

**Strategic Management – A Small Pond and Six Time Zones Apart:
A Comparison of Face to Face and Online Teaching
Sweden and the United States**

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ABSTRACT

Anyone who has taught a course in Strategic Management probably provides the same 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. What might be different in the teaching of strategic management courses are the methods of instruction. The focus of this paper is a comparison of the teaching of an undergraduate Strategic Management course for two different institutions located in different countries. The strategic management course offered in these two unassociated institutions is a 7-week long undergraduate course. Both courses are offered through a hybrid model of teaching that includes face to face meetings along with an online component. The curriculum and teaching methods of these two courses will be compared and contrasted. Additionally, the lessons learned both in the process of teaching and of comparing the two experiences will be shared.

Keywords: Strategic Management, Face to face and online education, Hybrid model, Methods of instruction, Pedagogical and evaluation formats.

INTRODUCTION

Sometime ago, we (the authors) happened upon a discussion of our teaching experiences and found that we both taught an undergraduate strategic management course. Upon further discussions, we realized that these two courses, taught at two different institutions, in two different countries were identical in many ways. We wondered if we could learn anything from comparing these courses which were geographically separated by a small pond and six time zones. This paper will focus on a comparison of teaching an undergraduate Strategic Management course for National Louis University (NLU) located in Tampa, Florida, USA and the Lund Institute of Technology (LU) located in Lund, Sweden, respectively. Both of these courses run 7 weeks in length and are taught by some combination of face to face and online methodology. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the teaching methods used in each course in order to draw some comparisons and differences between them. The closing section of the paper will discuss the lessons learned in this comparison and of course, some ideas of what we might do to enhance the experience for the students.

HYBRID MODELS OF TEACHING

Online higher education is part of the growing trend in lifelong learning [1]. The issue of online instruction has been discussed among a wide variety of academics. Online

learning is the fastest growing segment in the educational marketplace today. According to a July 2003 U.S. Department of Education report [8], more than 3 million people were enrolled in online classes in 2001, and 6 million are projected for 2006. Based on more recent 2002 data, the 2003 Sloan Survey of Online Learning [7] found that 81 percent of all higher education institutions offer at least one fully online or blended course, and 34 percent offer one or more complete online degree programs.

Some authors have provided information on the problems in implementing online learning. A comparison between online and face-to-face instruction of the same course is often made in an attempt to identify the differences in the students learning. In both, face to face and online learning, students are being asked to know content (knowledge) and to solve problems. What is often found is that the student's ability to solve problems in an online class is highly dependent upon the methods being used by the instructor [4].

Online learning methods have been implemented across nearly all academic disciplines. Mixed results have been reported from these studies. Green & Gentemann [2] reported "no significant difference" outcome occurred in English courses being taught online. Morrissey [5] suggested that student performance in Management did improve in the online setting. Some research suggests [6] students do as well or better in an online class, and that most aspects of learning could be met in the online environment. The majority felt that student-professor interaction could be enhanced by online instruction.

The question arises as to the appropriate combination of face to face and online teaching to enhance learning. Some form of online learning is being accepted in most educational institutions and in the business environment [3]. Students who take courses from local institutions tend to appreciate hybrid classes that are conducted in person several times but also 'meets' online. 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 online 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 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 class groups start together, go through the curriculum together, and finish together. The student body in the field programs at National-Louis University is characterized as adult students with full-time employment. The average age of a student is 35 in these programs. The BSM curriculum has 3 terms; each term is 17 weeks in length. Courses range between 4 weeks and 7 weeks in length, depending on the particular course. The courses are conducted in weekly face to face meetings and in an online 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 7 weeks in length.

Included in the Lund University which was founded in 1666 is the college of the Lund Institute of Technology (LTH). It is Sweden's third largest institute of technology and the third of its kind in Sweden. 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. 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. The courses are conducted in weekly face to face meetings and with the aid of an online class site using an IT-platform developed within the Lund School of Technology. Face to face class meetings take place at various times during the week. The Strategic Management course runs 7 weeks in length.

