Using in-class movement to facilitate participation and minimize groupthink in ethical decision-making

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ABSTRACT

In the present manuscript an experiential exercise is presented that requires students to consider ethical dilemmas, and physically move to one corner of the room that best represents their stance on the issue, creating a visual representation of the decision-making outcomes across the class. From there, representatives from each location are asked to verbalize the rationale for their decision, challenging the students to reflect on and critically think about not only what they decided but more importantly the reason for their decision. This "voting with their feet" facilitates an increase in participation among reluctant participants, minimizes opportunities for groupthink in ethical decision-making, and helps students to appreciate how peers come to different decisions using similar/different philosophical rationale (e.g., utilitarianism, deontology). A detailed overview of how to implement this exercise, as well as variations on how to use it is provided.

Keywords: movement, ethical dilemma, utilitarianism, deontology, decision-making, groupthink

INTRODUCTION

In a world where polarization, tribalism, and lack of civility are commonplace, it is important to help students appreciate that reasonable people using similar/different ethical frameworks can come to well-reasoned but different decisions regarding ethical-dilemma situations, where two or more right values conflict (Treviño & Nelson, 2021). As it stands, social media, for example, allows individuals to freely come and go from a conversation or debate and society "ends up in polarized and insular echo chambers of our own making" (Edenberg, 2021, p. 259). As a result, many students experience life in a way that insulates them from the complexities of values-conflicts and tends to characterize those who disagree with them in oversimplified terms such as misinformed, dumb, or even evil.

In addition, a variety of related issues emerge as students grapple with how to navigate an ethical dilemma situation – particularly in a classroom context - limiting the opportunities for students to fully engage in critical thinking and decision-making. Such issues involve some students solely centered on finding the correct answer online (Weinstein, Brotspies, & Gironda, 2020) – as if there is only one right answer to an ethical dilemma in a case study. Additionally, many students will remain quiet during a discussion for a variety of reasons. Some students may be reluctant to share out loud their opinion on the problem for fear that they do not have the correct answer or that their values do not align with those of the majority in the class. Other students may add a comment or two to the discussion, agreeing with or piggy backing on another classmate's stance on the issue, contributing to an illusion of unanimity and group think (Janis, 1972; 1982). The problem is, the dynamics between a few students who openly share their ideas and those who agree with the vocal majority as well as those who withhold their ideas can limit the breadth of viewpoints represented in the discussion, serving to oversimplify the variety of perspectives in the classroom. Additionally, students often struggle to explain the reasons they agree/disagree, to articulate a rationale for their decision, and to especially draw on or apply a theory to inform their decision-making in an ethical dilemma situation.

In the present manuscript a possible approach for addressing these issues is provided, with a focus on equipping students to utilize a set of ethical decision-making frameworks and critically consider values-conflicts from different viewpoints. An experiential exercise is outlined that involves incorporating physical movement - helping instructors to increase participation and overcome the barrier of groupthink in the classroom - to provide students with a process for considering an ethical dilemma and practicing critical thinking and decision-making. More specifically, this paper outlines a "vote with your feet exercise," where students assume the role of the decision-maker. By voting with their feet, they are required to determine their stance on the ethical dilemma situation and to move to one corner of the room. Each corner represents a combination of the individual's decision (e.g., yes, I would take the proposed action/no, I would not take the proposed action), as well as the primary ethical decision-making framework the student would use to justify their decision (e.g., utilitarianism vs. deontology). The utilitarian approach focuses on what decision would yield the greatest good and least harm for society overall, whereas the deontological approach focuses on what decision would be consistent with universal principles, moral rules, and values (Treviño & Nelson, 2021).

