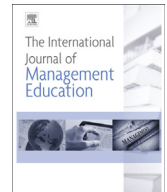




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A study into the effects of a board game on flow in undergraduate business students



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ABSTRACT

This research empirically tests whether employing a commercially available board game – The Logo Board Game – to facilitate student learning about brand elements, results in significantly higher levels of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) in undergraduate business students. A post-test only control group experimental design was employed with a total of 235 business students enrolled in a core marketing unit – Brand & Product Management – at an Australian university. Tutorial sessions across three different campuses were randomly categorised as experimental and control groups. A total of 107 students (approximately 46%) were exposed to the experimental treatment (i.e. the board game). In terms of results, an independent-samples t-test shows that students involved in playing the board game reported significantly higher levels of flow, as compared to students attending and reporting on a conventional tutorial session. Findings from this study suggest that the use of a board game to introduce a brand-related topic saw students experience greater motivation, enjoyment and absorption (i.e. a flow experience) than students in the control group. Business educators may consider experimenting with alternative teaching methods, including board games, in order to enhance students' flow during face-to-face classes.

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1. Introduction

Problems associated with traditional approaches to teaching have been well-documented. While the usual problems with a one-way system of lecture delivery are recognised (Hainey, 2010), Dawson (2000) emphasises the lack of experiential learning in a usual class environment. Educators from a variety of backgrounds (e.g. Pieroni, Vuano & Ciolino, 2000) have also commented how a course may seem uninteresting and unpleasant to students, who often want to see a direct relevance to their career plans. Similarly, teachers have commented on students' lack of motivation and self-discipline (Pieroni et al., 2000). In today's world of globally mobile students, a growing number of non-English-speaking students have trouble taking notes in lectures and participate less in discussions (Skapinker, 2014). Such students gain more from small group activities. Empirical research demonstrates that students prefer communicative (Cobcroft, Towers, Smith, & Bruns, 2006) and cooperative learning activities (Garfield, 1993). Importantly, many tertiary students today are millennials (Jones, Jo, & Martin, 2007), who were born between 1980 and 2000 (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Millennials have a unique set of traits, not found in other generational groups as they are reportedly more affluent and better educated (Howe & Strauss, 2000). To help the

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millennial generation achieve its maximum learning experience, teachers are advised to modify their teaching methods (Pardue & Morgan, 2008).

Strategies and methods currently used to appease and engage a new generation of millennial learners include: blended learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); gaming (Leigh & Spindler, 2004); simulations (Faria, 1998); educational drama and/or role play (Brennan & Pearce, 2009) and Moocs – massive open online courses (Thompson, 2014). The use of board games as discussed in this paper, are but one method of addressing the needs of learners in ‘the future university’.

Amongst a range of available tools, educational researchers are interested in measuring the effectiveness of teaching with games (Sandford, Ulicsak, Facer, & Rudd, 2006). Broadly speaking, such games include computer games, role-playing games (Barreteau, Bousquet, & Attonaty, 2001), business simulation games (Faria, 1998), and instructional board games (Klein & Freitag, 1991). A variety of games are often used in the classroom to improve students' skills – card games, letter games, mathematical games, puzzles games, guessing games, word games, and games of physical skills (Hays, 2005). This study reports the use of a commercially-available board game in a marketing classroom.

In proposing to use board games in a higher education marketing context, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) ‘flow’ model serves as a guiding theoretical foundation. Flow has been defined as ‘a psychological state in which the person feels simultaneously cognitively efficient, motivated and happy’ (Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Flow has been described as a state of consciousness whereby people become immersed in an activity, and enjoy it immensely (Bakker, 2008). The participant of an activity is totally connected to the task and thus experiences an optimal psychological state. Time flies during a flow experience. In view of the definition above, Bakker (2005) has highlighted the three dimensions of flow: ‘absorption’ (the total immersion in an activity); ‘enjoyment’ (enjoying and feeling happy during the task/activity); ‘motivation’ (the need to perform an activity with the aim of experiencing the inherent pleasure and satisfaction in the activity).

Flow has been examined in a number of contexts – use of internet (O'Cass & Carlson, 2010), marketing (e.g. Lotz, Eastlick, Mishra, & Shim, 2010), shopping (Eccles, Woodruffe-Burton, & Elliott, 2006), work (Eisenberger & Jones, 2005), music (Bakker, 2005), recreation and sports (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), and education (Block, 1984). While the study of flow has attracted considerable interest from school educationists, it has only received limited attention from the higher education sector (e.g. Asakawa, 2004).

Evidence indicates that ‘experiencing’ flow can positively affect students' perceived learning of subject matter (Klein, Rossin, Guo, & Ro, 2010), students' perceived skill development (Rossin, Ro, Klein, & Guo, 2009) and student satisfaction (Klein et al., 2010; Rossin et al., 2009). In view of the emotional contagion theory (Schoenewolf, 1980), which suggests that ‘emotions can be contagious’ (Doherty, 1997, p.131), it is argued that flow experiences of students may positively influence other students as well as the teacher. Reinforcing the potential importance of flow, Bakker (2005) asserts that an important objective for institutions is to design classroom activities that facilitate a state of flow.

The purpose of research reported in this paper is to empirically test whether employing a commercially available board game – The Logo Board Game (TLBG) – to facilitate student learning about brand elements, results in significantly higher levels of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) in undergraduate business students studying marketing.

2. Literature review

2.1. Games and education

A game can be defined as ‘any contest (play) among adversaries (players) operating under constraints (rules) for an objective (winning, victory or pay-off)’ (Gray, Topping, & Carcary, 1998, p. 48). Interestingly, earlier definitions described a game as being ‘not serious’ (Huizinga, 1950, p.13) and ‘unproductive’ (Caillouis, 1961, pp. 10–11). However, more recently educational researchers (e.g. Freitas & Oliver, 2006) have started acknowledging a number of benefits realised by incorporating games into curricula.

It is claimed that games as instructional tools were used in China as early as 3000B.C. (Dempsey, Haynes, Lucassen, & Casey, 2002). While computer games have been the focus of recent research interest, it has been acknowledged that games are not limited to any specific medium (Juul, 2003). Thus, games may include computer games, mobile (phone) and location-based games (Schlieder, Kiefer, & Matyas, 2006), board games, card games, word games, sports etc.

Evidence suggests that students have different learning styles (Kolb & Goldman, 1973). It is well-established that if a student's learning style is taken into account, it would result in greater student satisfaction (Becker, 2006). There is now a substantial amount of research undertaken which supports the use of games, which if used in conjunction with other teaching techniques, can help target a variety of students with different learning styles (Becker, 2006).

Playing games can be useful for students as they acquire skills which may not otherwise be taught. It has been recognised that in spite of the element of chance, playing games hones the players' entrepreneurial skills as they learn to deal with incomplete information, predict rival's strategies and understand human psychology (Johnson, 2013). It is not surprising to find many commentators draw comparisons between playing poker and undertaking a business venture (Goldenberg, 2015). While there are many online versions of traditional games available experts claim that the social aspect of a face-to-face interaction is useful in helping gamers understand business relationships (Johnson, 2013).

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