Controversy in the Classroom: A Collaborative Approach

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My goal for students in my first-year seminar on the topic of controversy in economic policy was for each student to develop opinions on economic policy issues that were grounded in empirical evidence and consistent with the student's values. It was also important that students recognized that policy changes produce winners and losers, and their opinions should be based on a full understanding of the effects of policies on different outcomes and groups of people. This project focuses on how working collaboratively with other students can help achieve these goals.

Throughout the semester, students discussed a variety of issues, covering a new issue each week. In addition to explaining the details of each issue, I also drew students' attention to the types of evidence that authors used and how they structured their arguments. In parallel to the weekly discussions of new issues, students worked on a research paper that challenged them to explain their opinion on a policy issue with support from empirical evidence found in academic journal articles.

Small Group Activities

Policy analysis is complex enough for academics, much less first-year students who may not have previous experience studying economics. I used small-group activities to help students understand policy issues by listening to others and having to teach their classmates. In some classes, all students came prepared having read the same two short articles about an issue, each expressing a different point of view. I began the activity by dividing students into groups and giving each group a question to answer. For example, one group was asked to list the advantages of free trade, while the other was asked to list the disadvantages of free trade. Or, one group might be asked to list the specific pieces of empirical evidence given in one article about the minimum wage and the other group did the same for a different article. I experimented with dividing the class into groups of 7 (dividing the class in half) or groups of 3-4; smaller groups tended to work better.

I usually gave each group a blackboard (a section of the board would work in a larger classroom). In some groups, students would hand the chalk back and forth, and each student would come to the board when he/she thought of something to add to their answer. In others, one student might act as note-taker for everyone's contributions. Being able to see ideas being added and modified allowed me to observe how the group was tackling their task. I would drop in on each group to answer questions, particularly if I could tell from their board that they were stuck or going off in the wrong direction. A mentor (for first-year seminars) or a teaching assistant who can also help the groups can be very helpful for this activity.

Next, students were tasked with explaining the answer to their question to students who answered a different question. I also experimented a bit here. Initially, I paired students up, so that each student had to take the knowledge that their group had generated together and share it with one student who had not been part of that group. However, I found that students seemed more comfortable and explained the issues better when they presented as a group to the rest of the class. These impromptu class presentations also forced class participation from those who might otherwise be less engaged, because groups always chose to make sure that each student had a role in the presentation.

After all groups had presented, we would come together for a discussion as a class. This would be the time for evaluating which proposed policy students thought was a better solution to the problem at hand or how the policies might be improved. I sometimes used quick informal writing assignments to enhance the discussions. Students might be asked to take a few minutes to explain which policy they thought was best. This ensured that all students had time to think about the question before the discussion. Another type of informal writing assignment was occasionally completed at the end of class, though I informed students ahead of time to expect it. They were required to explain a point that another student had made during class and respond to it. My hope was that students would listen carefully to their classmates if they anticipated having to complete this assignment at the end of class. Most students showed that they had paid close attention to what others students were saying and had constructive responses. However, students were somewhat more reluctant to actually give those responses during the discussion itself.

While working in groups simply to better understand the issues served one purpose, the same activity had an additional, more subtle purpose in other class periods. In about half of the classes, I assigned two or three longer articles as the reading for the class. However, each student was only responsible for one reading (assigned by me). This meant that students had to really rely on their classmates to explain the main points of the other readings in order to participate fully in the discussion in the second half of the class period. As was the case when all students had done the same reading, discussing and presenting in groups helped students develop a deeper understanding of the reading they did. In addition, they gained at least an exposure to other points of view from their classmates' presentations. My hope was that these activities also planted the seed in students' minds that other students have knowledge and different perspectives that can help them learn more about an issue.

Because students could not choose which article they wanted to read, the group of students who were assigned to a given article usually had different initial opinions on the issue. For issues where more disagreement was indicated on a survey students completed at the beginning of the course, I made sure to assign students with different viewpoints to the same group. The concept of confirmation bias in psychology tells us that people often search for or focus on evidence that supports their existing point of view. When reading an article about the minimum wage, a student who supported it might focus on the parts of the article about poverty reduction or efficiency gains from lower turnover. However, a student who opposed the minimum wage might read the same article and have his attention drawn to arguments about reduced employment and higher prices as the result of a higher minimum wage. By putting these students in the same group, I hoped to ensure that students came away with a fuller, more accurate understanding of the article. Ideally, they might also recognize that their attention was consistently drawn to particular types of arguments and be aware of this bias in the future.

When discussing some issues as a class, it was clear that some students had changed their opinions, or at least they were no longer as certain as they had been. Students would occasionally remark that they hadn't thought of an angle of the problem that a reading had brought up or that what they had thought or hoped a policy would do was not consistent with the empirical evidence. In my view, that kind of intellectual progress is what can happen when students are forced to consider many sides of an issue. I made it clear from the beginning of the course that the goal was not to defend an existing position, but to try to find the right one.

Complementary Writing Assignments

While the focus of my project was on the interactions between students, a brief description of the complementary formal writing assignments is necessary to give a complete picture of the course. To reinforce ideas from class and develop skills they would need to write their research papers, students completed a series of three short papers and three very short papers.