This experiential exercise - where students are required to participate by voting with their feet - removes the opportunity for students to sit back during a discussion and instead, requires them to engage openly and establish a "voice" on an ethical dilemma. Additionally, this exercise requires students to consider what they would do in the situation and to reflect on and discuss the

reasons for their decisions, as well as observe their classmates' decisions, importantly made public by where they are physically gathering in the room. This movement is key as it helps to limit the opportunity for the vocal few to dominate discussion and create the illusion that their view is representative of the group. This exercise also requires students to consider what they would actually do in response to the dilemma and to reflect on and discuss the reasons for their decisions. In sum, this movement-oriented exercise helps students learn to apply ethical decision-making frameworks in an engaging way, one that enables them to appreciate while not being overly influenced by the differing perspectives of their fellow classmates (Garfinkle, 2017).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Previous research provides a rationale for the usefulness of movement in learning. For example, a study that examined the feasibility of physical movement, namely "movement breaks," in a university setting found that activities like brisk walking, hopping or jumping, and step lunges, to name a few, positively contributed to alertness, concentration, and enjoyment (Peiris, et al., 2021, p. 2). According to the study, the movement breaks seemingly served as a benefit to class participation, "as students described feeling more comfortable and less worried about making mistakes so that they were more willing to speak up and be interactive" (p. 6). The movement breaks, described here, are different from the get up and move to one corner of the room activity being described in this exercise. However, such physical movement can allow for a break from sitting in a chair and participating in a routine case discussion, and instead allow for an opportunity to decide, get up, and move to a different part of the room. Such breaks can improve one's concentration and alertness. Others, specifically in management education, have also found value in incorporating physical movement into the classroom. Peterson et al. (2016), who use line dancing to teach mental models, argue that "when physical performance is required in an environment where learners are used to sitting in chairs to receive information" it can lead to insights that would not have been experienced otherwise (p. 227). More specifically, the physical movement enables the learners to move in accordance with their thoughts and feelings, strengthening how they make sense of and process the course material. There is also some vulnerability in physically taking a stand (as is the case in the present exercise) and making a decision on an ethical dilemma situation.

According to Ertel (2022), physical engagement is an "often-neglected engagement strategy" (par. 30). Such efforts that "engage students physically help to keep them focused and may help change their brains by strengthening neuropathways leading to improved storage and retrieval of information" (par. 30). Research shows the important role the mind and body have in learning, and physical activity can activate the brain, and therefore, this process is critical to how instructors teach and engage students (Blakemore, 2003). In fact, student learning can be enhanced through using activities that leverage both sides of the body (Stevens-Smith, 2004). The physical movement, afforded to students by way of this vote with your feet exercise, activates their mind and body, giving them the opportunity to get up and move around, and most importantly, choose a corner of the room that best represents their decision-making. Such physical movement helps students to engage cognitively with the decision and the viewpoints of others in a way that is different from the passive observance of verbal responses, typically made by other students in the classroom. Specifically, it forces the students to publicly take a position on an issue without knowing what others in the room believe about this issue (other than their partner's position), thereby insulating the class from groupthink processes that might otherwise

cause individuals to self-censor or experience pressure from outspoken, opposing views (Janis, 1982). Like how people make decisions in a business setting, students will need to be able to stand by their decision and recognize how others (such as their manager or their employees) may approach the same ethical dilemma situation in a different way - this exercise helps to simulate this ethical decision-making process.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After this exercise, students will be able to:
1. Apply ethical decision-making frameworks (utilitarianism and deontology) to an ethical dilemma situation.
2. Dialogue with others about how to approach an ethical dilemma situation.
3. Analyze another person's perspectives on an ethical dilemma situation.
4. Apply techniques to circumvent groupthink.

EXERCISE OVERVIEW

In this exercise, students must decide on what they would do in response to brief, ethical-dilemma situations. Each scenario prompts the students to decide whether they would or would not take a specific action. The students must also identify the justification for their decision as being most consistent with one of two ethical decision-making frameworks (either utilitarianism or deontology). The room is divided into four quadrants, representing yes/utilitarianism, yes/deontology, no/utilitarianism, and no/deontology, respectively. Students vote by moving to the quadrant of the room that corresponds with their yes or no choice as well as the dominant philosophical rationale for making that choice. The instructor surveys the room, asking students in each of the quadrants to share their respective rationale.

