

# **GAMES: Virtual Worlds and Reality**

Selected Papers of ISAGA 2008

Eugenijus Bagdonas & Irena Patasiene (eds.)

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## **Creating Understanding and Meaning across Cultures: Playing a Business Game with Groups from the US, South Africa and Germany**

**Klaus-Peter Schulz, Michael Fox**

### **Abstract**

In the proposed paper we will discuss the option of learning across cultures through playing a business game. We will refer to a case study of realizing a business game with students from three different nations, the USA, South Africa and Germany. We assume that different societal origins show culturally different effects in issues such as cooperation, leadership and decision making. Therefore we will discuss how learning across cultures can be facilitated using a business game as a platform. We especially focus on implicit background understandings that are considered as being influential on cooperation and communication. Our study is based on a qualitative empirical research investigating learning experiences in a societal diverging and a societal homogeneous group of players. From a theoretical perspective we will refer to the GLOBE-Study of culture and leadership in organizations. With our contribution we will offer an opportunity on how to deal with learning and understanding across nationalities or in international firms.

**Keywords:** intercultural cooperation, business game, social process of communication, GLOBE-study.

### **Introduction**

In the paper we will argue that in globalized economies the ability to communicate and cooperate across cultures is essential in management processes. From a practitioners position, a question arises as to how such intercultural communication and cooperation can be learned in work processes. We see business games that focus social processes as an appropriate forum to learn communication, cooperation and coordination, since they represent a form of practice that is close to operational work. Furthermore, business games support learning as collective and active experiencing and reflecting, a principle we consider as being essential to provide sustainable and work relevant learning success. Several studies on intercultural cooperation argue that in different societal groups “culturally generalizable” and “culturally specific” aspects can be identified (House et al. 2004). Significant differences are especially shown in implicit background understandings (e.g. Dorfman 2004). Such understandings can be considered as being central for corporate (work) practice. The more different the backgrounds of cooperation partners are, the more important and difficult it is to create a collectively shared understanding. Apart from these textual aspects we will consider, from a methodological position, business games as a powerful context to observe and (collectively) reflect learning in an intercultural background.

In the theoretical part of the paper we will discuss outcomes in light of the GLOBE-study on culture, leadership and organizations (House et al. 2004). This study delivers among others, empirical background data of the three countries (societies) from which the participants of the business game originate. Learning from our perspective can be seen as collectively growing into a new context (Schulz 2005). Therefore learning is considered as “situated practice” (Lave & Wenger 1991); it is related to a specific reality (context) and part of collective acting and reflecting. Therefore it does not follow any specific didactics but instead, the actual needs of the situation. This principle of joint problem solving and goal pursuit within competing and contradicting groups can easily be adopted by business game settings. Additionally we will refer to concepts of background understandings (Baitsch 1993). We will argue that shared understanding is essential for collective learning, acting and reflecting.

In the case study we will refer to a social type business game, where a group of players have to re-organize a global acting food company. Participants come from the three different countries of South Africa, the USA and Germany. The empirical outcomes of the business game are compared with the same game played by an only German group. In our study we will in particular focus on the development of shared understandings and the process of communicating and problem solving.

In addition, we will analyze reflection on the game process. In the discussion we will compare the business game outcomes of the societal inhomogeneous group with a societal homogeneous one.

### **Theoretic conceptions**

#### Acting, learning and reflecting in social practice

Lave and Wenger describe in their frequently cited situated learning theory “Legitimate Peripheral Participation” LPP (1991) how a newcomer develops into a practitioner within a social system. He or she starts from a peripheral position, getting access to organizational practice and participating more and more in the tasks of the group. Finally the newcomer is capable to entirely participate in the social practice of the group. This individual learning process is overlaid by a collective one: As far as the newcomer is legitimated, his/her input and questions may cause contradiction to long term members. Thus the social system will reproduce itself and change over time (Lave & Wenger 1991: 113).

Related to learning settings such as business games, the model of Lave and Wenger can be seen as collective growing into the new context. Therefore it is not a question of whether an existing group legitimates a single novice or not, but whether all newcomers have to be legitimated by each other. They all start cooperation from a peripheral position and grow into the new context together. However it should be taken into account that several participants of the business game are experienced professionals. The collective growing into the context brings about the following central aspects of team genesis: (1) a corporate understanding has to be developed out of the different backgrounds to provide a basis for communication and cooperation; (2) Decisions to be made and actions to be taken are due to intensive discursive processes and to different perspectives and opinions. This however brings into the light tacit backgrounds and understandings.

