

# **A STAPLE DOES NOT MAKE IT A TEAM PROJECT: AN EXAMINATION OF COLLABORATION IN STUDENT TEAMS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Because teamwork skills are valued in the business world, business schools are using team projects in many classes. This paper examines the extent to which collaboration is present in student teams. Two major issues reviewed is the extent to which students edit other team members' work and the issue of social loafing in teams. In results which run counter to many other studies, approximately 75% of students indicated they are comfortable editing others work. Approximately 50% of students indicated they had experienced issues with social loafing which is less than expected given prior work in this area. Overall, these results were very positive for the team environment in business classrooms.*

To help student build teamwork skills that are needed in the business world, team projects are an increasingly used pedagogical tool in business schools. Team projects are seen as a way to have students learn such teamwork skills as group decision-making and communication (Hansen, 2006). Aggarwal and O'Brien (2008) listed the following benefits that have been identified in the literature regarding the use of teams in business school classes: (1) to foster high level learning outcomes on Bloom's taxonomy, (2) to enhance student learning through increased opportunities for critical thinking and responding to critical feedback of peers, (3) to promote student learning, achievement, and retention, and (4) the scope of the group projects can be greater in group projects than in individual ones, providing a greater learning experience for students.

Professors often assign team projects thinking and hoping that students will truly work as a team. However, it has been noted that having students work in groups may not really develop them as team members (Barker & Franzak, 1997; Hansen, 2006). To truly work as a team, students need to be open to working collaboratively. Often teams simply divide up the work, work independently on their part, and then come together at the end and staple their independently completed work together, often with minimal editing to make it a cohesive paper, and submit their "team" project. This approach does not build the teamwork skills that the project was designed to enhance. In one study, it was found that breaking up a complex interrelated task led to decreased group performance and an increased risk of social loafing (Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2008).

In a study of the use of wikis for collaborative writing assignments, Parker and Chao (2007) found that a drawback in using wikis is that students have to be willing to let others see their work in progress and should be open to suggestions regarding revisions. Even using a wiki, which is designed for collaborate writing, it has been found that students are hesitant to edit each other's work (Hughes & Narayan, 2009; Jaksch, Kepp & Womser-Hacker, 2008; Mindel & Verma, 2006). If students will not edit team members' work, it is difficult to see it as being a collaborative team project.

Social loafing, or free rider behavior, is another frequent problem in student teams (Cox & Bobrowski, 2000; McCorkle et al., 1999; Rau & Heyl, 1990). One way student teams may differ from the teams used in the business world is they may only complete one project rather than have on-going projects. A social loafer may feel they can get away with this behavior for one project and other students may shy away from confronting the social loafer, because after this project is completed, they do not have to work with that person again.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the issues in student teams that prevent a true collaborative team experience, focusing on hesitancy to edit each other's work and the presence of social loafers. The results of a survey are reviewed and recommendations on how professors can improve the student team experience will be discussed.

## **COLLABORATION IN STUDENT TEAMS**

While specialization into certain areas in student team projects adds to efficiency and allows team members to focus on their core competencies, editing the work of teammates is a critical aspect of integrating member contributions into a coherent team product. As noted by Nonnan and Frederick (2000), cooperative learning cannot be expected by merely putting students together in groups and assigning a project. Yet too frequently, it has been our experience that when confronted with instructor criticism of certain sections of a paper or project, several team members will respond that 'it wasn't my part; accepting accountability for only certain sections of the paper. Clearly, these particular teams did not critically review the final product as a group prior to submitting the assignment.

Several scholars of teamwork cite Johnson and Johnson's (1988) five requirements of cooperative learning; a) positive interdependence, b) promotive interaction, c) accountability, d) interpersonal skills, and e) group processing. Perhaps most relevant to the area of editing of group work is promotive interaction, described, in part, by Felder and Brent (2007) as providing one another with feedback, challenging others' reasoning and providing encouragement to one another. Likewise, Whetton and Cameron (2002) list several task-facilitating roles that contribute to team performance. Most relevant to this discussion are three important interactive functions; a) information seeking or asking for clarification and further information on a particular topic, b) information giving or providing useful information to others to enhance content, and c) elaborating or building on the ideas of others. Absent these fundamental interactive processes a disjointed collection of individual effort is produced without benefit of collaboration and synergy, resulting in a much less cohesive paper or project. It has been suggested that team projects may be improved by the assignment of roles to team members --the pulling together and final editing of the final versions of the paper or project being the primary responsibility of a monitor or group leader. However, giving the sole responsibility of review to one individual does not encourage the on-going critical feedback, information sharing, and team evaluation needed among all members and detracts from the main advantage of collaborative effort. Interestingly,

