Episode 45: Group Work and Free Riders

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 45 - handling group work and free riders.

Now, one of the reasons students don't like group work is because, inevitably, there will be a student in their group who does no work and avoids every meeting - and still gets the same grade as the rest of the group. We call this a "free rider" in group studies. Now, how can we, as teachers, make group work more fair - and how can we make sure that free riders don't get a free ride?

In this episode, Dinur and I are going to talk about ways to make that at least less likely, if not impossible.

Dinur: And the first part is, well, why do we even assign group work? And for this, Adam and I draw on several resources that will appear in the show notes: an article from Vanderbilt University, and another article from Carnegie Mellon.

From Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching, Brame and Biel write that group work demonstrates a quality called "positive interdependence." This is when students can see that if each person performs well, the entire group performs well too.

This does not have to be a formal thing. The thing is, instructors often have to come in and do some kind of instruction, in order to make sure student learning is happening. Ideally this happens through student interaction, through talking and working together. Now group work can be used to get in all sorts of ways, regardless of class size and discipline - and it can be really, really effective.

Now, again, I mentioned earlier that this can be informal or formal, and when we're talking about informal group work, it could be something like "think, pair, share" where you talk to a few people in class to come up with an answer to a question. Or, it can be something more formal, like a research project that takes most of the term. The goal is to get students to engage with the material and the coursework in a way that isn't just something individualized. It's not just a single-person assignment and it's not a test. And this can be done through small

group work in the classroom, study groups outside of class that students get credit for, or full group projects. And this is really good preparation for the workplace, because a lot of workplaces demand the ability to work well in groups.

Adam: And according to Carnegie Mellon, there are many benefits of group work. More people are doing the work, which makes it work easier. You get multiple perspectives on how to get the work done, so you kind of avoid that "I have the only right way." And it's often more fun to know that you're not the only one who has to work toward this goal, and you're not the only one who's feeling the pressure of getting it done.

Students also develop a ton of skills by doing group work, and these are skills that are so needed in the workplace. And the students who have done well in groups? Carnegie Mellon reports that these students are more likely to stay in school, they're more likely to learn more while they're in school, and more likely to be successful in college. So the advice, from Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center, is to create group works that emphasizes both group skills and individual skills.

So this can include: taking a complex task and breaking it down into small steps; learning how to manage your time; understanding how to discuss and explain issues and ideas to each other and to outsiders; giving and receiving feedback; learning how to challenge other people's positions and assumptions (and your own); and getting better at communication, generally.

Now these are usually seen as individual-level skills, but group work also helps students learn how to cope with problems that are more complex than they can do on their own, and it also helps them learn how to delegate, how to see other people's perspectives, how to combine knowledge from a lot of different sources, and find skills that reinforce each other - and learn what it means to hold people accountable and to be held accountable.

Other group skills that you'll get from group work include how to take risks, and trust the social support of the group while you do it; developing new ways to fix problems; finding role models and establishing shared group identities; and holding your own in discussions about ideas and perspectives.

Now, some of these skills will also help reduce the problem of the free rider - specifically, being held accountable and delegation. And we're going to talk about that next.

Dinur: The next part talks about how to set up group work to avoid the free rider problem, to avoid having someone completely slack off, yet get the A that everyone else contributed to. So, Peter Levin wrote an article, published in 2015, titled "Running Group Projects: Dealing With the Free Rider Problem." And the main points of the article are: how to set up group projects to avoid free riders, how to make sure that no one in the group takes on too much work, and finally how to report a free rider if that becomes necessary.

So the first part was setup issues. And as teachers, we need to identify this problem to our students. We need to point out that for most of them, the idea of "I do my own work and succeed by my own effort" - well, that's been ingrained in them since kindergarten. So the idea of group work, where some of their success depends on the work of other students, it's going to be confusing - and it might be really frustrating. Levin calls this a "culture shock." And as teachers, we need to acknowledge that this is going to require students to change their views about how they earn their grade.

Second, we could have students write a reflection about how this individual achievement culture might get in the way of being an effective group member, and discuss how to overcome these obstacles together, as a

class. As part of the reflection, we can have students reflect on how their own culture may change or affect their understanding of "what's okay to do" and "what isn't" when working in a group. Levin says the scope for misunderstanding and upset between students from a "speak your mind" culture and those from an "always be polite and try to reach consensus" culture is huge.

One thing that I've noticed, when I've had my students do group work, is that sometimes there are students who do try and take on too much. They try and be the hero or the she-ro of the group, where they're going to take on the work for three or four people. And that's bad both for the person doing all of the work, and the people who don't have to do the work themselves. And I'll give an example from the world of sports (because why not?): Often, when you see a player in a team sport - and I photograph hockey a lot, so I see this in hockey a lot - when you see a player trying to do everything for the team, they're caught out of position. Their teammates are out of position. And that results in more goals against.

Well, the problem is, is they're trying to do so much that no one else knows how to respond. They don't know what's expected of them. And so what you need to focus on is having clear designated roles. What is each person responsible for? Because, in a group work setting, we're not just trying to see that you know this material; we want to see that you're developing your skills - and if one person is trying to do the work for three or four people, well, that means three or four people are not developing their skills as well as they should. And for the person trying to take on all that work, it can become overwhelming really, really quickly. And that may cause that person to stop working on the project because they're overwhelmed, they don't know what to do, and they really don't want to disappoint their peers.

Adam: And the thing about the hero or the she-ro is sometimes it's a student who can't get out of the individualist mindset. I had a student once who said to me, "Well, I know you want us to do group work, but I refuse. I'm going to do the whole thing myself, and my group members can just cope with the fact that I'm going to do it all."

And I said, "No, you're not. You're not allowed to."

And they're all, "Well, I have to, because I can't trust anyone else to do it as well as I know I can do it."