#### Background understandings

In the consideration of social processes, the novice who enters a new community is rarely free of pre-experience from other contexts. Newcomers have for example worked in similar industries or performed comparable tasks. Therefore, “growing into a new context” results in a “growing together” of newcomers and established workers. Organizational reality is mainly influenced by informal and tacit rules and understandings that are rarely accessible from the outside. They are however responsible to ensure that members of a system understand and are able to communicate and cooperate. Background assumptions are incorporated by newcomers through their exchange with experienced group members and through work practice within the context.

These views that significantly influence behavior can be defined as background understandings brought about through practicing. The individual adopts the ways of acting, convictions and values of the community in which he or she is a participant. In general individuals are not aware of these background assumptions, although they characterize activity within a community. Besides aspects of daily work, background assumptions also include general understandings, convictions and values (Elden 1983; Baitsch 1993). Baitsch stresses that background assumptions are collectively shared within a working group. The expression “collectively shared” can be interpreted to mean that there is an overlap of understandings and convictions between the members of a group, but also that there is a distinction between them. Background assumptions may change in the short run through development in work conditions or in a change of actions or products. However general values and convictions are far-reaching and resist rapid change. Shared values, understandings and convictions hold communities together and can also distinguish them from other communities. Although background assumptions are tacit and informal and elusive to members of the community, their effects can be identified in the way people behave or in the development of specific tools and instruments.

#### The GLOBE study on culture, leadership and organizational behavior

The concept of background assumptions shows significant similarities to several models of national and organizational culture (Hofstede 2001). In the GLOBE study (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program) leadership and organizational behavior, dependent on cultural backgrounds, has been researched (House et al 2004). General issues of the

study are to describe divergence and correspondence of organizational behavior dependent on the cultural backgrounds of the participants. The study has been carried out within 62 different cultures, using quantitative and qualitative methods. The study is based on the general assumption that practice that functions effectively in one culture may not in another (Dorfman 2004). In other words it can be assumed that culturally generalizable and culturally specific behaviors exist. Both from a theoretic and an empirical aspect the GLOBE-study corresponds well with our research concept (ibid.):

- Organizational behavior is seen as an effect of “culture”, which is originated in shared (tacit) values and understandings;
- Culture based effects is shown in the different behavior of individuals and groups;
- Countries researched represent participants of the business game in our case study.

In the following report we will refer to specific results of the study assigned to the following societal groups: South African (Black and White); US American (also Mexican); German (East and West). The study distinguishes between “values” and “practices”. The first aspects are self estimations and expectations, the latter are the practices to be observed. The subsequent figures show three items, which are relevant for corporate practicing. Figure 1, *group collectivism* describes “The degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations and families.” (Javidan et al. 2004, 30). It shows that especially Mexicans and Black Africans express high group cohesion and loyalty. However the general practice is significant lower than the verbal expression on the item. Figure 2, *human orientation* describes “The degree to which individuals in organizations or societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring, and kind to others.” (ibid). Results show that black South Africans show the highest degree of human orientation at work, followed by US-Americans and Mexicans. Germans, especially East Germans are far lower in this aspect. Altogether the expectation of the human orientation is far lower then its practice. Figure 3, *avoidance of uncertainty* (ibid) presents a completely different picture: The Germans tend to rely on norms and bureaucratic practice to alleviate the unpredictability of future events.

Figure 1: Group collectivism (House et al. 2004)

