-face learning?
- Were there some disadvantages of learning via the on-line classroom versus more classic approach, i.e. face-to-face learning?
- What were the main facts you learned from the discussions on the global automobile industry?
- Was the amount of time devoted to the three discussions appropriate?
- Would you recommend that other professors at the university use on-line classroom technology as a learning tool in their courses? If yes, in which course?

Overall, students reported in the post project survey that they learned much about the global automobile industry. They felt that being exposed to different viewpoints during the discussion was very beneficial. As one student put it, "Throughout the collaboration I've noticed how we tend to bring forward interesting aspects of the topic at hand. Apparently this is one of the benefits of collaborating over nations." When asked to identify the advantages of this type of learning, most students said it was convenient and flexible. They also said this learning method allowed them to better prepare and complete research ahead of time, before they posted their discussion message. Being able to connect with a diverse group of people in another country added to learning that took place. One student indicated, "Professionally, I learned that on-line classes can succeed, if the partner is next door, or half way around the world." Another student said, "You can efficiently exchange information with people who might have grown up in a totally different environment, having very different points of view."

When asked about the disadvantages to this type of learning, the students identified the time lag in feedback as a downside. They sometimes were not sure they were "on the right track" with the discussion as the feedback was not immediately received. A few students also felt they were missing the auditory aspect of learning. As one student stated, "Although I did enjoy the online [experience], I am one of those students that needs the classroom structure. I think it would be very hard for me to do a four to six week class online, although I do have friends that consider that the only way to go". This is supported by the quantity and quality of discussion posts they made during the 14-day discussion period. They felt the time period for the discussions was about right, any more time would have dragged the discussion out, and any less would not have given them enough time to complete the assignment. However, they reported feeling some anxiety with regard to the time period and the complexity of the assignments being asked to complete. Overall, the students expressed that using this on-line platform for learning was interesting and would be appropriate for some types of courses, but not all courses.

CONCLUSION

One focus of this paper was a comparison of the teaching of an undergraduate Strategic Management course for two different institutions located in different countries. The paper also addressed the logistics of connecting the two separate student groups for a collaboration project using an on-line platform. Additionally, the paper shared the experiences learned when students work in multi-culturally mixed groups.

Although the Strategic Management courses were very similar in their teaching objectives, length of time, undergraduate status, and using face-to-face and online pedagogy, the study revealed the following three main differences: the balance between lectures and case seminars, the use of the online component and the evaluation of students.

By adding an online component, the authors fostered a more continuous student engagement in the course curriculum and between the students. An online asynchronous discussion area was used via WebCT, where students from both courses were connected and had an opportunity to work together in multicultural groups.

Overall, many things were learned from this short interaction. From the feedback, it was apparent that students want and miss the instant feedback they often receive in a face-to-face environment from both the instructor and their group members. Often students are used to being "served" knowledge through lectures. The on-line learning mode requires both new learning models and working formats from both students and faculty. As the on-line course proceeded, the quality of student discussion improved noticeably and the pace of interaction in the on-line classroom picked up. It was also noted that the students' ability to conduct research using on-line library resources and search engines increased. Students liked the multicultural aspect of discussing topics with dialoguing with students from a different culture. The collaboration project thus fulfilled expectations of enhancing learning in an international setting. Utilizing an on-line classroom platform permitted students to collaborate across six time zones and a small pond.

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