Reducing Social Loafing in Group Projects: Socio-structural Antecedents and their management.

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Abstract

Group work , Group learning , Group evaluation has been glorified , particularly in higher education for its obvious benefits. Group projects have known to lead to enhanced communication skills, interpersonal skills, peer learning as well as team building skills. The national as well as international accreditation agencies have also mandated group projects as an essential performance indicator that measures group learning and makes the students corporate ready. However, group evaluation is no without its challenges. Despite its obvious benefits, it might not result in expected learning.' Social Loafing' or 'Free riding' has been cited as the most important factor that dilutes this learning experience. The students' frustration, disillusionment and a sense of injustice at the end of the project when even the student who did the least gets the same marks is not a very positive picture of the teaching-learning-assessment relationship.The Teacher-Evaluator's inability to take corrective action despite the knowledge that all have not contributed equally is also frustrating.

The paper studies the construct of Social Loafing through two theories; The Social Impact theory as proposed by Lantane and Karau & William's Collective Effort Model.The Social Impact theory suggests that when individuals work collectively, social influence is spread across group members.Every additional member has lesser impact as group size increases.The Collective Effort Model proposes that the two key elements that determine individual's motivation while working in a group are, the value that is assigned to the goal and the expectation regarding the ability to reach the goal.

The paper attempts to

1. Explore antecedental factors of Social Loafing.

2.Using the above knowledge to propose proactive measures to reduce Social Loafing while assigning projects.

The research methodology followed by the paper is the practitioner –knowledge approach which uses reflective practice too form ideas. The classroom experiences are used to learn using theoretical basis reflexively and critically. Additionally, extant literature was used to extract and study factors that affect Social Loafing.

12901

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

Group size, project scope, group formation have been most cited in literature as structural factors that affect Social Loafing behaviour. Social factors in the form of-Disruptive behaviour, apathy and social disconnectedness -have received attention in literature on Social Loafing.

Since Group projects are an integral part of Higher education in the current scenario, a knowledge of the factors that affect Social Loafing and designing strategies to modify these factors assumes a lot of importance from the perspective of learning and assessment. Hence, this study is highly relevant to the Institutions , students as well as the academicians.

Introduction

Over the last few years, the use of group work has become increasingly popular in the business and management curriculum — perhaps too popular. The widespread belief that group work is one of the most efficient means for assessing large classes, coupled with both the large number of students typically enrolled on undergraduate business degree courses and the wider pressures for 'massification' (Booth et al., 2000), have meant that many Business Schools have tended to over-use and, at times, abuse this type of learning activity. Far too often, in fact, group work is being used as a 'quick-and easy' assessment tool, with little or no attention devoted to equipping students and staff with the skills necessary to deal with the inherent difficulties of co-operative learning. This approach has resulted in many dysfunctional group work experiences (most of which remain, not surprisingly, unreported) and in an increasing sense of frustration and disenchantment.

The use of student-led group projects in business schools has been growing over the past couple of decades (Batra, Walvoord, & Krishnan, 1997; Huff, Cooper, & Jones, 2002). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation standards for business schools require faculty members to "encourage collaboration and cooperation among participants" (Standard 13). AACSB standards also require individual students to "contribute to the learning of others" (Standard 14) and degree programs to include learning experiences in such skill areas as "group and individual dynamics in organizations" (Standard 15). The AACSB stresses the importance of group and peer learning: "students need to acknowledge their responsibilities to their fellow students by actively participating in group learning experiences" (AACSB, 2007)

Over the past few decades, there has been growing emphasis on the appropriateness of group-based activities in student learning (Freeman and Hancock, 2011; Sykes et al., 2014. This emphasis has been due to the requirements of national and international accreditation agencies who have mandated group work in unit assessments and stressed the need for students to actively participate and experience group-based learning (Aggarwal and O'Brien, 2008; Freeman and Hancock, 2011; Sykes et al., 2014). One of the most widely used justifications for using group work in the curriculum is that it prepares students for the "real world", that is, it enhances employability after graduation (Sridharan et al., 2018). Group assignments in universities have been seen as a way to develop team skills (Kalfa and Taksa,2015)

Challenges to Group Learning

However, there are several issues associated with developing and administering appropriate group-based assessments (Sykes et al., 2014). Working in groups often tempts some

12902

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

individuals to put forth less effort. This is called "social loafing" (Latane et al., 1979; Jassawalla et al., 2009). The issue of social loafing arises when certain team members reduce their physical, perceptual, or cognitive effort in group-based activities for one reason or another (see Latane et al., 1979; Jassawalla et al., 2009). Social loafing is a key inhibitor of group work effectiveness in university assessment (Murphy et al., 2003).