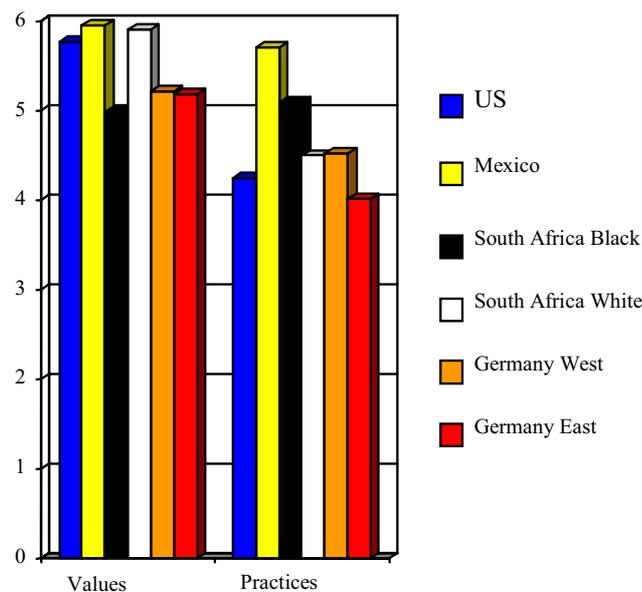


Figure 2: Human orientation (*ibid*)

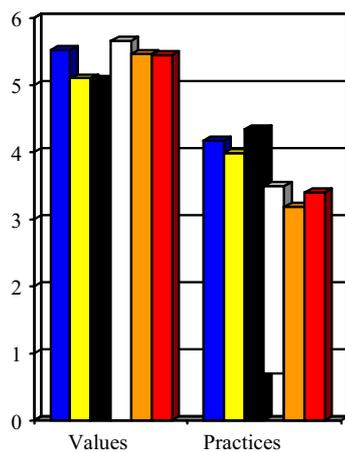
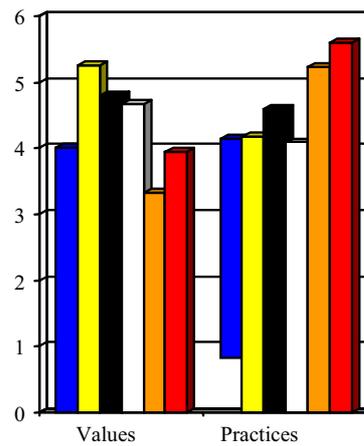


Figure 3: Uncertainty avoidance (*ibid*)



These examples represent items that are likely to be relevant for cooperation in settings such as business games. Behind the characters of the variables stand different (tacit) values and understandings. We assume that they show in different behavior. However since these aspects are more or less tacit, participants of the business games are expected not to be aware of what drives the different behaviors. Furthermore, a question arises as to how participants cope with differing understandings. Possible variety spreads between open and explicit discussion and (implicit) persuasion.

### Case study: reorganizing a global player

Our case study refers to a business game called “Tasty plc”. It deals with change processes in organizations through corporate activity of its members. As the game focuses on communication and cooperation processes it should therefore be seen as a social science type business game. In the process of participating in the reorganization of Tasty two main aspects are pursued:

- (a) conceptualization and coordination of organizational change following general strategic goals;
- (b) reflection on and the appropriation of the social process of communication, cooperation and especially the coordination of structures, rules and varying interests.

The playing period of the business game lasts two and a half days. Players represent the management level of the different divisions and functions of Tasty plc, for example, the executive board, production sites, product management and union representatives. The players operate in small groups with each one representing one of the above functions. The groups are formed by chance. In advance players get a user manual describing products, structures, basic financial data and the business situation of the company. The manual includes an organizational chart of the different functions. At the beginning of the game each group receives an individual task list that is to some extent contradictive to the other groups’ lists. In addition, it is part of the game that information is rudimentary and may be completed by the group if necessary. During the game the players have to present interim results from time to time to an advisory board which gives feedback. This advisory board also represents the view of the ‘outside world’ and has the option to intervene according to the course of the game. The advisory board is made up of the leaders of the game. The advisory board meetings are moderated by the players. The game is interrupted for reflection several times. In the meetings of the entire player groups, behavioural aspects of communication, cooperation and coordination are especially discussed, as well as methodological aspects as to how to approach the change process of Tasty. Reflection is moderated by the game leaders.

Tasty plc can be played with groups between 12 and 35 participants. The player group can be supplemented by a group of observers (maximum 6) that follow the dynamics and give systematic feedback at reflection sessions. Additionally the game leaders (2 to 3 people) observe the process

essentially to react to the dynamics and intervene if necessary. Tasty may be played with undergraduate and postgraduate students or business practitioners.