Zam, Adams, and Matkin (2009) suggest, that while not fully researched, the concept of shared leadership, a process through which all team members lead various aspects of group processes and decision-making is promising. This leadership structure would be one means of involving all members in the monitoring and editing processes. This process might only require that teams submit drafts to the instructor with individual comments at two to three intervals of the project. Moreover, as noted by Rieber (2006) the requirement of teams to submit to peer editing throughout the project should help prevent last minute, poorly written submissions because time must be reserved for the shared editing process.

## **SOCIAL LOAFING**

Social loafing is defined as “the reduction in motivation and effort when individuals work collectively compared with when they work individually or coactively” (Karau & Williams, 1993, p. 681). It has been identified as the single most important factor in determining group effectiveness and satisfaction (Aggarwal & O’Brien, 2008; Williams, Beard, & Ryner, 1991). Social loafing is considered to be pervasive in student teams. In one study, students were surveyed regarding social loafing, but were told not to complete the survey if they did not have any experience with social loafing in teams. No student declined to participate for that reason, indicating 100 percent of the students in that study of 349 students had been in a team with a social loafer (Jassawalla, Sashittal, and Malshe, 2009).

Given social loafing appears to be widespread and important to performance and satisfaction, the question of why it occurs has been often examined. In a meta-analysis of social loafing studies, Karau and Williams (1993, p. 700) concluded that social loafing will be more likely to occur “...when individual outputs cannot be evaluated collectively, when working on tasks that are perceived as low in meaningfulness or personal involvement, when a group-level comparison standard is not available, when working with strangers, when they expect their co-workers to perform well, and when their inputs to the collective outcome are redundant with those of other group members.” They also found that working with close friends or teammates reduced social loafing and social loafing was eliminated when individuals worked in highly valued groups. In a study of student teams, Aggarwal and O’Brien (2008) found that the scope of the project, group size, and the number of peer evaluations were related to social loafing. However, somewhat counter to the results of Karau and Williams (1993) regarding working with friends, whether the student teams were self-selected or instructor assigned had no significant relationship with the incidence of social loafing.

Jassawalla, Sashittal, and Malshe (2009) examined students’ perspectives on social loafing. In a content analysis of student responses, they found that students view social loafing broader than the traditional definition to include poor quality and distractive/or disruptive behaviors. Antecedent behaviors of social loafing, according to students, include apathy and social disconnectedness as defined as a negative or weak social relationship between the social loafer and the other team members. Given the pervasiveness and importance of social loafing in student teams, further examination of the construct is warranted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess students’ perceptions and attitudes, a 21-question survey was administered to students in business courses at a medium-size state university via an electronic survey. The

courses included in the study were in the areas of finance, marketing, and management. These are the disciplines at that university that most use student teams. Professors were asked to request student to complete the survey if they used teams in their class. The questions included in the survey related to comfort with editing team members' work and social loafing. The survey questions are listed in Table 1 and 2.

## RESULTS

Because many students may have been in multiple classes and they were directed not to complete the survey more than once, it is difficult to assess response rates; however, responses were received from 159 students.

Findings concerning team member attitudes toward editing other team members' work are somewhat equivocal. Approximately seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that they were comfortable editing team members' writing. Concerns about receiving a bad peer evaluation was the primary concern identified that may lead to hesitation in editing writing, although only twenty-eight percent indicated this was an issue. Seventy-five percent of the students also felt comfortable with other students editing their writing and seventy-two percent found the feedback useful and provided helpful writing tips.

Notably only 47% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "When my team members don't edit my writing, I feel they are not putting forth their best effort on our project." Importantly, these results suggest that editing of others' work is not a role expectation of about half of team members surveyed. These data again suggest that instruction on specific roles and the imposition of some role structure would be beneficial to team efforts.