Although there are several potential benefits of including group projects as part of the marketing curriculum, such as enhanced communication skills, group skills, peer modeling, and cooperative learning (McCorkle et al., 1999), students working on such projects may not always have a consistently good learning experience. Social loafing or free riding has been cited as the single most important factor that can derail a group's effectiveness thereby resulting in a negative experienceThe widespread belief that group work is one of the most efficient means for assessing large classes, coupled with both the large number of students typically enrolled on undergraduate business degree courses and the wider pressures for 'massification' (Booth et al., 2000), have meant that many Business Schools have tended to over-use and, at times, abuse this type of learning activity. Far too often, in fact, group work is being used as a 'quick-and easy' assessment tool, with little or no attention devoted to equipping students and staff with the skills necessary to deal with the inherent difficulties of co-operative learning. This approach has resulted in many dysfunctional group work experiences (most of which remain, not surprisingly, unreported) and in an increasing sense of frustration and disenchantment in the group.

We all remember the dreaded group project from school. No matter who was in the group or what the project was about, it always felt like one person ended up doing less than the rest of us. Yet at the end of the project, everyone got the same grade for the group work, with no negative consequences.

It can be really frustrating to feel when a team member did less work than you and yet still received the same grade or credit. This phenomenon is called "social loafing"—the idea that some people put in less effort in a group setting. According to social psychology, social loafing occurs when there is a diffusion of responsibility and a shift of focus from individual performance to group performance.

Social Loafing: Theoretical basis

Group tasks involve the collective pooling of individual members' input (Karau and Williams, 1993). Working in groups reduces the motivational efforts of those who may expect to reap the benefits of others' accomplishments (Kamau and Spong, 2015; Karau and Williams, 1993). Such a tendency has been coined "social loafing" (Latane et al., 1979). Social loafing is the reduction in the effort of an individual of a team while working on a joint project or tasks, as opposed to working alone (Karau and Williams, 1993). In psychology and economics literature, social loafers are called "free riders" (Freeman and Greenacre, 2011). According to Deleau (2017) free riding and perceived social loafing are two different concepts. Free riding is the wilful intention of an individual in a team to exploit the benefit supposed to be achieved from the team work (Albanese and Van Fleet, 1985; Deleau, 2017). According to Deleau (2017), free riding is a deliberate loafing action of an able individual and is measurable at the individual level, whereas perceived social loafing is about an individual's perception of loafing behaviour of other members in a team.

12903

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

"Group members who shirk their obligations in the hopes of benefiting from the work of others are often referred to as social loafers or free riders" (Dommeyer, 2007). For the purposes of this study, social loafing is viewed as a behavioral pattern wherein an individual working in a group setting fails to contribute his or her fair share to a group effort as perceived by group members. Among students, social loafing is the primary complaint as to why they dislike group projects (Williams et al., 1991). Because of prior experiences with group members who did not show up for group meetings, or who had a poor attitude, or did not do their fair share of the work, "students not only indicated problems with freeloading but also [had] the tendency to expect such actions" (McCorkle et al., 1999). From a student's perspective, the problem of social loafing seems to be one of the biggest challenges of group projects. It takes only one social loafer in a group to affect the dynamics of the entire group. Social loafers contribute less than their fair share to group effort but reap the benefit of other members' efforts because of a common grade for the entire group. Social loafers also have the tendency to "exert less effort when they pool their efforts toward a common goal than when they are held individually accountable" (Beatty, Haas, & Sciglimpaglia, 1996). There are many factors that play a role in why students choose to not participate fully. Students may "fear exposing their lack of understanding" or maybe are naturally "less assertive, [and] talk less" (Webb, 1997). Some students may "believe their efforts do not matter or that no one will know whether they contribute" (Webb, 1997). Irrespective of the reasons for social loafing, the fact remains that social loafing affects more than just the person who is doing the slacking; it affects the whole group.

