

Board Games as a Medium for Learning: A Brief Overview of a Self-Directed Learning Course

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Introduction

In the Faculty of International Studies at Otemon Gakuin University, the curriculum offers a series of year-long (two semesters) self-directed learning courses to students for credit. The flexibility of a self-directed learning course (自主研究 / *jishu kenkyu*) allows students to explore topics that interest them, develop essential problem-solving skills, and engage in collaborative learning outside the traditional, teacher-centered learning environments of old. These self-directed courses offer students the chance to explore learning on their own, albeit with some initial or periodic guidance from the teacher.

The course I designed employs board games—non-traditional learning materials—as a means of offering a new dimension to learning; blending fun with educational outcomes. Board games, in particular, have emerged as an innovative tool for enhancing engagement and fostering learning through play (see, for example: York, 2019).

This report examines student feedback from my self-directed learning course where board games were used as a central medium for learning. The course was designed to allow students to engage in both leadership building, self-learning, as well as development of problem-solving and interactive skills. Drawing on survey responses from participants, this report will focus on student motivations for enrolling in the course and the outcomes they experienced, particularly in terms of their learning and engagement as well as overall course satisfaction.

Student Makeup of the Self-Directed Learning Course

In total, 11 students enrolled in the self-directed learning course using board games. Of those, 9 took part in a mid-term course survey (at the end of the first semester) about their experience in the course and 2 agreed to a close interview to allow for a more detailed analysis of the course such as its place in the FIS curriculum as well as getting feedback on how to improve the course going for-

ward. One of these interviews is detailed in a forthcoming paper, while the focus of this report will be on the survey data only.

The initial expectations of students enrolling in the self-directed learning course reveal several different motivations and assumptions. Responses were collected from students in the course through a survey ($n = 9$), and the results indicate that most students enrolled in the course because they are interested in board games ($n = 7$), and others because they wanted to improve their English language skills ($n = 2$). Board games likely appealed to many students due to their potential to combine leisure with learning, which was reflected in their early engagement and the fact that 4 of the respondents were repeat students (i.e. they enrolled in the course for a second year in a row).

Survey Results and Discussion

The mid-term course survey responses provided by the students largely affirmed their initial expectations, although there were some areas for improvement. The overall feedback indicated a highly positive reception, with students praising the course for its innovative approach, though a few noted logistical and structural issues that could be improved.

Student Impressions and Learning Outcomes

The general consensus among the students was that the course exceeded their expectations. Most respondents gave the course a high rating, often highlighting how it was both enjoyable and educational. Participants mentioned that the games kept them engaged throughout the course, and reported that they gained a deeper understanding of strategic thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, and related areas. Overall then, students' evaluative comments regarding the course were positive: “this *jishu kenkyu* is the best”; “it was really fun and enjoying my time”; “I really enjoyed it, i learned a lot too,” and other similar remarks.

As for learning outcomes, students noted how the games provided a tangible framework for learning about various strategies, problem solving, and logical thinking. The nature of gameplay—where each move has consequences—encourages critical thinking and analysis, allowing students to practice skills in a ludic/playful way that can be carried over and applied to other domains of their lives.

To illustrate this, students were asked in the survey to describe what skills other than English they felt they practiced/acquired as a result of engaging in the course. Some of the more interesting responses are shown below:

1. “I could learn how to read what my opponent was thinking as well as hide my own motivations.”
2. “I learned how to maintain composure when another player uses hostile-sounding language towards me.”
3. “Problem solving. In *Bloodrage*, we have to manage our resources such as the cards in our hand to gain points.”
4. “I learned delayed gratification through having long-lasting plans.”
5. “I improved at staying calm, even if I had to explain the rules for a third time.”
6. “I learned to think before acting.”

Regarding language skills, the majority of participants felt that their speaking, listening, and reading skills improved the most because, in the words of one response, “I had the opportunity to speak English freely and listen to others speaking English as well. For reading, it’s because all the rules for the games we played were written in English, so we can improve our reading and our understanding skill at the same time.”

Here, it must be mentioned that students at this point in the course have only played **competitive** games, where I have suspected less opportunity for interaction in a foreign language would take place. This assumption is partially reflected in the sheer number of responses to the optional “skills other than English learned” question above. Perhaps because competitive games, by their nature, may require players to withhold information from one another and think strategically for themselves in order to win, this had the effect of participants honing in more on the non-language learning affordances of ludic spaces.

In addition, it is interesting to note that the medium of board-games itself was seen as a positive. When asked whether or not the participants considered themselves board gamers prior to the course, all but one respondent said “no,” and the vast majority wrote, “I didn’t think about it.” However, by the end of the first term 7 of the 9 participants said they “absolutely want to play them (board games)” going forward, and the remaining 2 saying they “might like to play them.”

Suggestions for Improvement

While the overall reception of the course was positive, some students pointed out areas for potential improvement. A recurring suggestion was related to logistics and course organization. Several participants noted that the course could benefit from having a dedicated room or space, as they often faced challenges with finding suitable areas to play. The students normally use the self-access learn-

ing center E- CO (English Cafe at Otemon), but there were times that students said they found the space too loud to concentrate on the game. Others suggested that simpler games might be better than ones with complex rules, particularly for students who are less familiar with board games or gaming in general.

A few respondents also recommended increasing the variety of board games used in the course. While many appreciated the games that were included, some felt that the range could be expanded to cover different types of learning experiences, such as games in Japanese to facilitate particularly international students who already have strong command of English.

Future Prospects

Looking forward, most students expressed excitement about playing board games in the future, and I want to improve the framework that has been built over the past year and a half as of writing. The course's success in engaging students over long stretches of time and promoting game-based learning has implications for future curricula, particularly in how we might incorporate game-based learning into more traditional academic settings.

From a more general curricular perspective, the self-directed learning courses are related to each teacher's speciality and a wide variety of experiences are offered (not only my own games-based learning one). Therefore, it may be an intriguing study to compare the level of graduation thesis work produced by students who engaged with *jishu kenkyu*, and then followed up by enrolling with the same teacher's 3rd and/or 4th year seminar courses versus those who took only the seminar without having had the experience of *jishu kenkyu*.

References

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