THE 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 previous 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 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 that have managers who can think and act strategically. Strategic managers are concerned with the future direction of the organization, and strategic plans are usually 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 psychosocial 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 School of Technology, Sweden focuses on business understanding and decision making. It is a course for the 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 an opportunity to experience the critical role of strategic management and organizing in different firms; small and large, national and international, commercial and voluntarily. Strategic focusing and orchestration within and between organizations has become necessary due to the increasingly complex and

changing nature of societal and business contexts. Strategic managers and other internal and external key stakeholders are more concerned with managing the future direction of their companies. In this course, the focus is on understanding (and developing) strategic management along with core business ideas such as business models, positioning, stakeholder mapping and managing change. The strategy course addresses the two leading key perspectives on strategy research, i.e. the fit and stretch perspectives. The latter focusing on how the organization's resources and capabilities address and sometimes change with the external milieu.

The Objectives of the Course include the following:

- Understand how a company 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;
- Gives 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;
- Managing and changing large and small organizational systems.

METHODS OF LEARNING

As stated earlier, both of these courses are offered through a hybrid model of learning, with a face to face and an online component. For the course at National Louis University, it meets face to face once a week for 4 hours and has an online classroom site using the WebCT platform. Students are required to participate in both the face to face meetings and the weekly online 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 clarification on

more difficult concepts as well as answers to any questions they might have about the material. The class group is often broken into smaller groups and each assigned a short case study which illustrates the topics of discussion for the week. These smaller group analyses are then reported back to the whole group to identify where each group was thinking similarly or differently about the issues.

The online WebCT classroom is used in a number ways. Often it is used to bridge the learning from one week's topics to another. Having the students connected online 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 online classroom can also be used to introduce the next week's topics and provide questions for thought as they are preparing for the next face to face session.

Due to the nature of working adults and their experience, they have a very high level of application skills when it comes using case studies. 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, which becomes a significant portion of their final course grade evaluation. 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 simulates the management of this organization for 4 hours while being assessed by trained observers.

The Strategic Management course at the Lund Institute of Technology, meets face to face three times a week for 2 hours of lecture at a time. On Wednesdays there is a case seminar for case teams of twenty students. There are three paralleled case seminars held four weeks in a row. The course works with guest lecturers from both the industry and academia with close connection to the curriculum. The course begins and ends with a live case presented by executives from local and global companies. The material that is presented is then 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 the face to face meeting sessions, a variety of teaching methods are used. Each class session is started 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 whole class group 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 case from the USA, Europe and Scandinavia in order to get a thick repertoire of examples.

The course uses an online web site for storage containing course documents and information; e.g. course program, assignments, information about guest lectures, added case material, the question of today and Power Point slides on the lectures.

Students are required to participate in the face to face case seminars. If they miss more than one case seminar they are assigned extra individual and collective assignments from a case in the literature. The students also work with a special case project during the 7 weeks. This project accounts for 40% of their final course grade. The focus of the special case project changes every year. The main purpose of this task is to encourage the student with the integration of theories and concept by applying them to real life events.

At the very last face to face meeting session, students are presented with the literature once more and are assigned one last case. They are allowed to work in small groups to investigate what kind of issues/questions could be addressed from a strategic point of view. After three weeks they individually write a final examination (60% of final grade) on the literature.

COMPARISONS

When we compared the strategic management courses in United States and Sweden, we found many similarities especially concerning the objectives of the course, the curriculum and the literature. The areas we found dissimilar were the following:

- The pedagogical format of the balance between lectures and case seminars,
- The use of the online component,
- The student evaluation forms.

The pedagogical format of the balance between lectures and case seminars

NLU uses the face to face sessions for both lecturing and mini-case discussions. Face to face sessions are held once a week for four hours at a time. They intertwine the use of lectures and case studies. LTH uses more classical lectures

(six hours) in a traditional “classic” manner and adding guest lectures from companies and academia to enrich the learning. The seminar meetings are held separately for two hours each week and specifically address case analyses.

The use of the online component

NLU uses the webCT as an online “living” classroom where dialog with students and faculty are of the utmost importance for the end result of the course. The WebCT platform used at NLU provides a virtual classroom with email, areas for posting information, discussion boards, and synchronous chat technology. LTH uses their website more as a self serviced storage and information desk of necessary and supportive material to the course.

The student evaluation forms

NLU uses several forms of student evaluation including weekly case assignments, a final strategic management analysis of one company, and the assessment of student’s participation in a behavioral simulation. LTH has two evaluation forms; a team project (i.e. The Scenario analysis including a strategic PM) and a written case analysis addressing key concepts and models within the literature.