Reasons of Social Loafing:The theoretical basis

Social Impact Theory

Latané, Williams, and Harkins (1979) explained social loafing through the Social Impact Theory.

Latané (1981) defines social impact as: "any influence on individual feelings, thoughts, or behavior that is exerted by the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of others".

Lantané's (1981) social impact theory focused on how individuals can be sources or targets of social influence, and claimed that in social loafing experiments, there are few sources and few targets, so the effort of each target decreases.

The theory suggests that when individuals work collectively, social influence is diffused across group members, and each additional group member has less influence as group size increases.

Social Impact posits that while the impact of others on the individual increases as the number of people increases, the rate of increase in impact grows less as each new individual is added.

Collective Effort Model (CEM)

Karau and Williams (1993) published a meta-analytic review of 78 such studies in order to integrate the findings of different scientists from across the field.

The meta-analysis found that social loafing is "moderate in magnitude and generalizable across tasks and subject populations".

Karau and Williams's meta-analysis(1993) presented their own integrated model to explain social loafing: the Collective Effort Model (CEM). The authors created this model by

12904

integrating multiple of the partial explanations discussed above, such as evaluation potential and effort matching. It also incorporated variables such as task meaningfulness and culture.

The CEM suggests that two key elements determine individuals' levels of motivation when working in a group: their expectations regarding their ability to reach the goal, and the value they assign to the goal.

Motivation increases when individuals have high expectations and high value for the goal, and motivation is reduced when either variable is diminished. In groups, each individual's expectations tend to be low, since one individual often cannot predict the outcome of the entire group.

Working in a group can also lead to low value for the goal. According to CEM, this explains why motivation is low in these cases.

The CEM is supported by Karau and Williams's(1993) meta-analysis; the authors found that variable such as evaluation potential, task valence (intrinsic "good"-ness or "bad"-ness of the task), expectations of co-worker performance, and group size all moderated social loafing effects as the CEM predicts.

For instance, in regards to task valence, "the tendency to engage in social loafing decreases as task valence increases" .This fits with the CEM, as task valence strongly relates the CEM element of the value placed on the group's goal.

The CEM also backs several implications found in studies throughout the meta-analysis. A few examples include findings that "loafing was greater among men than women, in Western countries compared to Eastern ones, and for simple tasks rather than complex ones" (Forsyth, 2009).

The methodological stance adopted in the paper is based upon 'practitioner knowledge' as a praxis (Usher & Edwards, 1994) - a theory in action which regulates and forms ideas through critical 'reflective practice'. As a method of research, this approach scores low on the 'validity' and 'reliability' criteria of the scientific method of inquiry and may be perceived by many as merely anecdotal. However, because the illustrations offered here are part of a process of professional development "... in which practitioners describe classroom experiences and their ability to learn from these experiences using theoretical and practice based resources, reflexively and critically" (Walker & Warhurst, 2000), they can legitimately be attributed action-research. Although group work has a long and distinguished history, changes that have taken place in British higher education have led to its widespread application as a 'quick-and-easy' assessment tool. This trend has resulted in many dysfunctional group work experiences, and growing frustration among students and tutors alike. Beattie & Conle (1996) argue that there is much to be learned from these 'fragile stories' of teaching, while Ramsden (1992) views this reflective and enquiring approach as "...a necessary condition for improving teaching" . The aim of this exercise, is to share a useful set of conceptual tools which have proved valuable in informing practice and will help Instructors and evaluators n reducing the dysfunctional elements of team work caused by Social Loafing.

ANTECEDENTS OF SOCIAL LOAFING
Structural
<u>Scope of the project</u>.

12905

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

Group projects vary significantly in terms of their scope. On one hand, group projects may be very limited in scope and require groups to meet for a short while to work on a narrowly defined project. On the other hand, group projects may be semester-long assignments that require the cooperation and coordination of group efforts over multiple meetings. As the scope of the project increases, the project deliverables become more complex, making assessment of individual members' contributions more difficult (Strong & Anderson, 1990).

Group size.

The social identity theory posits that an individual balances the demands of two identities when operating in interpersonal situations: the self-identity and the social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When the rewards are shared with other group members, the strength of the social identity will determine the motivation of a person to work for the overall welfare of the group. Research has shown that the extent to which a person identifies with a group is inversely related to the group size (Gerard & Hoyt, 1974; Simon & Hamilton, 1994). Thus, the social identity theory would predict greater incidence of social loafing in bigger groups.

