

CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL TRAINING: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Cal Poly Pomona business students experienced a taste of business globalization via working with the State Engineering University of Armenia. The strategic management course has been offered in the spring 2005 in the hybrid format. A Web-based simulation model was the nucleus to bring together students. Blackboard was used to post the theory and concept of course. Students used English language to communicate among themselves. The Web enabled technology created a synergy of collaboration among students and professors. This paper will discuss problems encountered and technical issues that the authors faced and some potential solutions. As a by-product, one would realize that this type of course offering would allow students and professors to better communicate with their peers at other geographically located areas, thus improving the quality of the education offered.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic Management Policy and Systems is a capstone core course for many Business colleges. Traditionally, this course is offered in either of the following two formats:

- 1 Exposing students to the theory and concepts of the strategies as adapted by firms. Under this approach, students often are required to use case study analysis and submit project/reports.
- 2 Incorporating a simulated business model in the curriculum in order to have more practical expertise for selecting the future development path of a firm, in addition to the essential concepts of the strategic management and related cases.

At Cal Poly Pomona students will participate in a simulation model in addition to being exposed to the theory and concepts of the strategic management.

METHODOLOGY

In the spring quarter, there was a collaboration between Cal Poly Pomona, and the State Engineering University of Armenia (SEUA) to conduct a hybrid class using the Web-based Strategic Management Simulation Model[®] as a vehicle to bring together these students. Peer faculty member in Armenia was consulted about the course offering in order to maximize the outcome acceptable to each university. This means that while the result of the collaborative work through the Strategic Management Simulation Analysis would be part of all students' grades, each professor was free to select materials related to the theory and concept of his/her choice in order to conduct the class and deliver accordingly the student's grade. Both professors decided to use Blackboard as a common platform to post their PowerPoint slides and theoretical concepts of the course. The Blackboard site was also used for private chat among team members.

The English language was set as the main communication tool while students could select one of the five offered languages in the Web-base simulation model (These languages are: Armenian, English, French, Spanish, and Russian.) The simulation model was run twice per week at pre-defined time giving students ample time to input new data, analyze the latest results, and communicate with each other in a time lag of 12 hours time zone difference. In this offering, a total of 78 students participated, 62 Cal Poly students (in two sessions of TOM 411 classes) and 14 from SEUA. Two groups consisting of 8 teams were composed and– to the extent of possible– one Armenian student for each group was allocated. Therefore, two teams were left without an Armenian student.

While a short overview of the simulation model used is described further below, Fig. 1 depicts the operation of the joint collaboration of Cal Poly and SEUA in the strategic management class.

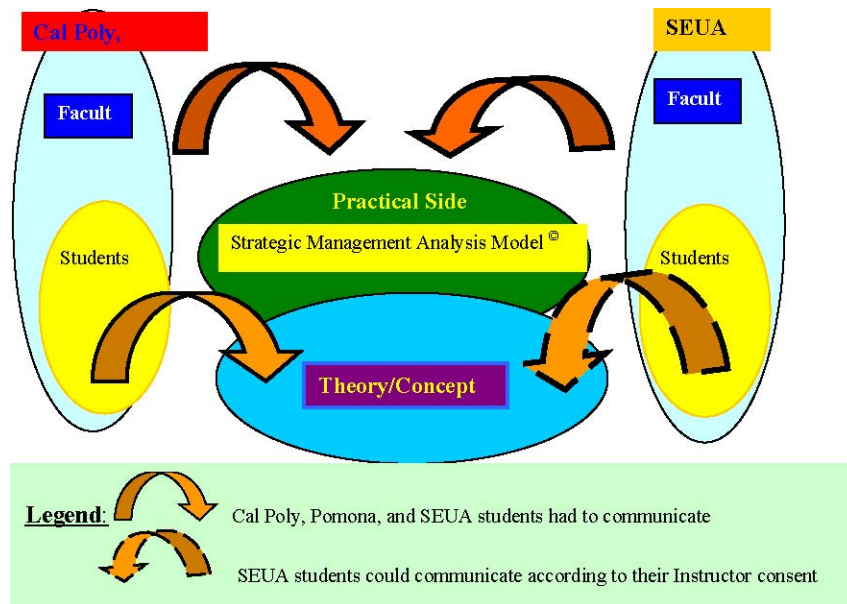


Fig. 1- Operation of the Joint Collaboration of Cal Poly and SEUA

OVERVIEW OF THE WEB-BASED STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS MODEL[®]

This simulation model is especially targeted to expose MBA students and managers to a rapidly growing manufacturing firm. A heavy emphasis on the inter-relations of the firms' performance, including finance, marketing, operations, and human resources, is designed to improve participants' skill and enable them to work in a highly competitive business environment. The simulation is also suitable for graduating business students by limiting the program to only one product.