The following learning aspects of the game are proposed:

- participants experience and reflect on communication and coordination processes in and beyond the groups;
- negotiation practice related to conflicting perspectives are learned;
- the process of group formation and development of mutual understanding is learned and reflected upon;
- coping with contradictions in work processes;
- managing conflicts and sudden interventions;
- managing processes despite incomplete information;
- development and reflection of rules, structures and organizational behaviour;
- development of strategy and objectives;
- presentation and discussion of goals, strategies and concepts;
- conceptualisation of change;
- ability to reflect on individual and group effects.

### **Empirical outcomes and discussion**

The business game Tasty plc has been empirically researched using several qualitative methods such as interviews and participatory observation. Moreover, the empirical analysis includes statements from the feedback meetings which were carried out at the end of the game. In this study we will compare a performance carried out during a summer school in 2007 with the societal heterogeneous or intercultural group described above (US-American, South African and German). To compare results with different settings, we will also refer to a performance carried out with a societal homogenous group. Results presented in the following report are based on the empirical analyses.

The participants pursued the task to reorganize the globally acting enterprise. The groups represented different disciplines and different levels of professional experience. However the heterogeneous group consisted in majority of work experienced part time students, whilst the homogenous group comprised mainly of undergraduate non work experienced students.

Although participants are provided with realistic data about the company they should reorganize, access to organizational constraints in terms of product, process or market requirements is missing. Participants have to make several assumptions as prerequisites for their actions. The quality of these assumptions strongly depends on pre-experience of the participants and of their ability to create a collectively shared understanding. The results show that general understandings of work differed. Especially in terms of problem solving, communicating, decision making and leadership, understandings differed significantly. These different understandings led to contradictions but rarely to conflict, since participants treated each other with great respect. Therefore the business game, especially in the beginning, is characterized through careful listening and a high degree of respect between participants. The group focussed to develop a shared understanding and explication of background assumptions, since participants were aware about differences. The following quotation explores such an aspect:

“... it was difficult at first, because we started when we heard a little bit about the business game. That was the first activity that we did together. So we were kind of broken up into groups – a few Germans, a few South Africans and a few Americans. And that was difficult, because we had a task at hand, but we didn’t know, who we were, where we were coming from. So, the business game, I guess, functioned for me as a buffer. That was the catalyst that got us to get to know one another. So that was, I guess, the exchange ethos, that really helped us learn about one another ...” (South African student).

The homogenous group, in comparison, was far more characterized through conflict and implicit acting. In the homogenous group acting was less reflexive.

Participants of the intercultural group were aware that they needed to learn from each other in order to solve the task, and they were aware that they could benefit from each others' experience and diverging views. This corporate acting can be identified as the subsequent phase in the game. This is expressed in the following:

“My best period was when people from different backgrounds were put together and they were given a task to do. The challenge was to get beyond the issue of being themselves and to try to work together and to listen to everybody. This was the greatest highlight of the game, because we were drawing from different backgrounds, but at the end of the day we had to complete the task. We had to deliver issues of cultural differences, our experiences and to bring this all together.” (South African student)

In the following period the intercultural business game was characterized through smooth action despite the different origins of the participants. Communication and cooperation can be described as being highly efficient and goal oriented despite different backgrounds. Furthermore, reflection beyond actual needs of the game practice played an important role. Several participants were highly interested in getting to know background information of the social life, of the work life and of context factors of the other cultures.

At this stage the homogenous group showed a totally different behavior. Mutual understanding was tacitly seen as a prerequisite. Therefore at the beginning participants cared about understanding the game tasks but they hardly cared about understanding each other. As a consequence reflection on backgrounds and opinions played a minor role in the game. Cooperation showed many more signs of competition and conflict.

To summarize, cultural inhomogeneous groups tend to explicate understandings, perspectives and basic assumptions. Cooperation has a smooth and explicit character, with a focus on listening, understanding and joint problem solving, even beyond the borders of intentionally competing groups. Cultural homogeneous groups follow a pattern of intuitive action. The pursuit of personal and interpersonal goals dominates the game, the effort taken for conscious communication and learning from each others' experience is far lower. Considering the outcomes of the game, it can be concluded that the intercultural group shows, despite their higher time effort in terms of listening and gaining understanding, better results. This is however, also due to the higher number of work experienced participants.

Although differences which are based on the societal backgrounds could be identified in the intercultural game group, diversities can hardly be related to the culture related characteristics of the GLOBE study (Figures 1-3). An important learning aspect through the business game can however be identified in the case of the difference between perception/estimation (GLOBE: value) and experience (GLOBE: practice): The intercultural business game provides the chance to experience culture caused differences.