Group formation.

Student groups can be formed in primarily two different ways: Either the instructor can assign students to a group or students can be asked to self-select group members. Instructors can either do a random assignment of students to groups or they can use some other basis (skill sets, personality types) to determine group assignments. When students self-select their group members, they tend to pick students they are familiar with or with whom they share comparable skills and personalities. This familiarity results from either a prior social context or from an experience working with students from another class/context. The extent to which a person defines her identity in group terms—or group identification—is a result of a person's selfcategorization. Group identification determines a person's commitment to a group and his or her inclination to behave in terms of group membership. The self-categorization theory shows that group behavior can be explained in terms of a shift from personal to group focus. The stronger a person's self-categorization as a member of a group, the more likely she or he is to act in the overall interest of the group. Research has also shown that when individuals voluntarily commit to membership in a group, they are more inclined to show group solidarity (Cioffi & Garner, 1996; Turner, Hogg, Turner, & Smith, 1984). Thus, self-categorization theory would predict a lesser incidence of social loafing among self-selected groups. This prediction has some precedence in the pedagogical literature. 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 (Strong & Anderson, 1990).

Prior literature suggests that apathy, social disconnectedness, and disruptive behaviour influence social loafers' quality of work (Kaplan et al., 2002; Jassawalla et al., 2009).

Disruptive behaviour "

Disruptive behaviour refers to any behaviour that is sufficiently off-task in the classroom, as to distract the teacher and/or class peers from on-task objectives" (Nash et al., 2016, pp. 167–168). Disruptive behaviour is any negative activity that distracts, undermines and damages group members' effort (Bedford, 2018). Jassawalla et al. (2009) relate social loafing to disruptive behaviours of a group member. They measured distractive and disruptive

12906

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

behaviour along dimensions such as difficulty in paying attention to what was going on in the team, engaged in side conversations when the team was working, and mostly, distracted the team's focus from its goals (Jassawalla et al., 2009). Interestingly, prior studies define distractive behaviour as a component of disruptive behaviour and indicate the possible influence of such behaviour on individual and team performance (Doel, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2002). Jacobsen (2013) found that disruptive students distract other students in the classroom. Defining individual students' action to distract others as disruptive behaviour, Doel (2005) suggests, as an example of disruptive behaviour, a group of students within the group not actively participating in group activities but disturbing and distracting others with private conversations, giggling and whispering. Studies have shown such disruptive behaviour to have a negative impact on individual and team performance in the class (Arthur et al., 2011; Kaplan et al., 2002). Therefore, this study posits disruptive behaviour as an antecedent of social loafing and proposes that it will have a significant impact on work quality.

Social disconnectedness

An understanding of the association between social disconnectedness and social loafing remains underdeveloped. The transition from high school to university can be emotionally traumatic for a student and this can translate into loneliness and a sense of isolation from their peers (Bauer and Liang, 2003; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Other students may lack a sense of belonging and feel anxious in social situations (Lee and Robbins, 1998). Conversely, encouraging students to participate in small learning groups can improve their sense of belonging and the learning experience (Bauer and Liang, 2003). Counterintuitive to expectations, working in small groups may still create a sense of disconnectedness if there is a lack of team cohesiveness (Jassawalla et al., 2009; Aronoff et al., 1994).

Apathy

Apathy means a lack of passion and it refers to the lack of motivation attributable to loss of interest or energy (Marin, 1996). Apathy can also be a symptom of psychological disorder or a dimension of behaviour. In this paper, we consider apathy as a behaviour impacting group work. Apathetic people lack the incentive to contribute voluntarily to group efforts (Asch and Gigliotti, 1991). Such students are lazy and reap the benefits of other members' efforts. Jassawalla et al. (2009: p. 45) use the term "apathy" to refer to "social loafers' apparent disinterest and lack of caring for the task, other team members, or the grade, and to their perceived laziness and expectation that others will pick up the slack"

Reducing Social Loafing

Why is it important to minimize the incidence of social loafing in group projects? Our study examined two reasons. First, social loafing creates an impression of inequity among group members. It leads to dissatisfaction among students about their group members' contributions. This dissatisfaction also has a direct impact on students' perceptions of the fairness of their project grade. Students who report higher levels of social loafing in their groups feel that their project grades do not reflect their own contribution to the project. Thus, though the instructor evaluates the entire project as a single graded unit, students see the same project as a composite of different inputs from different group members and feel cheated when the group project grade is not commensurate with (their impressions of) the quality of

12907

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

their individual component. We had asked students if the instructor used peer evaluations to change the project grade. Instructors used peer evaluations to modify project grades assigned to individual students 85% of the time. Although social loafing was essentially at the same level between the two groups (3.36 vs 3.24; not significant, ns), students' satisfaction with their group members' contributions went up when the instructor used peer evaluations for modifying individual students' grades.