The results for social loafing are shown in Table 2. The pervasiveness of social loafing in student teams has been documented in studies such as Jassawalla, Sashittal, and Malshe (2009). In our study, fifty-three and forty-two percent of students said they had experienced social loafing in classes at the university and the college, respectively. However, only eleven percent agreed to the statement "*I have been guilty of being a social loafer.*" No students indicated that they strongly agreed with that statement.

When students experience a social loafer in a team, sixty-six percent said they usually manage the problem itself while eleven percent usually go to the professor. Forty percent of students in the study indicated they usually talk to the social loafer, while sixty-one percent ignore the problem, but try to avoid being on a team with that student again. Eighty-nine percent said they reflect the social loafer's performance on the peer evaluation accurately, but thirteen percent said they are hesitant to give them a bad peer evaluation because they don't want to hurt their grade. Forty-nine percent were more hesitant to confront the social loafer if they are friends with him. One issue with student teams that differentiate them from teams in the business world is that often the team works on one project and then disbands, which might lead the team members to ignore the social loafing and avoid, to the extent that they can, being on a team with that member in the future. The results show that seventy-nine percent of students were more likely to confront the social loafer if they have to work on multiple projects with them.

## DISCUSSION

The results concerning editing other team members writing are surprising and run counter to other studies (Hughes & Narayan, 2009; Jaksch, Kepp & Womser-Hacker, 2008; Mindel &

Verma, 2006; Parker & Chao, 2007). In our dealings with student teams, it appeared they were more hesitant to edit team members' writing than the results show. It was also surprising how comfortable students are with their team members editing their writing and how much they saw this as an opportunity to learn helpful tips. With this openness, perhaps professors should emphasize the learning nature of the editing process.

Our results indicate that while incidences of social loafing is widespread, with approximately 50 percent experiencing social loafing, it may not be the pervasive problem that Jassawalla, Sashittal, and Malshe (2009) indicated in their study. However, given approximately 50% of students have experienced social loafers on teams, few students admit to being a social loafer. This result is consistent with the findings of Jassawalla, Sashittal, and Malshe who found that social loafers may not realize they are being perceived as a social loafer. This finding may be related to additional results of Jassawall, Sashittal and Malshe who also found that students might have a different perception, and perhaps even a different definition, of social loafing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENT TEAMS

Given the results of this study and the literature on social loafing, we provide the following recommendations for professors using student teams in their classes.

**Team skills.** As a starting point, teams should be provided basic team skills. Many management classes cover team skills as a part of the content of the course. But student teams are used in many other classes such as marketing and finance where team skills are not routinely taught. But as we mentioned earlier in the paper, having students working in groups does not really develop them as team members. Ahles and Bosworth (2004) stated that without formal teamwork training, students are not likely to understand what it takes to have a successful team. If professors want students to work in teams, they should provide basic team building skills.

**Multiple projects.** Given our findings that students are more likely to confront social loafers when they have to work with that student again, having multiple projects will make students more likely to work through the issues related to social loafing. Having multiple projects presents the students with a team project that more realistically mirrors the team experiences they will have in the business world. If the class doesn't lend itself to multiple projects, another option is to break up large projects into several smaller projects. At the end of each project, team evaluations should be given to allow social loafers, as well as other team members, to receive feedback.

**Conflict management tools.** Since a large percentage of students want to handle the social loafing problem themselves before escalating the issue to the professor level, students should be provided with appropriate conflict management tools. Students should be made aware of the correct and incorrect ways to handle social loafing. This exposure is good training for business students to have and is a valuable tool for managing conflict in the current and future student teams.

**Team Evaluations.** Although team evaluations are fairly standard in classes with student teams, the content of the evaluations should be given consideration. For example, carefully defining the behaviors for evaluation is important since students often see behavior differently (Jassawalla, Sashittal, & Malshe, 2009).

**Assigning Teams v. Self Selection of Team Members.** Whether team members should be assigned or self-selected has been the subject of much debate. In our study, 49% of the respondents were more hesitant to confront social loafers if they were friends with them. Sixty-

one percent of the students indicated they usually ignore social loafing—irrespective of whether they are friends or not. It appears students want to ignore the problem anyway and being friends may make them even more likely to ignore it. This result might indicate that assigning teams would be preferable. However, one would need to consider the totality of issues surrounding assigning members v. self-selection. It appears the tendency to ignore social loafing is present anyway. Perhaps a better solution would be to provide team and conflict management skills rather than being concerned about how the teams were chosen.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since many business courses use student teams in order to prepare students for the teamwork they will experience in the business world, social loafing is a problem that has generated much interest in business schools. However, there has been less attention given to the true collaboration, including editing each other's work, in the team environment. Both issues are important and need further examination.

