

Reflective Equilibrium and Community-based Design

Length: 1 Day, 90 min.

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Problem Statement: Community-based design requires moral reasoning skills to find consensus solutions among stakeholders with differing different values and concerns.

Learning Objectives:

Students will understand the relationship between stakeholders' values and consensus decision-making.

Students will understand the process of reaching Reflective Equilibrium and its role in building consensus.

Students will improve skills in moral reasoning, moral imagination, and consensus building skills.

Keywords: Reflective Equilibrium, Consensus Decision-Making, Moral Reasoning, Community-based Design

Description: This module is built around a case study of an actual dilemma encountered during a community design project. The focus of the information is understanding the skills required to reason and discuss ethical dilemmas well. This leads to a role-play activity where students practice these skills. While other communication skills are required in situations such as these, the role-play activity is set-up as a best-case scenario of well-intentioned stakeholders in order to focus on the mechanics of ethical reasoning. A power-point on the case study is included along with the module.

Case Study:

Background: Biological Engineering students at LSU take a first-year design course in which they collaborate with communities (typically public schools) to design playgrounds, with the children at the center of the design process. Class ends with college student groups (3-4 students each) having created detailed design concepts that meet community-identified needs and wants. Subsequent to the semester, the LSU Community Playground Project takes these design concepts and continues to work with the community to create a consolidated, community-approved design. Once funding is obtained, the playground is built, either by professional installers or by community volunteers who are supervised by a certified installer.

The case: Miles Liner was a student in the first-year design course and worked in a group to design a playground at Brownfields Elementary School. Tragically, Miles was killed by a drunk driver in a car accident about six months after he completed the course. The LSU Community Playground Project worked with Brownfields to include a memorial area for Miles as part of the consolidated, community-approved playground design. This area consisted of a "pride rock" (large, standalone rock wall) in honor of Miles because his favorite movie was the Lion King. Funding for the playground was obtained from a number of grants and private sources, including Miles' family.

We organized a volunteer build for this playground and Miles' family traveled to Baton Rouge from Berwick, LA (90 miles) to build the pride rock; both his parents were present, in addition to several aunts and uncles and his grandmother (no siblings, Miles was an only child).

When we unpacked the play equipment components from shipping containers, we discovered that only one-third of the rock wall had been delivered. We called the playground manufacturing company and they took responsibility for not shipping all the proper components, but said that it would be a minimum of four weeks until they could ship the rest of the rock wall.

The dilemma: Do you allow Miles' family to build part of the rock wall, or do you wait until all the materials to build the rock wall are available?

Additional details:

- Children will not be able to play on one-third of the rock wall for safety reasons. Children will not be able to use the rock wall until it is fully constructed.
- The rest of the playground components (swings, a large playhouse with multiple slides, climbers, and other activities, and a set of monkey bars) are ready to be built safely on the volunteer build days.

Discussion questions 1:

What is the role of the engineer in community-based design?

What community expertise is required to successfully carry out such a community-based project?

Values, Stakeholder, and Reflective Equilibrium:

In applied ethics, "stakeholder" means anyone who can affect or be affected by a decision. That is, anyone who can make or provide input for the decision, engage in an activity related to the decision, or be harmed or benefitted by the decision. Stakeholder theory is based on the idea that if someone will be affected by a decision¹ (if they have a stake in its outcome), then they deserve some say or a vote in the decision, or they at least must be considered by those who can make the decision. This is known as the "All-Affected Principle."² Often, the first step in making a good decision is identifying who the stakeholders are and what possible benefits or harms might result from the decision. There are at least two ways to think about stakeholder benefits and harms. The first approach focuses on stakeholders' material interests. Identifying stakeholders means identifying people who have a material interest in the outcome of a project, such that they may be positively or negatively affected by the project's potential outcomes. The second approach focuses on stakeholders' values and moral concerns, taking into account their beliefs, especially those beliefs we call values (*what* they think is good or bad) and the moral intensity associated with those beliefs (*how* good or bad they think things are). Stakeholders are unlikely to share the same values or the same judgements about the moral intensity of their values.

Taking values into account is important, but it also leads to complications. Stakeholders can agree that they want the best outcome for everyone party to the decision, while still disagreeing about what "the

¹ Deciding what counts as "affected" by a decision is a difficult and open question in applied ethics known as the Boundary Problem. There is a trivial sense in which almost everyone, including all future people, are affected by every decision, which would make the principle unusable. Much work on the principle aims to provide a non-trivial account of what "affected" means. See Stehr 2022 for an example.

