

Educational Resources

Modified Borda Count – building consensus

Project management, decision making, creativity, problem solving, teamwork

What is this?

The Modified Borda Count is a voting system where participants rank the different options according to their preferences rather than select a single one. They are asked to award 1 point to their least preferred option, 2 points to their second least popular two points, and so on; their most preferred option thus receives the maximum number of points – as many as the number of options to vote for. The option with the most points is the winner.

Why is this important?

The Modified Borda Count is a group decision-making method better suited to promote consensus than the usual majority vote, since an outcome based on shared preferences and reached through a fair and transparent process is likely to be more acceptable even by those who do not fully agree with it. This makes it easier for team members to buy into the final decision, which is a key success factor for the ensuing action.

The debating stage (see the instructions) is also an effective opportunity to develop active listening, argumentation and persuasion skills.

This method is named after French mathematician and political scientist Jean-Charles de Borda, who proposed it in 1770, although historical records show it had been previously put forward by others as early as the 14th century.

What can I use it for?

This method can be used:

- Whenever a team must make a decision maximising both effectiveness and buy-in.
- To select a single option or a shortlist of options from a large number of possibilities (e.g. in the "converging stage" of an ideation exercise, like selecting the best ideas from a list generated in a brainstorming session).

The Borda Count is used in politics, in electing governing bodies in universities, professional and technical socities, and even for granting sports awards.

How can I use it?

Please refer to the detailed instructions on the following pages.



Educational Resources

Modified Borda Count – building consensus

Audience

Preferably for Year 6 and above and in theory with groups of any size, although complexity will increase and consensus will decrease with group size. Ideal size should be less than 15 members.

Facilitators

The decision-making session can be conducted by one teacher/facilitator alone.

Learning objectives

A decision-making session using the Modified Borda Count helps participants:

- Compare different options and evaluate them on their contribution for a particular end
- Develop an active listening attitude
- Practice argumentation and persuasion skills
- Adopt a positive, win-win mindset
- Value the importance of unity around shared decisions

Time

Depends on the number of participants and the range of options to choose from (several voting rounds may be necessary to reach an acceptable shortlist).

With a 15 member group (rough estimate):

•	Introduction	00:05
•	Debate	00:15
•	Vote (1 round)	00:10
•	Tally and analysis	<u>00:15</u>
•	Total	00:45

Materials

- Large sheet of paper with chart combining options and voters (see example in "Tally and analysis")
- Markers

Conducting the activity

1. Introduction

The facilitator explains the goal of the decision-making session and insists on the importance of reaching a decision that will secure maximum buy-in, and then explains the process, relating it to the maximum buy-in criterion and providing clarifications as needed.

2. Debate

The facilitator invites participants to present and explain their choices, encouraging them to use rational arguments and helping them formulate their claims. The remaining participants must remain silent and listen attentively, and may be asked to express their opinion on the cases made.

3. Vote

Participants are asked to rank their selected choices in order of preference, and to assign them a score. The recommended number of choices in 5, although older students may be given up to 10.



Educational Resources

They then assign a score to their top 5 options:

- First choice 5 points
- Second choice 4 points
- Third choice 3 points
- Fourth choice 2 points
- Fifth choice 1 point
- Remaining options
 0 points

4. Tally and analysis

The facilitator asks participants in turn for their votes and records them on a chart like the one in this example, whith 8 possible project ideas generated in a previous ideation session (e.g. a brainstorming):

Options	Yara	Jeff	Hadiza	Klaus	Sunil	Hui Yin	TOTAL
Run a blog on the school's SDG-related activities	5		3	1	1	2	12
Hold learning support classes for Junior School students from other local schools		2	2			3	7
Grow a carbon-neutral vegetable garden	2	3					5
Build a robot prototype				3	5		8
Write a learning enhancement algorithm showing flash cards based on students' previous replies	1			5	4		10
Write and stage a play on a specific SDG	3	1	4			5	13
Organise a singing contest for all the local schools	4		5	4	3	4	20
Run a website featuring exploration trails in the local area			1	2	2	1	6

(Alternatively, participants may walk up to the board and record their votes themselves.)

Please note that Jeff only voted for 3 choices, which is allowed. In this case, scores are always allocated bottom-up, i.e. the maximum score (3 in Jeff's case) must be equal to the number of choices he settled for.

The tally shows that the top three choices are:

- #1 Organise a singing contest for all the local schools 20 points
- #2 Write and stage a play on a specific SDG
- #3 Run a blog on the school's SDG-related activities 12 points

Note that the top choice – "Organise a singing contest for all the local schools" – was never below the participants' third preferred choice, except in Jeff's case (whose behaviour, as a clear outlier, hints at a potential disengagement or conflict and should deserve individualised attention). In other words, it was *never clearly rejected*, and therefore represents an outcome that is easily acceptable by the whole group.

13 points

5. Further iterations

At this stage, the most voted choice can be accepted as the final decision, or the group may engage in a further round of decision-making. This takes usually one of the two following paths:

A. The group examines the second, third, etc. most voted choices to see if some of their aspects can be incorporated in the winning choice. In this example, this doesn't look obvious. But imagining for a moment that the winner and the runner-up had been instead the second and third most voted choices, they both deal with Sustainable Development Goals and it wouldn't be difficult for the group to reach some sort of amalgamation between them. This would result in an even broader acceptance of the ultimate outcome.



B. The group proceeds to a second round of debating and voting, this time between, say, the top 3 choices – with each member allocating 3, 2 or 1 point to the former.

Educational

Resources

Potential problems and disadvantages

In theory, it is possible that the option totalling more votes may have never been a first choice within the group of participants, and ends up behind another receiving a lot of second- and third-choice votes. However, under natural circumstances, this is an unlikely outcome. In this event, a possible course of action is to run a second iteration between the top three or so choices.

That is more likely to occur when the voting is tactical, i.e. when participants allocate a low preference (or no preference at all) to an option they suspect will receive a lot of support in order to undermine its chances of winning. (Holding this back is the reason why undervoting – abstaining from allocating all the votes – is penalised by the bottom-up rule as in Jeff's case). However, since it is in the team's interest that a strong buy-in is achieved, participants should be encouraged to vote honestly and to abstain from tactical considerations that will inevitably harm the end result.