Intended Audience

This exercise is most appropriate for an in-person management class, consisting of 25 to 35 students. Additionally, this exercise is typically used in an organizational behavior course or business ethics course, where decision-making and ethics are relevant topics. That said, variations of this exercise (described below) have been facilitated at a large, research university in the Eastern Time Zone and at a more teaching-focused university in the Mountain Time Zone, with undergraduate and graduate students, domestic and international students – all within in-person courses.

Materials

The instructor should provide an overview of the concepts of utilitarianism and deontology to the students through pre-reading and lecture (Mill, 1861/1998; Kant, 1797/1991; see the Appendix for potential assigned readings and lecture material). The instructor also needs to present at least one scenario that involves a values-conflict (see below for sample ethical dilemma scenarios). A values-conflict means that a reasonable person could come to a different conclusion about how to respond given their interpretation of the values involved (such as their personal values and the organization's values) and the philosophical framework they bring to the

situation. In practice, it is common to present two or three different scenarios, conducting this exercise two or three times, giving students multiple attempts to practice ethical decision-making and to identify the philosophical rationale for the decisions. For room set-up purposes, this exercise is appropriate for both fixed-seat classrooms and flat classrooms with movable seats (if there is space around the seats for students to move past each other and relocate to different corners of the room).

Sample Ethical Dilemma Scenarios

The below scenarios were adapted from Bucaro (2017); see this source for more ideas on such scenarios.

Scenario 1: While in the restroom, you overhear your manager telling a colleague that Taylor is going to be laid off in about two weeks. Taylor is one of your good friends. Do you tell Taylor?

Scenario 2: Company policy forbids co-workers from becoming romantically involved. You go to the same church as someone from another department, and you find yourself becoming attracted to this person. Do you pursue the relationship?

Scenario 3: You are ready to sign a new, big client to a contract valued for more than $50,000. Your manager is under a lot of pressure to increase sales. They call you into their office and tell you that their job is on the line. They ask you to include the revenue for your contract in the sales figures for the quarter that ends today. You know the contract is a sure thing, but the client is out of town and cannot sign until tomorrow. What do you do?

Exercise Implementation

Before the instructor can facilitate the exercise, students should complete the assigned readings prior to class on the basics of utilitarianism and deontology. Then, the instructor provides a brief overview of the concepts through a short, in-class lecturette (5 to 10 minutes). After the students are familiar with the concepts, the instructor divides the room into four quadrants by pointing to each corner of the room and identifying it as yes/utilitarianism, yes/deontology, no/utilitarianism, and no/deontology corner, respectively.

Then, the instructor provides the students with an ethical dilemma scenario and asks them to comply with the following instructions:

Step 1: Self-select into groups of two students (or three students, if necessary, due to an odd number of participants) (30 seconds). It is OK to work with the person sitting next to you.

Step 2: Read the first scenario provided by the instructor (1 minute).

Step 3: Debate what course of action you would take with your partner (6 to 10 minutes with 3-5 minutes per partner). Each of you should take turns providing a rationale for your respective stances on the situation, i.e., Why did you choose this decision?

Step 4: After you describe the rationale to your partner, decide whether your rationale was more utilitarian or more deontological in nature. It may be a little bit of both, but you should choose which one most dominated your reasoning. Also, it is possible that you and your partner may choose different approaches (1 to 2 minutes).

Step 5: Vote with your feet! Each of you should move to the appropriate corner(s) of the room and be prepared to describe your rationale to the class, if called upon by the instructor (1 minute).

Step 6: For the instructor: Ask individuals in each corner of the room - yes/utilitarianism, yes/deontology, no/utilitarianism, and no/deontology - to describe the rationale for their decision to the class (5 to 10 minutes).

Note: The instructor may repeat the process for multiple scenarios as time allows. Each scenario can take approximately 15 to 25 minutes depending on how much the instructor encourages the discussion.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

The instructor debriefs after each scenario, by having students from the four corners describe the rationale for their decision. More specifically, the instructor stands in the middle of the room and turns their attention to one of the corners, cold calling on two or three students. Then, the instructor turns their attention to another corner, cold calling on two or three students, and repeats this process for the last two corners. Because all students had an opportunity to explain their rationale to a partner prior to moving to a corner, the cold calling approach is particularly effective in this context. The earlier partner work - where each partner takes turns describing their decision - prompts all students to articulate their logic to another classmate, and arguably helps them to be more prepared (and confident) in sharing which philosophical framework supports their decision-making. The students seemingly gain some level of confidence during the think-pair-share exercise, before moving to some part of the room. Relatedly, the students also have accountability to their partner, moving to the area that represents their viewpoint rather than following the "crowd." Again, this approach ensures the students have a response prepared, should they be called upon during the class debrief.