The very short papers were simply one- or two-paragraph summaries of empirical academic journal articles from the reading list. While actually reading academic papers in economics is a challenge for second-year graduate students, I explained to students that they could understand enough of what an article was about by reading the abstract, introduction, and conclusion. Students were instructed to read only those parts of the article, focusing on what the authors found and how they found it. They were required to paraphrase (no direct quotations allowed), practice using an in-text citation, and include a bibliography entry for the article. I had made it my mission as a first-year seminar instructor that no student of mine would ever "unintentionally" plagiarize a paper. In addition, the assignment gave them practice locating the main points of a complicated article, a skill they would need when doing research for their research papers.

The other papers were a bit longer, two or three pages, and they focused on reinforcing skills learned in class. In the first paper, they explained why incomes of people in the top one percent of earners are much higher than those in the middle of the income distribution, based on the class readings. This is purely a cause-and-effect question. The goal was to avoid making any normative claims (for now) and instead focus on the cause of the problem. Since the readings often included normative arguments (in favor of higher taxes on the wealthy, for instance), students had to distinguish between the different types of arguments. They also had to set aside any emotional reactions to the prompt (regarding fairness, for example). This separation helps students—and more experienced scholars, for that matter—understand the problem before rushing to form an opinion on a solution.

In the second paper, they were asked to give their opinion on whether a hypothetical immigration reform would be an improvement over the policy in place at the time. However, they also had to explain the effects of the reform on two groups of people: one who would benefit from the reform and one who would be hurt by the reform. In policy analysis, it is important to recognize that policies that are good for everyone are rare, and one must be comfortable with the trade-offs that must be made. This assignment also forced them to write a paper that didn't just acknowledge evidence that supported their opinion, in an attempt to move them away from that approach to research.

In the last short paper, students explained why the authors of a Point/Counterpoint series about the minimum wage published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* disagreed. This assignment required students to understand the structure and supporting evidence of each argument. They also had to recognize that the reason for disagreement is not always simple. Students may be inclined to villainize the opposing side: supporters of the minimum wage don't understand economics, or its opponents don't care about poor people. In this case, the empirical evidence is mixed, and people with slightly different views about the purpose of the minimum wage can come to different conclusions. Recognizing this may make students more comfortable reading articles that draw different conclusions because the evidence and points of view explained may still inform their opinion, even if the student disagrees with the conclusion.

Peer Review

I imagined that peer review of their research papers would be an important part of the revision process during the semester. Soon after submitting their first (not rough!) drafts of their papers, students participated in an in-class revision workshop. I assigned each student to three partners and sent the partners' papers to the student a week before the workshop. For each partner's paper, the student was required to complete a revision worksheet that included the following questions:

1. What part or parts of the argument did you find most convincing? Why?
2. What part or parts of the argument did you find least convincing? Why?
3. Were there any parts of the paper that you found difficult to follow?

4. What types of evidence could the author look for to provide additional support for his/her argument?
5. What other effects of the policy or moral issues should be considered?

Students were specifically instructed to focus on providing constructive answers to these questions, rather than just peer-edit by circling typos. While I was generally impressed with the quality of the comments on these worksheets, the other CTL Fellows suggested that making the worksheet more impersonal by removing the personal pronouns from the first three questions might generate even better feedback. In class, students spent 20-25 minutes with each of their three partners, taking turns sharing and explaining feedback.

The rubric for the revision of the research paper included a category for incorporating feedback from a classmate, in addition to the category based on whether the student considered multiple points of view. Despite the quality of feedback received, many students did not make substantive changes to their papers. One change that might improve this assignment would be to have students complete written responses to their partners; this parallels the response to referees and journal editors that faculty must submit along with a revised paper. Students may be motivated to avoid wasting the effort of completing these responses by actually making changes to their papers.

Based on my experience in this class, simply allowing students the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers is not enough. There must also be a sufficient incentive for students to really re-write. Since my CTL Fellows colleague Dan Mrozowski faced the same challenge of getting students to do more than push words around in his project on the art of revision, unwillingness to revise seems to be a general problem with student writing. In evaluating the seminar, I concluded that I devoted a lot of thought to issues that would be specific to economics and forming opinions on policy issues. However, I did not put enough consideration into the general problems that students face when having to revise papers. When faced with deadlines in multiple classes, students may view a paper as “done” and revision as a minor task they might get to if they have time after their other work is complete. Students must view a revision as a new assignment in order to put in the effort necessary to obtain the results faculty want.

A Test in November

Having students focus primarily on the effects of policies throughout the semester and not allowing them to jump right to a conclusion had clear benefits at the end of the semester. After the election, several students expressed interest in discussing the new policy proposals. I decided to revise a week of the syllabus by replacing the issue we had planned to discuss the week after the election with the set of Trump's proposed policies that most interested or concerned students. While it was clear that many students had strong views about the outcome of the election, we were able to have an intellectual discussion about what might happen. Students were able to separate their emotional reaction from an evaluation of the policies themselves. The best evidence of this was that students who were clearly not Trump supporters were able to say that they agreed with particular ideas (e.g. trying to speed the drug approval process if it could be done without compromising safety).

By engaging with each other in a joint effort to understand the issues rather than just trying to win a debate, students came away with deeper knowledge of their own views on economic policy issues.