LESSONS LEARNED

The students at National Louis University and Lund University do both well when real life case studies are used to illustrate a theoretical concept from the text. They have an easier understanding of something they have experienced or seen.

It is believed that the hybrid method (face to face and online) of teaching results in a richer learning environment when compared to strictly face to face or strictly online. Whether it is used as a storeroom of information or as an active learning area, the continued level of interaction with students in the online platform fosters continued engagement from the student. This is supported by a course evaluation made in Lund where students reported more active engagement in the course due to the online component. Here a continued and improved interaction on the website fosters a more active participation.

You may want to include a specific section on the issue of how students will be evaluated on assignments. When asking students to post to the online classroom or participate in the face to face class meetings or seminars, it is beneficial to be very specific about these participation requirements. This also applies to any written evaluation methods. Be therefore very specific about the evaluation formats at the beginning of the

course. These evaluation criteria implicitly and explicitly serve as an “invisible” steering wheel of focusing the student’s engagement in the course.

As with any teaching, it is important to manage student expectations. Be clear as to when you will be connecting with students, whether it is before or after class, during specified office hours, or in the online classroom. If you aren’t there when they expect, it could lead to disappointment on their part.

Students want feedback, both in the face to face meetings and in the online classroom. Be very specific about when and how you will respond to student participation. You might want to make it clear to students in your syllabus when they can expect you to provide feedback, and how you will provide that feedback. You also want to get your students in the habit of communicating with each other, rather than relying on you all the time for “feedback”. These were well articulated and supported both at NL and LTH.

If it is applicable to your course, assigning a student moderator can add to both, face to face group assignments and online assignments. After students have had an opportunity to orient themselves and have a good understanding of the purpose and execution of an effective discussion, you can make assignments whereby students are designated as the “team leader” to moderate an assignment. This is a great way to engage students and free you from some of the vigilance of monitoring multiple discussions.

One of the most useful lessons suggested to anyone teaching a class with an online component is to use separate email accounts for your course. One of the best ways for your courses to intrude on every other part of your life is to send everything to the same email address. Having separate email accounts makes it possible to do a “quick email check”, and can help you to better manage the course. This separate email often comes in handy if your main system goes down due to those pesky viruses that are everywhere these days. If you prefer not to do this, ask the students to put your course identification in the subject line. Again, it is very helpful with regard to manageability.

Request students to provide you with their contact information. We usually ask for both telephone and email contacts from all the members of the team. It helps to have their email account so that you can easily identify which student has sent you an email message. We also request they put this in all communication and documentation. If you have an online component to a face to face class, create a student lounge as a area for students to communicate with each other. You can also use this area as a place to post frequently asked questions. It’s also a golden opportunity for the faculty and instructor to gain a deeper knowledge of

the student perspective. Many times if one student asks a question, there are several others in the class that have the same questions. It is much easier and time effective to respond once than 15 times.

CONCLUSION

The main differentials in the teaching of this strategic management course in the United States and Sweden are three; the pedagogical format i.e. the balance between lectures and case seminars, the use of the online component and the evaluation forms. The focus of this paper has been a comparison of the teaching of an undergraduate Strategic Management course for two different institutions located in different countries. By adding an online component we foster a more continuous student engagement in the course curriculum and between the students. Adding an online component to any course takes a great amount of time and effort.

One area of enhancement is to explore the possibility of combining the class groups in their learning. It might be helpful to create an online asynchronous discussion area, or an online synchronous chat session where students from both courses are connected and have an opportunity to work together. This could include having a guest lecturer on a specific topic or assigning groups of students to work on a short case study.

The end result of an academic strategic management course can be measured in a number of ways, although the best result is found when the students experience the learning of something new that makes a difference to them in relation to the real world. Through our experience with comparing and contrasting our similar but also different perspectives on the academic agenda in our two countries, we've learned some new ways to better understand and manage our energy as facilitators of learning. This will help us to focus and prioritize all the learning activities that can be chosen when designing and executing an academic course in the future.

Having the right combination of face to face and online methodology adds enrichment to both the teaching content and learning process for both students and faculty. How you combine these depend of the purpose and objectives of the course, the participants and their willingness to actively participate in newer hybrid learning methods. The course objective and evaluation forms determine the choice and the balance between face to face and online teaching and the different challenges they can offer for both the reflective student and the reflective teacher/faculty member.

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