Features of the Strategic Management Analysis Model[®] Software

The software consists of instructor and student modules. While the instructor version offers administrative capabilities such as adding/deleting and setting up the initial condition for all companies involved, the student version requires 66 inputs in the areas of marketing, manpower, finance, and operations. The result of each run is defined as: Operations, Costs, Financial Statements, and Comparative Analysis. Figure 2 shows an example of the input interface view of the student module.

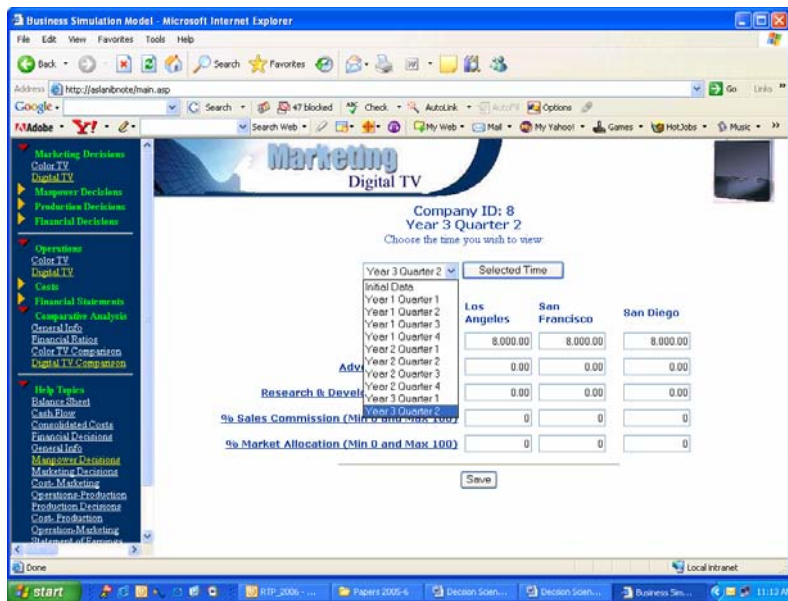


Figure 2- Sample input interface view of the student module

CHALLENGING ISSUES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Offering a global course requires a thorough coordination among professors involved and setting a coherence technical infrastructure of the institutions involved. Lack of proper coordination and/or technology difficulties, e.g. proper Internet connection, could result in the faculty and student's frustration. At the beginning of the course, there was lack of proper access of the Armenian students using Blackboard, though these students have been registered as Cal Poly students. This issue was corrected after SEUA students discovered some software glitches in the SEUA computers. This event caused Cal Poly students and SEUA students to lose their valuable time. In addition, using the Blackboard interface did not prove to be as simple as it sounded. Often the Group Discussion icon would allow them to post their team's views.

A survey conducted at the end of quarter among both Cal Poly and SEUA students shows that there was more eagerness to communicate from the Armenian students than Cal Poly students. One might suggest that the lack of response from Armenia at the beginning, due to the difficulty of connecting to the Blackboard site, could have played a role here. On the other hand, some Cal Poly Pomona, students express the lack of proper email communication, the 12 hours time zone difference and the pressure to respond to the class requirement all played roles in not waiting for their counterparts response and pursuing more collaboration with their Armenian colleagues.

It is interesting to mention that in general, due to the difference in the educational systems among countries, engaged professors should agree on the course criteria and the expected course outcome. Prerequisites and the minimum knowledge level of participating students should be well defined. Therefore, it is advisable to have a face to face meeting between professors involved to ensure that the course offering would be beneficial to all students regardless of their geographical location or educational system.

As concluding remarks, this experience was particularly rewarding to the Cal Poly Pomona, and SEUA faculty. The authors were able not only able to bring the latest pedagogical tools and utilize more

efficiently the class time period for our students, but the authors were able to bring an international business environment to a traditional class and better prepare our students to face challenges of the global environment, thus improving the quality of our education.

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