² There are many different versions of Stakeholder Theory. These are kept general for the module. For some background, see Jamali 2008.

best” is. This is because they have different values and different judgements about their intensity. This difficulty can be handled in many different ways. For example, if the decision is decided by majority vote, you only need 51% percent of people to agree that the chosen decision is the best one. For this lesson, however, we are going to look at **consensus decision-making**. A consensus decision is reached when everyone agrees on what is to be done, even if what they agree on is no one’s first choice. This has the advantage that if consensus is achieved, no one feels like they “lost” in the decision (unlike majority vote). It can be difficult to reach a consensus, however, because different stakeholders have different values and even different beliefs about the facts of a situation. Luckily for us, beliefs are revisable. In what follows, we are going to explore a specific tool that will help: Reflective Equilibrium.

Reflective Equilibrium is a specific way to think about the goal of any deliberative process. On the Reflective Equilibrium view, a deliberative process comes to an end when our beliefs about what we are deliberating about are consistent with each other (equilibrium). In order to achieve this consistency, we have to revise or reject views that are in conflict or contradiction. For example, we cannot have the belief that the project should be as inexpensive as possible and that we should use the best quality materials. We will have to decide which to accept. We can think of consensus decision-making as reaching a reflective equilibrium among the beliefs held by the group as a whole.

In dialogue with others, we begin deliberation by identifying different beliefs that pertain to the project and its objectives, such as beliefs about what makes it valuable, what goals the project pursues, and ideas about the context in which the project unfolds. These beliefs rarely start off as completely consistent with each other. If in consensus decision-making, the goal is to end up with a consistent set of beliefs shared by the group, we must engage in a process that allows us to revise our beliefs relative to and in light of others’ beliefs. Think of it as a process of making different and sometimes divergent beliefs fit together by adjusting or changing their content, the way we apply our values, and by learning new facts or ways of looking at things. In the process we may have to give up some formerly cherished beliefs, change our values, or change the moral intensity we assign to our values.

This process is useful not just for consensus-building, but for arriving at any decision. This is because many of our values involve very general beliefs (e.g., “do unto others as you would have done unto you,” “you should judge a person by their intentions,” or “never cause harm unnecessarily”), while a decision involves a particular course of action to be taken in particular circumstances. Fitting ideas together helps us take those general values and apply them to the details and facts of a specific situation. The most important part of this process is that what causes all of these different revisions to our beliefs should be reasons based on other relevant beliefs and the process of making our own beliefs explicit and consistent in the course of consensus building. For example, if consensus is reached because someone threatens everyone else, or everyone is tired of discussing (so they agree to a consensus just to be done with it), Reflective Equilibrium has *not* been reached. In other words, not all consensus achieve Reflective Equilibrium.

In situations where we are trying to reach equilibrium around ethical issues, we must use skills such as ethical sensitivity, ethical reasoning, and moral imagination. Ethical sensitivity is the ability to pick out ethically relevant details of a situation. Ethical reasoning is the skills and processes used to understand and think about different values. Moral imagination is the use of imagination to think of possible actions that can be taken, how those actions will play out, and, importantly, what benefits and harms (and to whom) those different actions may have. In all of these skills, emotions may be an important guide

because our emotional responses (such as anger or shame) often pick up on ethically relevant aspects of the world to which we should learn to be sensitive. Affective clues can also help us to discern how we rank the relative importance of different values (moral intensity) and may help us imagine how people will react to different outcomes. While our goal is a consensus based on shared reasons and beliefs, emotional cues can be a central part of reaching that goal.

Roleplay Activity:

The roleplay activity can be played in groups of 5, or by splitting the class into 5 groups, one for each advocate. The advocate is standing in for different stakeholders in the case study. Each advocate has a belief, a value, and a starting position. These are revisable if given good reasons (which are either reasons that appeal to the advocate's specific value or more general practical concerns and values). While each advocate has their own unique belief and main value, all advocate roles are reasonable people who want to do what is best for everyone involved. They have other common values, and they may share the values of other advocates (this is up to the role-player), however, their listed value is their primary concern. They also have all the information about the situation you have from the Case Study presentation.

Goal: Come to a decision and a justification for that decision that satisfies as many of the advocate's concerns as possible and do so within a given time limit. While there are two starting positions (in favor of building the play feature and completing it later, or waiting to build it all at once), new positions may be proposed and argued for during the course of the activity.

Roles:

Advocate for the Family

Belief: Waiting to build and dedicate the feature is asking for a sacrifice from a family already going through a difficult time.