Occasionally during the debrief, a student will misclassify their reasoning, e.g., they provide a deontological reason for their decision even though they are standing in a utilitarian corner of the room. This situation provides an excellent opportunity for the instructor to kindly correct and demonstrate that their rationale is more aligned with the other philosophical framework, thus reinforcing the difference between these perspectives for the larger class.

VARIATIONS OF EXERCISE

There are other variations of this exercise that draw on this vote with your feet approach to explore ethical decision-making. For example, a simplified version of this exercise has been implemented as an icebreaker activity, using the Heinz Dilemma (McLeod, 2013), on the first day of class in an undergraduate course on business ethics. In this variation, students read the dilemma (outlined on a slide), and then move to one or the other side of the classroom to indicate what Heinz should decide. Students are then given the opportunity to voluntarily explain why they made their respective decision. From there, the instructor goes on to foreshadow how the course will draw on different frameworks to aid in ethical decision-making. Additionally, the vote with your feet approach has been used as a method to encourage students to participate in a case study discussion in a course on business ethics, asking them to assume the role of the protagonist and to move at key decision points. Other variations used include having students explore different competing frameworks such as divergent perspectives on moral relativism vs. moral objectivism (Harman & Thomson, 1996), conflict management styles (e.g., integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising; Rahim, 1983), and work values (e.g., terminal vs. instrumental values; Rokeach, 1973) in lieu of the utilitarianism/deontology

dichotomy. In these variations, the implementation process follows a similar structure to the decision-making exercise outlined above; however, the scenarios are modified to align with the framework under consideration.

The vote with your feet exercise could also be modified to be used in a virtual classroom instead of a physical room. The authors give the following suggested modification based on their collective experience with using Zoom, although they have not yet facilitated this exercise online. By way of Zoom, the instructor would create the breakout rooms, name them by the decision they represent (e.g., yes/deontology, no/deontology), and then allow participants to select their own rooms. In this online modality, students can see and move to their preferred breakout room. The students can also see who is in each room, allowing them to consider how others voted, like in a physical classroom. That said, students cannot communicate with those in other breakout rooms, so the instructor would need to screenshot the breakout room attendance, and then bring the class together and share the screenshot with the class in the Main Room. While sharing the breakout room attendance - showing how each person voted - the instructor could ask individual students to share why they chose their room, mimicking how the instructor debriefs the exercise in a physical classroom with students standing in their respective sections of the room (see Zoom, 2023 for more information on how to manage breakout rooms).

EVIDENCE FOR EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EXERCISE

By way of this exercise, students demonstrate a clear understanding for the nuances of and application of utilitarianism and deontology and a deeper awareness for how one's own values align with these two different ethical decision-making frameworks. Students also recognize and appreciate how they may arrive at different ethical decisions using similar/different philosophical rationale compared to their classmates. The benefits outlined here are evidenced by increased performance on exam questions related to the concepts of utilitarianism and deontology, improved and more accurate use of the concepts in class discussions, and student feedback about the usefulness and engaging nature of the exercise in course teaching evaluations. In fact, students recalled how this exercise helped them to appreciate how their classmates' perspectives can differ on the same situation. This exercise enabled them to recognize the opportunities more fully for diversity of thought in an ethical dilemma situation in a way not typical in other class discussions. In addition, several students at the graduate level initiated and adopted a similar pedagogical technique when they were tasked with facilitating a class-wide case discussion, providing evidence that these students found value in this exercise. They, too, leveraged this exercise in physical movement to enable their peers to express their ideas more openly about how a protagonist should navigate an ethical dilemma situation.

