

**BUSINESS GAMES TEACH: THOUGHTS ON THE SOURCES OF  
CONFLICTING CONCLUSIONS ON THEIR EFFECTIVENESS**

Joseph Wolfe, University of Tulsa

**ABSTRACT**

Numerous evaluations have been made on the teaching effectiveness of business games. Despite these evaluations it is still unclear that these games are effective or they are worth the effort expended on them from both administrator, developer and player perspectives. This paper offers reasons why the literature has produced so many conflicting conclusions regarding their effectiveness.

**INTRODUCTION**

Even though many doubt the effectiveness of business games their use has increased annually since their inception. Are games being accepted because of their high face validity with certain groups? If games are valid learning environments, and are superior to other knowledge delivery systems in certain applications, what is the source of confusion regarding their efficacy given the years of study that has been spent on creating, enhancing and delivering them?

It is believed there are many sources of confusion. Much havoc comes from how the validation study was conducted, the measures of course success used, the problems of distinguishing between individual and group-level learning, and the differing skills possessed by instructors using simulations. Moreover, too of ten student opinions or attitudes about a game have been cited as "proof" of a game's success or failure even though numerous studies have found student opinions vary based on their experience with the game. More importantly it has been found positive attitudes about a game are not associated with superior course grades or learning levels.

Some studies failed to separate team size from team composition thereby making it impossible to detect the level of involvement each player had in the company's decision-making sessions. It could

be reasoned that highly cohesive teams and enthusiastic players would lead to superior game performance but this has not always been the case. While it has been found that high achieving, high aptitude students outperform low achieving, low aptitude students in a game, no study has discovered a relationship between game results and learning about course-related knowledge, whether measured at the group or individual level.

Lastly, the literature has often written of "the case approach" and the "gaming approach" as if the methods are practiced in a uniform manner. Although it is possible games are applied in a more uniform fashion due to their "programmed" quality, instructors can vary the way both cases and games are used in the classroom. When using cases some employ group presentations. Others have students prepare their cases as group projects. Others merely discuss the cases in class. In applying games, some instructors delegate the entire administrative and coaching process to graduate students. Others integrate the game's development throughout the semester through press conferences, shareholder's meetings and consultant's reports. All these factors, plus the individual instructor's skills as a case discussion leader and a business game coach could influence the degree either approach produces learning.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on objectively measured, course-related learning outcomes the business games used for teaching strategic management produced knowledge gains while games in marketing and economics courses less successful.