

Course Proposal: Collective cognition

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In what ways collective cognition subdues individual cognition? How should we go about solving problems in groups? When should we rely on hierarchy, and when should we facilitate self-organization? How can we reasonably resolve disagreements among peers? How to properly harness the benefits of diversity? This course provides an interdisciplinary approach to these questions, drawing from wide perspectives including managerial and political science, social epistemology, cultural evolution, and complexity and decision theory, all brought under the umbrella of “collective cognition”. Students will be invited to transform the classroom itself into an experiment by self-organizing around a joint-project (related to the course) and by reflecting upon their own process.

The goal of the course is twofold. The first goal is to familiarize students with research from disparate bodies of literature relevant to the broader theme of collective cognition. Throughout the course, students will be encouraged to draw connections between these bodies of work. The second goal of the course is to reflect upon the implications of the theoretical issues explored throughout the course for organizational and institutional design: what does collective cognition have to say about markets, democracy, or central planning?

In the process, students will:

- Learn to model situations of collective cognition using the appropriate frameworks(s): decision theory, game theory, Bayesian belief-updating, complex landscapes, etc.
- Learn to co-organize a “large-scale” project.
- Understand the epistemic implications of organizational and institutional design for groups and societies.

Students are expected to be familiar with the fundamentals of Bayesian probability, decision theory (in particular probabilistic utility-maximizing decision theory), and game theory. They (or at several of them) should have some computational skills and experience with programming. It is fine, and even better, if students have heterogeneous skills and knowledge.

1 Contents

The course is organized in four themes. The last theme is more open-ended. Students should be able to start working on their joint-project before the end of the class.

1.1 From individual cognition to collective cognition

- The collective brain as “the secret of our success” [1–3]
- The independence thesis in social epistemology: why collective rationality does not reduce to individual rationality [4]

1.2 Division of labor and cooperation in collective cognition

- Exploration/exploitation trade-off in collective cognition: multi-armed bandits in multi-agent systems [5, 6]

- It’s all fun and games: selfishness in collective cognition [7–9]
- Inverse problems in collective cognition: working with behavioral data [10]

1.3 Diversity in collective problem-solving

- The benefits of transient diversity: making space for individual and independent exploration [11–14]
- The Hong-Page model: high diversity can exceed high-ability [15]
- The wisdom of the crowds [16–18]
- Pitfalls of diversity (issues in judgment aggregation [19]; polarization [20]; the trade-off between diversity and coordination [21])

1.4 Adaptive systems, self-organization, and hierarchies

- Collective problem-solvers and complex adaptive systems [22, 23]
- Conflict, self-organization and hierarchies: the case of Wikipedia [24, 25]
- Markets and central planning in economics and organizations [26–29]
- Challenges in collective cognition: collective stupidity [30, 31], collective adaptation [32], and artificial intelligence.

2 Evaluation

On the first day, students are asked individually to report their skill sets and domains of expertise (e.g. the programming languages or computational methods they might be familiar with, their favorite courses, etc.). Based on their feedback, the instructor(s) design(s) a joint-project for the class that no single student would be able to accomplish on their own given (i) the scale of the project and (ii) their distribution of skills. The joint-project is related to collective cognition and should involve several of the following tasks: designing formal models, collecting data, conducting an experiment, analyzing data, etc. The project should be rather open-ended. Students will work collaboratively over more than half of the semester and produce a joint-report. In order to be evaluated, students hand out short individual reports (a) describing their individual contribution and (b) reflecting upon how one or more issues raised during the class may have transpired during the course of the project and how they affected the outcome.

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