Future directions for research include a more in-depth analysis of the collaboration in student teams. This study focused on editing each other's work, but we did not investigate collaborative decision-making regarding important student team issues such as the topic to select for the project, the process that should be followed in accomplishing the task, or the setting of deadlines. The openness that students showed to both editing others' work and having their own work edited surprised us and ran counter to our experiences and other research. That part of the study should be replicated and checked for social responsiveness bias.

The topic of social loafing also merits further examination. Testing the occurrence of social loafing in classes with one project versus multiple projects would add confirmatory evidence of our results that students are more likely to deal with social loafers if they know they have to work with them again.

Student teams are a fixture of business schools. As business professors, we should provide our students with the tools to be successful in all aspect of their business education, including working in student teams. Not only will students that learn team and conflict management skills have more successful student teams, but they will be better prepared to deal with teamwork issues in the business world.

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**Table 1: Editing Team Members Writing**

	Mean	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I feel comfortable editing my team members' writing	3.76	16.3%	58.8%	10.6%	11.9%	1.9%
I am hesitant to edit my team members' writing because I don't want them to feel badly	2.45	1.9%	16.9%	13.1%	60.0%	7.5%
I am hesitant to edit my team members' writing because I don't want them to get mad	2.37	2.5%	16.9%	10.0%	55.6%	14.4%
I am hesitant to edit my team members' writing because I think they will retaliate and edit my writing	2.23	1.9%	11.3%	12.5%	55.6%	18.1%
I am hesitant to edit my team members' writing because I think they will retaliate and give me a bad peer evaluation	2.58	5.0%	23.1%	11.3%	45.0%	15.0%
I am hesitant to edit my team members' writing because it isn't my job to do so	2.15	3.8%	7.5%	13.1%	50.6%	24.4%
I feel comfortable when my team members edit my writing	3.78	15.0%	59.4%	13.8%	10.6%	0.6%
When my team members don't edit my writing, I feel they aren't putting forth their best effort on our project	3.29	11.3%	35.6%	27.5%	20.6%	4.4%
When my team members edit my writing, I find it useful and learn helpful writing tips	3.79	16.3%	55.6%	20.6%	3.8%	3.1%

**Table 2: Social Loafing**

	Mean	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social loafing is a problem in the majority the teams I have been a part of at UNC	3.38	18.8%	34.4%	15.0%	28.8%	2.5%
Social loafing is a problem in a majority of teams I have been a part of at MCB	3.03	10.6%	31.9%	12.5%	38.1%	6.3%
I have been guilty of being a social loafer	2.06	0.0%	11.3%	10.6%	50.6%	26.9%
When I have a team with a social loafer, the team usually manages the problem itself	3.52	6.9%	58.8%	14.4%	17.5%	1.9%
When I have a team with a social loafer, the team usually goes to the professor so he or she can fix the problem	2.25	2.5%	8.8%	15.6%	56.9%	15.6%
When I have a social loafer on a team, I usually try to ignore the problem, but avoid being on a team with the person again	3.51	11.3%	50.0%	18.8%	16.9%	2.5%
When I have a social loafer on a team, I usually talk to the person myself	3.06	2.5%	37.5%	26.3%	28.1%	4.4%
When I have a social loafer on a team, I reflect their performance on the peer evaluation accurately	4.08	23.8%	65.0%	5.6%	4.4%	0.6%
When I have a social loafer on a team, I am hesitant to give them a bad peer evaluation because I don't want to hurt their grade	2.23	0.6%	11.9%	13.8%	56.3%	16.9%
I am more hesitant to confront the social loafer if I am friends with him or her	3.13	10.0%	38.8%	12.5%	30.6%	7.5%
If I have to work with the social loafer on multiple projects, I am more likely to confront them and try to get them to change their behavior	3.89	20.6%	56.9%	13.1%	7.5%	1.3%
I am more likely not to	3.25	6.3%	43.8%	23.1%	20.6%	5.6%

confront the social loafer, if I know I'm not going to have to work with that person again						
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