CONCLUSION

In the present activity, students publicly indicate a decision by physically moving to one corner of the room and demonstrate ownership of their decision in the larger class discussion. In doing so, the students are better able to engage in the decision-making process, avoiding the passive participation and groupthink issues that are common when using a traditional class discussion approach. In addition, with a simple look around the room, the visual nature of the voting process allows the students to quickly witness that a reasonable person (i.e., many of their

peers) can come to a different conclusion on an ethical dilemma situation using similar/different philosophical rationale. Such an observation is indicative of the experiences that they undoubtedly see online, in their social circles, and in the workplace, and the ability to overcome groupthink is a valuable skillset that students can use now - in their student organizations - and in the future.
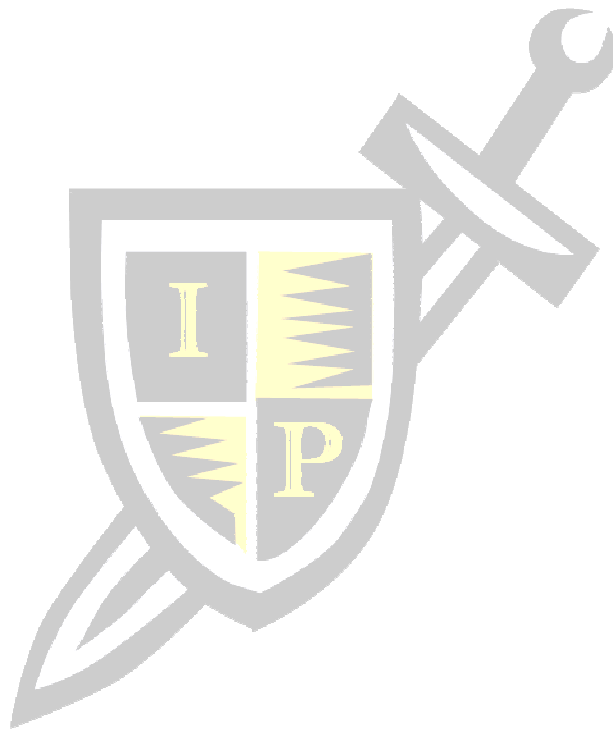
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APPENDIX

Potential Assigned Readings

The instructor can ask students to complete the following readings prior to class:

Alexander, L., & Moore, M. (2016). Deontological ethics. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/

Freeman, S. (1994). Utilitarianism, deontology, and the priority of right. *Philosophy & Public Affairs, 23*(4), 313-349.

Overview of Lecture Slide Content

The instructor can use the following slide content to introduce this exercise. The slide content should be used in addition to the assigning readings (referenced above) to help students to remember and understand the concepts of utilitarianism and deontology. The assigned readings also provide supporting material for the points outlined in the slides.

Outline of Slides: Brief Review of Moral Philosophies

Slide 1: Utilitarianism (Mill, 1861/1998)
"Greatest Good for the Greatest Number" Cost/Benefit Analysis
John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham
See video on The Trolley Problem (BBC Radio, 2014a) for example

Slide 2: Deontological Ethics (Kant, 1797/1991)
Rule-based, Outcome is Irrelevant
Immanuel Kant and the Categorical Imperative
"Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"
See video on Kant's Axe (BBC Radio, 2014b) for example

Slide 3: What Would You Do?
Step 1: Get into groups of TWO.
Step 2: Read: While in the restroom, you overhear your boss telling a colleague that Taylor is going to be laid off in about two weeks. Taylor is one of your good friends. Do you tell Taylor (adapted from Bucaro, 2017)?
Step 3: Debate: Discuss the course of action you would take.
Step 4: Take turns: Share your rationale for this course of action. Why did you choose this decision?
Step 5: Reflect on your rationale: Was it more utilitarian or more deontological in nature?*
Step 6: Vote with your feet: Move to the appropriate area of the room.

*While discussing Step 5 with the class, the instructor may want to share that it could be a little bit of both, but each student should choose the one that most dominated their reasoning. The instructor should ask the students to review the course materials on utilitarianism and deontology - if needed - to answer this question.