Group Polarization Demonstration

Shared with STP’s “This is How I Teach” blog by David Myers.

Have everyone in the class complete this case example by checking one answer:

Leslie is a writer who is said to have considerable creative talent but who so far has been earning a comfortable living by writing cheap Westerns. Recently, Leslie has come up with an idea for a potentially significant novel. If it could be written and accepted it might have considerable literary impact and be a big boost to Leslie’s career. On the other hand, if Leslie is not able to work out the idea, or if the novel were to be a flop, considerable time and energy will have been invested without remuneration.

Imagine that you are advising Leslie. Please check the lowest probability that you would consider acceptable for Leslie to attempt to write the novel.

Leslie should attempt to write the novel if the chances that the novel will be a success are at least:

- 1 in 10
- 2 in 10
- 3 in 10
- 4 in 10
- 5 in 10
- 6 in 10
- 7 in 10
- 8 in 10
- 9 in 10
- Place a check here if you think Leslie should attempt the novel only if it is certain (i.e., 10 in 10) that the novel will be a success.

Collect the sheets, form the class into groups of four, and give them a fresh copy of the same case example. Invite each group to discuss the case either until they reach a consensus, or till you call time after 3 or 4 minutes. At that point, have them mark how they what they would now advise.

If you average the prediscussion responses (perhaps before the next class) you will observe that the average student will tend to favor writing the novel, even if the chances are but 4 or so in 10. After discussion, this tendency will typically be strengthened, with the class average having shifted a tad, to something near 3 in 10. This illustrates a well-replicated phenomenon that inspired follow experiments on group polarization—the tendency of group discussion to enhance a group members’ initial leanings.