The participants from the intercultural group stated that they consider the business game an excellent chance to learn from each other and to understand the way of thinking of the other cultures of the participants. However this process is also influenced by the local context where the business game takes place – discussion about German culture dominated in our case. Following statement underpins these aspects:

“Yes, what I have observed during this period in Germany ...we all have experienced some problems from different backgrounds. However, we can learn from each other how to deal with such problems, because Germany had their own challenges, South Africa had their own challenges and the guys from El Paso, Texas had their own challenges. But if we try to bring these experiences together, we can help us as individuals to get better solutions. Getting solutions is important for solving problems, because if we don't, we are giving up the experiences.” (US-American student)

Considering the intercultural business game over a period of time, the process of gaining mutual understanding appeared rather quickly, which shows in the effectiveness and efficiency of the group. Therefore the learning setting of the intercultural business game can be considered as being successful in terms of learning work practice across cultures.

The game process and learning effects, compared between societal inhomogeneous and societal homogeneous groups can be summarized as follows (Table 1).

Table 1: Effects of the business game

Criteria	Intercultural group	Societal homogeneous group
Initial communication	Person oriented; careful listening; awareness of culturally based differences;	Task oriented; discussions about topics and rationality;
Developing of shared understandings	Explication and exchange of different understandings of participants; reflexive development of a collectively shared understanding of professional practice and the game;	Developing understanding of the game; understanding among participants is assumed; short queries in case of different pre-experiences, unawareness of the social situation;
Characteristics of action and reflection	Rule based; intuitive; reflection on two levels: 1. reflecting group performance in the game; 2. reflecting general issues and understandings of participants;	Rule based and further intuitive acting; reflection refers to in-process problems; hardly reflection of general situation;
Competitiveness	Mutual acceptance of roles within groups; cooperative action between group; discussion of contradictions;	Partial competition within groups about different roles; competition between groups about pursuit of conflicting goals;
Learning process	Focus of understanding; reflected growing into the game context;	Task focus; intuitive growing into the game context;
Game reflection	Communication beyond cultural differences; contents of cultural motivated differences; group aspects.	Focussing group aspects, decision making, communicative processes.

## Conclusion

In this paper we wanted to sensitize the importance of recognizing cultural differences in learning process. With reference to the GLOBE study we wanted to show that significant differences in behavior and attitudes exist between cultures. Through intercultural business games that focus on social processes of communication and cooperation we can see an important contribution to learning to understand each other and to experience intercultural cooperation.

The empirical results in our study go along with the general assumptions of the GLOBE study, however considerable cultural differences could not be allocated to the different societal groups of the game. Basic views and behaviors could be identified that significantly differ between the participating cultures. To facilitate fruitful cooperation in the game a mutual understanding in terms of meanings and rationality of artifacts, cooperation and leadership had to be developed. Since the group was aware of these differences and the necessity of gaining understanding, they made strong efforts to get to know each other and to understand each other. This development process, however, went far beyond the aspects necessary to play the game and also affected the whole personality and societal background of the participants. Different practices and views did not lead to conflict but to discussion about the differences. Therefore reflection and explication of background assumptions played a leading role in the game. This totally differed from the societal homogeneous group, which acted more intuitively, barely aware of a difference in understandings. The intensive reflection and discussion about understandings and views in the in-homogeneous group, however, did not affect the game result in a negative way. Efficiency and effectiveness of the latter group was higher than the others' results.

Very often enculturation processes are described as long lasting procedures of growing together. The business game however show, that such setting with participants from different societal background can be seen as a promising setting to gain mutual understanding which can include the whole person with its background. Further the ability of listening and reflection is intensively fostered through such a business game type. Another advantage lies in the artificial cooperation situation of the business game. Aspects of power relation and competition that go along with the

usual workplace environment are left out. This further strengthens the willingness to reflect and exchange.

In work contexts especially one should be aware that learning through an intercultural business game enables general understandings beyond cultural borders. Specific workplace related learning is neglected in such a setting. Therefore such intercultural business games can be seen as an initial activity to learn mutual understandings across cultures and to sensitize participants for culturally different views. In terms of work processes there would need to be more specific learning activities carried out with the participants.

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