

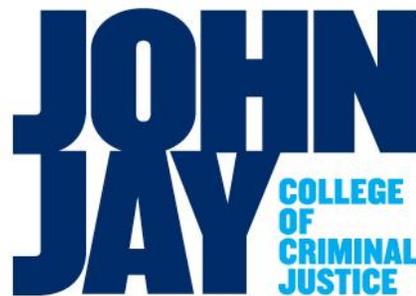
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

Working Paper

Collective Decision-Making in the Classroom as a Way to Influence Social Praxis

Mathieu Dufour

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Mathieu Dufour, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Economics
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York
mdufour@jjay.cuny.edu

Schooling in North America is largely an individual project. By the time they get to college, many, if not most, students have internalised various stimuli nudging them towards an individualist outlook, such as individual assessments and competition with their peers. This makes it challenging when teaching issues related to social behaviour and collective action: In an institution where success has been framed as an individual affair, how credible can a claim for the importance of collective action in social life be?

For me, teaching in an economics department at a large research university, the problem was compounded. Much of modern economics is about the individual, both in terms of the methodology used¹ and the object of analysis itself. Social outcomes are largely described as the aggregate result of individual actions, rather than, say, emanating from a system, such as capitalism, with immanent characteristics and tendencies going beyond the individuals populating it.

Subverting this state of affairs in a classroom setting is not easy, especially since the impact of any one course during a semester is bound to remain limited for most students. In many ways, this echoes the problem outlined by Nicholas Hengen Fox (2012) in a recent issue of *Radical Teacher* about teaching and activism: The classroom potential as a space to modify social praxis is limited. Nonetheless, in this very small sphere of their existence, a difference could perhaps be made if the only way to proceed, for the course to work, in some sense, was to function with a different logic. As an attempt to make this effective, I structured a course on economic policies around an exercise which require a fair dose of collective decision-making to function.

The premise of the course is simple: After a couple of weeks of preliminary considerations on policymaking and the functioning of the media, each week is to be devoted to a different issue for which various economic policies could be elaborated. During the week, the issue is outlined and different policy options presented, analysed, and debated.

One tricky part is that issues themselves, not just policies, have to be selected amongst many present in a modern capitalist society (the system itself being one of them). I could do it by fiat, but instead, I decided to turn the choice over to the students, with the proviso that I either be comfortable accompanying them on a topic or that I knew somebody who could do so.ⁱⁱ

In granting the students power over content, I hoped both to give them a stake in the course itself beyond the grade or credit to be gotten from it and to illustrate the social nature of decision-making. Furthermore, having the student exercise decision-making power over an issue affecting them allowed the course itself to resemble its content in some degree, as the student had to elaborate a policy shaping the way they were to study policies. I've tried that structure twice now, both times with an interesting outcome.

As a first step, at the end of the first class, the student outlined a list of possible topics and individually ranked them. I then asked the students to send me suggestions via e-mail regarding ways these individual preferences could be converted into a collective choice. The heart of the matter is that there are many more students or possible topics than weeks open, so the manner in which issues are to be selected became central. This brings forth the classic infinite regress of voting on the vote itself (voting to vote on whether we should vote to vote on voting...), but within a context where a resolution needs to happen for the course to proceed. Students are typically aware of the problem, at least in vague terms, but not really of its extent. After all, much time is spent in North America talking how political processes and institutions allow individual opinions to be channelled *democratically* to generate decisions for entire countries. Consequently, spirits were high after this first part, thinking we'd be able to select a collective list of topics quite easily during the following class.

Before the next lecture, I produced a set of statistics with the individual ranks, using the mechanisms suggested by the students – and a few others – to devise a collective

ordering. Examples included counting the number of first positions (or last ones) and taking the issues with the most (least); having each option compete with each other one in pair-wise contests to see if some are always preferred to others; granting each rank a weight (say 1 for a first position, 2 for a second one, etc.) and rank the alternatives according to their scores; eliminating options with the least first position votes and redistributing the votes of the people having ranked them first; etc. The problem, of course, is that there is no guarantee that different procedure will yield the same set of options to be selected.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, both times, except for a couple of options which seemed to garner general support, different mechanisms gave rise to different sets of topics.

I brought the results in the classroom without divulging them in advance and started the lecture by laying them out. They provoked some dismay: Most students expected a quick resolution and discovered that things are less simple than they thought. As a starting point for the ensuing debate, we discussed the reasons why, after all, there is theoretically no reason to believe that individual ranking would yield a consensus regardless of the method used to aggregate them.

