

Students in Assessed Workshops: An analysis of their behaviour as economic agents

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Abstract:

This essay evaluates the alert behaviour that students often exhibit during assessed workshops which account for a proportion of their grade. The paper will firstly set out the problem, while contextualising the student according to two dimensions: individually and in a group. Secondly, the concept of Homo economicus and animal spirits will be brought into the discussion to underline how rationality and irrationality lay the ground for a student's behaviour during an assessed workshop. This will further enable an analysis that can break down to the self-interested agent and his predisposition to manifest collective interest. Eventually, the paper will reach a discussion of rational student cooperation within a Prisoners' Dilemma approach. From all points, it can be seen how students' working style changes, depending on a series of constraints, motivations and traits which they might have. The essay will conclude by pointing out the relevance of such an analysis when examining students' alertness during assessed workshops.

Introduction:

This essay aims to examine a behaviour that was personally observed in daily life: why students often tend to be more alert during workshops that account for a proportion of their grade. This will be done by firstly setting out the problem, while contextualising it using basic economic principles. The discussion will then move to a more complex examination of this behaviour and will incorporate other economic principles, such as Homo Economicus, animal spirits and Prisoners' Dilemma into the argument, in an attempt to assess students as economic agents. Finally, the discussion will be concluded by emphasising the need and the relevance of such a behavioural analysis.

Contextualisation: Observing the individual in a constrained situation

The way in which students decide to engage in assessed workshops can be explored based on their general tendency to demonstrate alert behaviour during a workshop which accounts for a proportion of their grade. It can be said that students are rational maximisers of their own utility and act accordingly (Varian, 2003, p. 54-55), but this can alternatively be looked upon as how students try to minimise their cost during these workshops.

A student's utility can be said to be maximised when the student actively involves himself in the workshop, showing his interest and working proactively with others. Conversely, a student minimises the cost of his action by reducing the risk of getting a lower grade and choosing to mobilise resources to assure a better outcome. Furthermore, it is this notion of risk and its acknowledgement in a student's consciousness that can manifest itself as

pressure. Pressure can be regarded as a constraint on the student's ability to finish the assignment, and in turn, it can negatively influence the outcome (i.e. the grade or result).

However, there is more than the pressure constraint that may influence a student's behaviour during an assessed workshop, and this is time. As well as a resource which students should allocate in a manner that optimises their results, time is also a constraint. Supposing students get a three-hour session in one assessed workshop to complete their assignment, good time allocation can result in a better outcome. However, it can also bear the burden of a student's inability to solve any of the questions, and this can badly damage self-confidence.

Contextualisation: Assigning the individual to a group

Group work for assessed workshops usually tends to eliminate these non-adjustments with one's self (i.e. lack of confidence) but it can equally leave room for carelessness or inadvertence from one side of the group. In fact, when the latter happens, it will be known that the student chose to take no interest in group involvement and might not even come to the workshop. In either of these cases, the student is faced with an opportunity cost and can decide not to sacrifice three hours to work under complete concentration, as this would leave him with little or no energy for the rest of the day. The underlying assumption is nevertheless fallacious, since it is assumed that all other students in the group work under complete concentration, and this challenges psychological theory and practice that clearly distinguish between different types of people and their individual abilities to concentrate. Another limitation for the above example is that there are numerous potential opportunity

costs for assessed workshops, given that people's individual preferences entail how they choose to act under conditions of scarcity. Therefore, in a group situation individuals' behaviour varies.

Optimisation in this case can occur if students try to make the most of their assessed workshops, aided by their individual potential and their potential as a team. This potential can more precisely be called talent on an individual basis. The question is whether it is talent that constrains the outcome (i.e. the ability to perform well during a workshop). Consequently, it can be said that the outcome may depend on the probability distribution of students' talent. However, the obvious questions that would follow from this are whether talent can be quantified, and where does group potential stand with regard to all this.

From rational to irrational – Homo economicus and animal spirits:

On the one hand, Homo economicus is a term that defines the rational and narrowly self-interested economic agents that make decisions in accordance solely with their preferences and expected outcomes (Frank, 2010, p. 17-18). On the other hand, "rational maximising may not always be the way to represent human action" (Moggridge, 1992, p. 211).

Moreover, although mostly relating to macroeconomic concerns, animal spirits is a term which represents at its core "the extent to which people are also guided by noneconomic motivations [...] and to which they are irrational and misguided" (Akerlof and Shiller, 2009, p. 3). From that, it can be inferred that animal spirits may limit the role of the rational maximising agent in a microeconomic context.

From self-interest to collective interest:

In Marx's view, animal spirits "heighten efficiency of each individual workman through emulation when workers are organised for collective action (team work)" (Moggridge, 1992, p. 210). In other words, students working in a group are more efficient when put together than individually, as they tend to compete against each other for their own individual sake. This rather egotistic nature of the rational maximising student is much comprised by Homo Economicus and animal spirits, but the need is to ask whether students can also be motivated by factors that go beyond their instinctive self-interest to get things maximised. Binmore (1994, p. 20) emphasises that there is a new paradigm [that preserves optimisation as the underlying principle and it regards] "evolutionary forces, biological, social and economic as being responsible for getting things maximised". Thus, self-interest is in fact not that narrowly conceived, and students might in fact turn out to be altruistic and interested also in the welfare of their group mates. It would be hypocritical not to recognise that this broader dimension of interest, the collective interest, is still under the tutelage of self-interest, as self-interest in the aftermath of the workshop might still be what motivates a student to work collectively at the end of the day. Precisely at this point, two distinctions can be made: firstly, if collective interest might count as an attempt to measure what section 2 referred to as 'group potential', and secondly, if interest, in both its narrow and broader dimensions, can lead to rational cooperation.

Rational cooperation and the Prisoners' Dilemma:

It has been observed that cooperation between students in a group is nearly impossible if the group gets together for just one session of assessed workshops. This can end up as

either one student doing all the work or all students doing nothing. From bird's eye, the probability of this outcome is as dangerous as heads and tails. At a closer look, it can be argued that this probability can interfere with the probability distribution of students' talent.

For repeated sessions of assessed workshops, students working in the same groups might decide to merge their powers and help one another. While still preserving their original self-interest, students are also moved by collective concerns, and this decision to merge their powers can be seen as fair-play through their eyes. So, it can be said that students choose to play fairly because it is in their interests to do so, and thus, optimise their results provided that the other group partners also play fairly.

Allusively, it is therefore legitimate to think that this situation is no less than a Prisoners' Dilemma, whereby "rational cooperation in the one-shot version is impossible, but in which cooperation can be sustained as an equilibrium in the repeated versions" (Binmore, 1994, p. 58).

How the prisoners' dilemma relates to how students from an assessed group behave may also be a problem of trust, which can hold the team at the verge of being made either better or worse off (Pareto efficient and Pareto inefficient, respectively). In repeated cases, students cooperate because they hope "cooperation will induce further cooperation in the future" (Varian, 2003, p. 504). More specifically, supposing a student in the group refuses to solve the question assigned to him, other students in the group might as well refuse to cooperate at future workshops. While knowing they can influence their group mates' behaviour and this is not leading to any Pareto efficient outcome, neither of the students has any incentive to deviate.

Conclusion:

When analysing the behaviour exhibited by students during assessed workshops, it is necessary to be aware of their volatility and willingness to change the outcome. While assuming they are rational agents, there is a possibility that they are also guided by irrationality. However, besides acting in their own self-interest, there is an option that students might also find that they need to play fairly and work collectively, and thus, rationally choose to involve and cooperate in a workshop, whereby this rational cooperation is a case of Prisoners' Dilemma.

References:

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