

# Tips for Addressing Social Loafing in Group Projects

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Group work is a valuable learning device that teaches teamwork skills which students will use no matter what profession they enter. It is perhaps even more valuable in online classes, as more and more organizations are using distributed employees who need to coordinate their work from a distance.

But group work also brings with it the danger of social loafing, those one or two students who do not contribute their fair share to the project. Not only does it undermine the quality of the project, but it creates frustration among other group members who see it as unfair to have team members not pull their own weight. This can have a dampening effect on the motivation and thus performance of other members of the group.

While many people blame loafers as lazy and unconcerned with their teammates, Kevin Synnott (2016) found that social loafers do not actually know that they are loafing. They think that they are contributing equally with everyone else. It turns out that some think that "I am contributing in my own way," but they are not making real contributions.

Thus, it appears that identifying social loafing to the loafers themselves can turn the situation around and serve as a valuable lesson for social loafers about how their actions affect the group as a whole. Synnott suggests a number of ways to address social loafing, as well as to teach students about their own level of contribution to the group.

**Assign students.** It appears that groups put together by the instructor do better than self-selected ones. Synnott does not say why, but perhaps people self-select for the wrong reasons like friendships, and friends are not used to working with each other on a professional basis. He also notes that one of the problems with group work is syncing up schedules to meet, so it might be best to assign students to groups by times that they are available. Having students email you with available times will get messy, so a scheduling system such as Doodle (<http://doodle.com>) might be helpful for forming groups. Doodle allows you to set up a variety of time slots on which people can indicate whether they are free. The faculty member can set up possible weekly meeting times with a certain student limit for each and allow students to fill those slots to determine group assignments.

**Use smaller teams.** Unsurprisingly, people can hide out in larger teams more easily than smaller teams. Research suggests that teams of three or four are ideal for reducing social loafing.

**Use peer assessments.** One of the major causes of social loafing is that instructors generally cannot distinguish individual contributions from the project as a whole. Peer evaluations can help. Kadriye O. Lewis created a comprehensive peer-review survey that was featured in the January 2016 issue of *Online Classroom* in "[A Solution to the Free Rider Problem in Group Activities](#)." Take a look at it to learn how to structure an evaluation that will identify social loafers and produce student self-reflection on their own efforts and the progress of the group as a whole. This survey has the potential to help unconscious social loafers learn what they are doing from others.

**Team-building exercises.** While the suggestion of team-building exercises can bring up images of ropes courses, a quick online exercise might pay dividends in better teamwork in the long run. I like giving students in groups a discussion question that everyone can answer without any research. My go-to question is: "Imagine you are stopped at a red light at midnight. You look all around and do not see any vehicles. Do you stay or go through, and why?" This question immediately elicits lively response and quickly leads to a variety of considerations and counter-considerations for students to chew on. While it might not have anything to do with the eventual project, it will get students comfortable talking to one another.

**Teaching about group work.** One of the fundamental problems with group work is that while it is intended to teach about group work, we often do not explicitly teach how to work in a group, assuming that the lesson will come out of the group work itself. We think that experience teaches, but the wrong experience can teach the wrong things. Groups that

operate poorly are not necessarily teaching how to operate the right way, especially if they have no right way to model. So it is worthwhile to provide some instruction on working in a group.

The instructor can find an online module on working in a group to assign to students or provide a structure and directions that will track group work in productive ways. The instructor might appoint one person as the group leader with the duty to organize activities and to establish expectations about how many live meetings will be held and what each person's contributions will be. A schedule of deliverables is particularly important to counteract many people's natural tendency to put things off.

It is also a good idea to suggest or set up the technologies that the group will use, as many people are unfamiliar with the technologies for organizing group behavior at a distance. Google Docs is ideal for putting together a group document. Not only does this allow students to directly contribute to the document, which is far preferable to the archaic method of sending around email attachments, but students can also comment on each other's contributions. Each person's contribution can be identified by the different font colors assigned to collaborators, with the instructor monitoring everyone's activity.

Group work involving visuals such as a photo portfolio can be done using Google Sites, Google's website development platform, which has the same monitoring features as Google Docs. Weebly for Education (<https://education.weebly.com>) also works well, as does Livebinders for Education (<http://www.livebinders.com/welcome/education>) or Padlet (<https://padlet.com>).

I also require my students to use Google Hangouts for their live meetings, which is a wonderful app for projecting the webcam or screens of multiple meeting participants that comes with Google+. Seeing a face helps with collaboration, and it is a shame that so much of collaboration in both the business and education world is still done simply by voice rather than video.

Finally, I require my students to log their meetings and other group events on a Google Sheet, which is nothing more than a simple spreadsheet that can be accessed from the web. A list of deadlines and what came about of those deadlines can be added, in addition to the dates and deliverables from live meetings.

Try these methods to address social loafing, improve group projects, and make group work a valuable learning experience for all involved.

## References

Synnott, K. (2016). Guides to reducing social loafing in group projects: Faculty development. *Journal of Higher Education Management* 31 (1), pp. 211–221.

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