 Four factors; *reducing the scope of the project, reducing group size, allowing students to self-select group members, and including multiple peer evaluations* have been found to have an impact on social loafing. First, limiting the scope of the project reduces the incidence of social loafing. Thus, the takeaway of this finding is that instructors can reduce social loafing either by dividing a big project into two or more smaller components (this will lead to some increase in the grading load) or by replacing big, semester-long projects with a small project and some other graded work. Breaking up a big project into smaller components can also be beneficial because it will give students the opportunity to change partners in case things do not work out on the first small project. It is also possible that students may be less sensitive to social loafing if the stakes are lower. The second factor that reduces the incidence of social loafing is smaller group size. Group size is a factor that is very easy to control by an instructor. Limiting the group size can make it harder for social loafers to hide behind the shield of anonymity provided by a large group. It is also easier for group members to schedule group meetings and distribute workload more efficiently if the group size is small. In a smaller group, each member will feel that his or her contribution will add greater value to the deliverables than in larger groups. Group members in a small group setting can also get to know each other better at a personal/social level. The third structural factor that can help reduce the incidence of social loafing in groups is peer evaluations. As the number of peer evaluations during the course of a project goes up, the incidence of social loafing goes down. Peer evaluations send a signal to group members that there will be consequences for nonparticipation. In the absence of peer evaluations, students are pretty much assured of getting the same grade as the rest of the group irrespective of the quality and quantity of their own contributions. Multiple peer evaluations do two things: First, they introduce a strong element of accountability in group work, and second, multiple evaluations create an opportunity for group members to take corrective action in case of problems. If a group member finds that her performance on the group project was lacking, she could make changes after the first peer evaluation to address the group's concerns.

Establishing Individual Accountability

One factor that increases group productivity is when group members feel that they are being evaluated individually. Increasing identifiability, therefore, tends to decrease social loafing (Hardy & Latané, 1986).

Assign Distinct Responsibilities

Assign separate and distinct contributions for every team member. Without distinct goals, groups and group members drift into the territory of social loafing with much more ease.

Setting clear goals helps group members be more productive and decrease social loafing (Harkins & Szymanski, 1989). The goals also must be attainable; they should be not too easy, but also not too difficult.

12908

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

Encouraging Team Loyalty

Another factor that can greatly affect the presence of social loafing is involvement in the group. When group members feel involved and invested in the group, they tend to be more productive (Stark, Shaw, & Duffy, 2007).

So, increasing involvement in the group can encourage team loyalty and decrease social loafing.

Conclusion

The study has several implications for higher education, especially for marketing unit assessments that include collaborative learning and group activities. The marketing plan is a collaborative assessment that requires individual students in the group to assess various market environments and market opportunities and to develop appropriate marketing mix strategies. A social loafer's failure to assess a specific environment and/or opportunity will significantly influence the development of marketing strategies and business outcomes. Therefore, students need to identify social loafers and develop coping strategies such as "picking up the slack". Given the significance of collaborative learning in higher education, faculty members need to develop strategies to minimise the impact of social loafers. Faculty members should advise students on how to spot social loafing behaviours in the form of apathy, disruptive behaviour and social disconnectedness at an early stage of the group work. Faculty members also need to encourage students to form their own groups to avoid the possible effect of social loafing on work quality. If students form their own groups, it will be easy for them to identify social loafers and take remedial actions such as picking up the slack of social loafers. However, this may create an unfair advantage for the social loafers, as the team members pick up their slack. In such a situation, the group members can be encouraged to submit confidential peer evaluation reports to the faculty member.

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12909

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12910

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12911

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912

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12912

Eur. Chem. Bull. 2023, 12(Special Issue 4), 12901-12912