The effectiveness of a business game to improve students’ skills: A comparative European study

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Purpose

The competence-based learning model requires that European universities make relevant efforts to implement unconventional learning methods, many of them focused on new information and communication technologies (ICT) and e-learning, that help to develop the student’s skills and abilities, in contrast to traditional learning methods mostly based on transferring contents and knowledge. In the specific case of business students, business games constitute a relevant e-learning method in management training (Chang, Lee, Ng, & Moon, 2003; Curry & Moutinho, 1992; Faria & Dickinson 1994; Faria, Hutchinson, Wellington, & Gold, 2008; Keys & Wolfe, 1988; Siddiqui, Khan, & Akhtar, 2008; Wolfe & Suaia, 2005).

The main objective of this research is to analyse the student’s perception about the effectiveness of a business game, in terms of the generic and specific managerial skills acquired by students whilst using it. The focus is on the comparisons between students of postgraduate management courses in different European countries. In doing so, this study aspires to compare the students’ perception about this e-learning method by contrasting opinions from different contexts, all of them affected by the new European educational model, but also influenced by their former educational systems, their own perspective about experiential learning, and different educational styles.

Design/ methodology

To achieve the objectives exposed above, we collected data from questionnaires. The study was conducted with 126 management students at post-graduate level who used the same business game, Cesim Global Challenge, during the academic years 2009-2013, in five different
European universities of Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Germany. Given the closeness of the items used to evaluate some generic and specific managerial competences, we considered appropriate to form groups or categories of competences, applying the \( k \)-means clustering (MacQueen, 1967), which is commonly used to automatically partition a data set into \( k \) groups. Applying this clustering algorithm we obtained six categories of generic competences (information and decision-making, time management, entrepreneurship and change, conflict, use of ICT, and leadership); and three categories of specific managerial competences (management, planning and theoretical knowledge, managerial roles and risk). Then, we applied different tests to check for differences between students from each country, and from different educational systems, trying to determine whether their perceptions about the effectiveness of the game to acquire these different types of competences were the same or not.

**Results**

Our results indicate that students positively assessed, generic and specific managerial skills fostered by the business game, especially in the case of the Irish and the Italian students. The generic competences most valued were information and decision-making, and leadership, whilst the least valued was the use of ICT. Regarding the specific managerial competences, the most valued ones were management skills and the least valued, competences related to planning and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. However, despite the fact that students assessed the game as a useful tool to develop both kinds of skills, significant differences were found between students from different countries and educational systems, but only in the case of some specific managerial skills.

**Practical and/or social implications**

The findings of this study suggest that the students’ perception about how a business game helps them to acquire specific managerial skills varies in different countries and is influenced by cultural aspects and previous exposure to experiential learning. The differences detected could help to adapt the games and the teaching processes to the specific context in which the game is being used, trying to maximise its potential.

**Originality / value**

There are some reasons that justify the value of this research. First, there is not a clear classification of the aspects considered when evaluating a business game, mixing beneficial characteristics of these games with some learning outcomes, like competences and skills (Camuffo & Gerli, 2004; Chang et al., 2003; Faria & Wellington, 2004; Jensen, 2003). Second, there is a lack of empirical research about the role developed by business games from the point of view of students. Finally, the literature is scarce in terms of international comparisons, especially those between different educational systems, in terms of the effectiveness of the business games and the skills acquired by student using them.

**Bibliography**