Value: Your main concern is that the family's grieving process and time be respected.

Starting position: You begin the activity in favor of building the play feature today and completing it later.

Advocate for the Principal

Belief: Everything about school, including recess and play, is for the sake of educating students.

Value: Your main concern is that the solution should be an opportunity for the children to practice some important character traits, such as patience.

Starting position: You begin the activity in favor of building the play feature today and completing it later.

Advocate for the Children

Belief: Leaving a partially built feature that the children can see but not play on is cruel.

Value: Your main concern is that the children's autonomy is respected.

Starting Position: You begin the activity in favor of waiting to build the feature all at once.

Advocate for Engineering Professional Standards

Belief: Incomplete features are a safety issue.

Value: Your main concern is that engineering standards, especially safety standards, are adhered to.

Starting position: You begin the activity in favor of waiting to build the feature all at once.

Advocate for LSU

Belief: This project is important not just for the parties directly involved, but also for LSU's connection to local communities.

Value: Your main concern is that the project maintains LSU's good reputation with the community.

Starting position: Your choice

Stakeholder Survey Stage: To begin, each advocate should explain to the others their main value and how it relates to their starting position. Each advocate should write down the values of the other advocates. Once each advocate has explained their value, take a moment to rank the values in terms of moral intensity from the perspective of your role. The value given by your role will start as "1", meaning it is the most important to you. Choose the value you think is second most important and give it a "2", and so on. If you think a specific value is not relevant to your role, assign it a zero. These choices should be made individually. These rankings will change throughout the discussion stage, so it is fine to make quick decisions here.

Discussion Stage: Take on the position described by your role and begin discussing. Make sure everyone has a chance to speak and respond. As people suggest ideas you think are good, you should add them to your list of beliefs. You may also cross out beliefs or rewrite them if you are convinced otherwise. As you do so, you should reflect on your values. Have your changing beliefs changed the moral intensity of the values you hold? If so, alter their ranking to reflect this. If new values are brought up during discussion, they can also be added to your ranking. If you have changed your position from your starting position, let the group know. There is no limit to the number of times you change your position, but you should do so only when it coincides with the accepting of a new belief, or changing the order of your value ranking.

At the end of the time limit or if a consensus is reached (whichever comes first), the discussion ends. If no consensus is reached, take a vote on the possible options (include new options proposed in addition to the starting positions). Then, have each advocate explain how the decision did or did not align with their values.

Consensus Stage: Once the time is up or consensus is reached, groups should present their decision and their reasoning. This should include the different ways they revised their (or their role's) beliefs, what outcomes they imagined, how the moral intensity of their values changed, and how they understand their decision as a consensus among the different values of everyone involved in the decision-making process. Compare the different values and value rankings at the end (consensus can often be achieved even if each advocate has a very different list and ranking of values). If consensus is

not achieved, students should explain the main obstacles to consensus and what beliefs and values could not be reconciled or made consistent.

Discussion Questions 2: Once students complete the Role-Play Activity, they should reflect and discuss as a class on questions such as:

What did you find most difficult about finding consensus among different values? What skills were most helpful?

What is the role of the designer/engineer in community decision-making? What is their expertise best suited to helping with? When is it not?

Is consensus always possible? If not, is it still possible to complete community-designed projects in a good and respectful way when consensus has failed? How?

Actual case study outcome:

We built one-third of the rock wall during the volunteer build. After completing the partial build, Miles' family stayed and assisted with building other parts of the playground. They returned three months later to complete the construction of the rock wall (the company took much longer than four weeks to fabricate and send the rest of the wall).

How we arrived at this outcome:

Conversation with the certified installer, the leader of the LSU Community Playground Project (LSUCPP), the Principal of Brownfields Elementary, and members of Miles' family.

Specific considerations:

Though Miles' family was fine to return later to build the entire rock wall at once, the Principal and leader of the LSUCPP wanted the family to have the experience of building the rock wall that day.

The certified installer and leader of the LSUCPP were concerned about safety; building a partial wall would have been impossible if the playground had featured public access, but the playground was surrounded by fencing and was off limits to the broader community. Children were never left unattended on the playground, so adults could ensure that the children stayed off the partial rock wall. The Principal's explanation of being able to keep children safe satisfied safety concerns.

The Principal felt that the partially built rock wall would help engender responsibility and accountability in her students. She thought that the children had the rest of the playground to play on while they waited for the rock wall to be completed, and that "the waiting" was an opportunity to build character.

Further Sources:

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