Some Strategies for Reducing Social Loafing in Group Projects

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to review some of the research on social loafing in general and then to make suggestions about how experimental findings which demonstrate how social loafing can be diminished could be applied to group work assigned in educational settings. Several strategies that teachers may use to help reduce social loafing in group projects were discussed in this paper including identifying individuals with a high need for cognition, considering the difficulty of tasks, using performance measurement, emphasizing valuable individual contributions, limiting the group size, promoting group cohesiveness, and using peer evaluations.

Index terms— social loafing, education, psychology, group work, strategies, teaching methods.

1 Introduction

he phenomenon of social loafing is one that has plagued educators for a long time. Generally, social loafing means that when people are in a group they are likely to exert less effort than they would if they were working alone. Because all members of the group are pooling their effort to achieve a common goal, each member of the group contributes less than they would if they were individually responsible. There have been many studies that have attempted to eliminate social loafing, but very few have been successful (Harkins& Jackson, 1985 [1]; Karau& Williams, 1993 [2]).

The purpose of this paper is to review some of the research on social loafing in general and then to make suggestions about how experimental findings which demonstrate how social loafing can be diminished could be applied to group work assigned in educational settings.

From a theoretical standpoint, having students work on open-ended projects and in group settings instead of taking tests individually is a great idea. As educators, we want our students to learn skills, not just facts. We are interested not in memorization but in practical experience with concepts and ideas. It does no good for people to go out into the job market with a bunch of information they tried to cram into their brain for a test. Employers don't care only about what you know; they care about what you can do. This idea can be supported by a recent survey completed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which can be found athttp://www.aacu.org/leap/ -documents/2009_EmployerSurvey.pdf (2010 [3]). In that study, 84% of employers "expect students to complete a significant project before graduation that demonstrates their depth of knowledge in their major AND their acquisition of analytical, problem-solving, and communication skills"; 81% "expect students to complete an internship or community-based field project to connect classroom learning with real-world experiences"; and 81% want students who have developed "the skills to research questions in their field and develop evidence-based analyses". Now, certainly you cannot do much of anything if you don't know the facts that are necessary to understand how to accomplish a goal. So, this diatribe is not to suggest that facts are not important, but that facts are not sufficient. You have to take the facts and then apply them to novel situations. This requires a confidence in one's knowledge, along with a creativity to adjust that knowledge to a real life setting.

In the real world, students will be working in groups all the time at their jobs. In addition, group work can give students learning experiences which may be as valuable as the content of the course material. Firstly, group members will be in relationships of reciprocity ??Rich, 2012 [4]). If one student in a group is not clear

about something, they can rely on other group members to clarify. Secondly, group members who take the work seriously will gain practice in leadership and the communication of ideas. Also, a quality group work experience should include discussion and debate among group members. The kinds of skills that can be practiced within a group setting are the very skills that our student's employers will value. When our students graduate and get jobs, they will rarely -if ever -be tested on anything! Tests are for school. Our students' employers are never going to care how many facts they can rattle off; rather, bosses want to be able to give their employees a job, and trust that they have the skills to complete the necessary tasks to finish that job.

Though group work has been declared useful in teaching methods, much research claims that group projects or assignments are just not fair due to social loafing.The study of social loafing dates back to the late 20th century. Latané, Williams and Harkins introduced the idea of social loafing in 1979, explaining how subjects loaf on what some would describe as easy tasks (e.g. clapping and shouting tasks, pulling a rope, pumping air, playing in a marching band) **??**Latané, Harkins, & Williams, 1979 [5]).As the number of people in your group increases, social loafing increases as well and what always seems to happen is that the students with the most investment in their grades will pick up the slack for the people who are giving minimal contributions **??**Nunamaker, Reinig& Briggs, 2009 [6]). However, there are some findings about how to decrease social loafing from studies in educational, as well as non-educationalsettings that may spark some ideas about how to make group projects less unfair. The different techniques that can be used to reduce social loafing are listed below. ? Finding ways to eliminate social loafing is extremely important in class work. Students need to acknowledge their responsibilities to their fellow students by actively participating in group learning experiences **??**Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981 [7]).Social loafing can be reduced or eliminated when individuals have a dispositional tendency to view the specific task they are performing as meaningful. For example, Smith, Kerr, Markus, and Stasson (2001 [8]) found that individuals with a high need for cognition (the act or process of knowing; perception) did not loaf on a cognitively involving task. ? Consider the difficulty of the task at hand. Huguet, Charbonnier, and Monteli (1999 [9]) found that individuals who viewed themselves as superior in performance to others did not loaf when the task was challenging. Individuals who attach greater value to hard work in general are significantly less likely to engage in social loafing than individuals who attach relatively more value to tasks for which they are individually accountable than to group tasks on which they can hide in the crowd and rely on the efforts of others. ? Creating some form of performance measurement for each individual may serve as motivation for them to do well. Group performance researchers have repeatedly observed that individuals exert more effort when their efforts are considered individually (Harkins& Jackson, 1985 [1]; Aggarwal and O'Brien, 2008 [10]). ? Be sure to emphasize valuable individual contributions. It has been found that if an individual perceives that they are making a unique contribution to the group's effort, or if they feel that their lessened effort will be noticed by group members, they are more likely to exert themselves at a high level **??**Nunamaker, Reinig, & Brigg, 2009 [6]). [11]). Groups formed by the students instead of random assignment by the instructor are assumed to be more cohesive, more productive, and experience a lower incidence of social loafing **??**Karns, 2006 [12]). ? By adding peer evaluations during group projects you can help reduce social loafing as well. Peer evaluations can send a signal to group members that there will be consequences for nonparticipation. Members may be allowed to fire loafers, forcing them to have to work together in a new group. This decreases social loafing in the original group and in turn increases accountability. When multiple peer evaluations are used throughout a project, they can alert instructors early on to problems within the group (Goodwin&Wolter, 1998 [13]). In summary, group projects have many educational merits, and should not be abandoned. Rather, professors ought to try out the strategies which we have just discussed when they assign group work. Good luck! [1]

as opposed to large groups (Nunamaker, Reinig, & Brigg, 2009 [10]). As previously mentioned, as the number of individuals in a group increases, social loafing increases(Wech, Mossholder, Steel, & Bennett, 1998 [11]; Aggarwal and O'Brien, 2008 [10]).
? Make sure groups are cohesive. Group cohesiveness is important; when cohesiveness in a group increases, participation increases (Wech, Mossholder, Steel, & Bennett, 1998

Figure 1: ?

[1]Author ? ? ? ? ¥: cf. Kravitz, D. A. & Martin, B. (1986). Ringelmann rediscovered: The original article. Journal ofPersonality and Social Psychology, 50 (5), 936-941.

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