The voting paradox with three people and three options is a useful example for such a discussion. Suppose three people (1, 2, and 3) are trying to decide between three alternatives (A, B, and C) and rank them in the following way (with the preferred option listed first):

- Person 1: A-B-C
- Person 2: B-C-A
- Person 3: C-A-B

In this case, a “first past the post” procedure is useless, as each option has the same number of first places. The same problem arises with last places and giving a weight to different ranks does not help either. What if each option is pitted against the two others in a pair-wise

contest? In this case, the group should prefer B to C, since a majority (person 1 and person 2) ranks B above C. Similarly, C should be preferred to A, since person 2 and person 3 rank C above A. Lastly, A should be preferred to B, since person 1 and person 3 rank A above B. This gives the following ranking for the group: B preferred to C, itself preferred to A, itself preferred to B, or B-C-A-B... So while individuals have a complete and transitive ranking of the alternatives, this does not translate in a meaningful ranking for the group.

I gave a couple more examples using the mechanisms we had for our own sets of data and then brought the group back to the issue at hand. The aggregation mechanisms failed, yet a decision must be made for the class to proceed and there is a time constraint; the longer the process takes, the less students get to cover topics they are interested in. If the simple expression of individual choices cannot yield a satisfactory outcome, the process has to become social.

One obvious solution, which a student put forward both times, is to mimic the political process of a representative system and find a way to delegate somebody or a group of people to decide for the rest of the class. This of course raises the same problem as a simple aggregation of preferences – by what process should we select the representatives? Interestingly, both times, this was not the major consideration. Somehow, a majority of students found it unacceptable to cede their sovereignty to some of their peers. This fact itself generated some rethinking on the part of the students of their role in society at large, where policies are decided upon every day by such representatives.

A proposal to make me into a dictator garnered some support as well, which illustrates the persistence of the teachers' position of authority. Despite my attempt to devolve my decision power, some students sought to reinstate it and re-enter a comfortable setup wherein I end up having to make the difficult choices. I evidently declined, as that

would have defeated the purpose, but in any event, support for that option was not widespread.

There then remained only one solution: To talk it out and let the students try to find a way whereby they would be by and large satisfied with the outcome. This part of the exercise was by far the most interesting. I moderated the discussion minimally, but students themselves were driving the debates. Fleeting coalitions were made and deals passed – some students agreeing to a topic in exchange for the presence of another – but considerations for minority viewpoints and the degree of desire or aversion for some topics also arose, along with a preoccupation for enfranchising everybody. In one instance, it was even explicitly set as a principle by the group that everybody have at least one topic it liked a lot in the final list. Regardless of the final procedure(s) used, one of the results was a commitment on the part of students to attend and participate every week, whether or not it was the turn of one's topic of choice.

The main outcome, though, was a realisation by the students that they have to live together for the semester. Attempts to impose one's viewpoint – and there were a few of these – was frowned upon and explicitly resisted not only because it was not perceived as “nice” behaviour, but also because it would be pedagogically counter-productive: It was recognised that the only way to have a lively class was to make sure everybody was enfranchised by the decision-making process. This was quite a realisation, which was to pervade through the subsequent weeks as different topics were treated and students got involved in the analysis and discussion of various issues and economic policy proposals.

At the same time, the exercise remains limited. While the devolution of power over content had effects lasting the entire semester, the extent to which this translated in a changed praxis outside the classroom are uncertain. Being given power over the classroom experience is not the same as being granted a say in policymaking outside of it, yet it allowed

students to develop a certain sensibility towards participatory decision-making processes. No ground-breaking method of collective decision-making was uncovered, although some of the students who had experience with some of them through groups of which they were members shared different strategies with the rest of the group. Overall, students got an appreciation for the challenges inherent in such processes, but also their importance for meaningful democratic discussions. In both occasions, one class of one hour and a half was enough to come up with a list, partly because students imposed that limit on themselves. It seemed ridiculous to possibly lose one week on a topic following an inability to come up with a list – that would have both reduced the overall scope of the class and constrained the discussion even more.

Ultimately, clubs aside, a university professor mostly has control over his own course(s), one of many the students will take, which happens after years of socialisation within institutions with a fair individualistic bent. Unless the effort becomes concerted over the department and university, the impact of any one course is bound to be limited. Nevertheless, even with these constraints, changing the praxis of the course itself, having the students experience a decision-making process with something close to their proximate experience at stake, seemed to make a difference in the way many students felt about these issues.

Works Cited

Fox, Nicholas Hengen (2012) “Teaching (is not) Activism”, *Radical Teacher*, **94** (summer 2012), 14-23.

ⁱ Methodological individualism, which puts the individual human actor as the starting point of analysis, has been largely adopted by the profession.

ⁱⁱ I did choose the first two topics, so that I had time to prepare for the other ones.

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, there is a theorem in social choice theory (the Arrow impossibility theorem), which states that there is no procedure to aggregate individual preferences in a community-wide ranking that is complete and transitive (if A is preferred to B and B is preferred to C, A should be preferred to C), while meeting a few basic criteria.