And of course they got overwhelmed, their group did not get a good grade because most of what they did was shoddy, last-minute and stressed out - because they really did feel that they were the only one who could do it. And this idea of "I'm the only person who can do this right." That's nice. If you've been the overachiever, we understand that that is something that you feel. But that doesn't mean it's the truth.

And I've got to say, Dinur, that the hockey example is great, but I'm also thinking about baseball, 'cause you know that baseball is the one game that I really understand? It doesn't work if the shortstop tries to do the pitcher's job. It doesn't work if the left fielder tries to come in and do the baseman's job, right? And it doesn't work if the runner isn't doing their job, if they're trying to do the batter's job somehow. I mean, it makes it sound really confusing. But in hockey, it's maybe harder to tell what is exactly your job at that moment, because you're all on the ice, you're all running around. Whereas on the baseball field, you have to be, if you're the first baseman, your job is to be at the first base, and so they're not going to appreciate it if you try to cover second base, okay? That's not your job. What is the, what is it that the kids are saying now? "Stay in your lane?" Yeah. So stay in your lane.

Now, one of the things you can do as prep work for group work, especially bigger group work, is have the students, either in their groups or as a class, develop a set of ground rules - this is all Levin, by the way - have

them develop a set of ground rules for how they will work as a team, and make sure that at least one of these ground rules outlines how the students will acknowledge each other's contributions to the final project. Because a lot of times students don't think about, "Okay, well, Jerry did these things, and Joselle did those things, and I did these things," and they don't acknowledge Jerry and Joselle, because they're so focused on what they did. And perhaps there could be like a point at which you're required to get together and say, "Okay, Joselle I see that you did this and this and this; that was really great. Jerry, you did these three things and I thought that was awesome," and then you have to learn how to take compliments.

Taking compliments is just as difficult for some students as taking criticism, and group work makes a lot of students resent that they have to do this work and they're not getting acknowledged - but getting acknowledged may be uncomfortable. So if you make sure that there's a ground rule that says "this is how we're going to do it," then people are prepared ahead of time for "this is how I'm going to get acknowledged at some point."

And make sure that another of these ground rules outlines how the students are going to deal with free riders, because Levin acknowledges that a lot of students, even if they're having trouble, if Jerry is not pulling his weight, if he's free riding, they still don't want to be tattletales - because it feels bad to be a tattletale. It feels bad to say, "Hey, Jerry's not pulling his damn weight," and then you don't do it until like two weeks before the end of the semester, and by then, the teacher doesn't have any ability to fix the problem.

So, Levin also suggests putting together a grading rubric that clearly and unambiguously acknowledges group work as the method by which the grade is achieved. So the way I do this is, each student is assigned a part of a project. So if they're doing a big presentation, normally I divide it up into research, presentation and materials. So, materials would be things like the PowerPoint or a handout, or if they give like a quiz or something. And then presentation is the person who is actually standing there and talking. And research is the person who finds out all the information. And so each student gets graded individually on their contribution, and that's half their grade. And then the other half is the average of all the group's grades.

So if Jerry, if I'm giving Jerry 4/5 for presentation, and I'm giving Joselle 5/5 for research, and I'm giving Jimmy a 3/5 for presentation materials, well then I add the three, the four and the five together, which gives an average of four. So that means that Jimmy gets 3+4 which is 7, or 70%; and Jerry gets 4+4 which is 80%; and Joselle gets 5+4 which is 90%. So each of them gets a different grade for the presentation, based on their effort plus a combination of the group's effort.

Now if you have somebody who didn't do anything who was a free rider, then their score is zero, but it doesn't get averaged into the grade. So basically they only get the group grade, they don't get any individual grade at all. And that always tanks their grade, because half of it is group, half of it is individual.

And another thing that you should do, that Levin suggests is: include self and peer assessment as part of the grading rubric. So what I do at this point is, they've all had their grades assigned, they don't know what their grades are, and each student has to submit an evaluation of themselves and their peers on a scale, again, of one to five. And what I tell them is "if everybody gets graded five or everybody gets graded one, I'm ignoring your submission. You have to actually give me a different rating for - a reason for the rating for each person."

So they have to say, "Jerry gets a five, because he was always at meetings and he always helped us out, and when I had to to get some of this research done, he came in and did it for me. I'm giving myself a three, because I think I should have done better on the research, and I'm giving Jimmy a two because he never showed up, he just did what he felt like doing when he felt like doing it, and I really got annoyed with him."

And then my rule is, if they got a three, then their grade doesn't change. But if they got above a three, then I add one point to their grade. So if they had a seven, now they have an eight. If they had a six, now they have a seven. And if their grade is, if their grade from their classmates is below a three, then I drop their grade. But it has to be an average across all classmates - what was their score?

So it does take a little work, but it also acknowledges and it makes the students realize their input matters, their effort matters. But they also have to learn how to work in a group, because the grade depends on what the group does as much as it does on what the individual does.

Now the second part of what Levin suggests is to set up the project so nobody can take on too much work. And Dinur has already kind of alluded to this, but the thing you do here is, in a project you're going to define the roles and the tasks, so that each student does have to contribute, but nobody can get buried in taking on too much work. Cause that can lead to what Dinur talked about, withdrawal and the appearance of free riding, even if it's not actually a manipulative attempt to free ride.

And so, again, the way I do this is my responsibilities is in most class projects are research, presentation, and then presentation materials. And each student tells me ahead of time "I'm doing research" or "I'm doing presentation" or "I'm doing materials," and then they have to report on what they're doing across the semester, so that I can see if anybody is starting to drop out, free ride, or get overwhelmed.

Dinur: Now, as teachers, we have to provide a way for students to actually report a free rider to the professor. And Levin suggests, one, is you have each group submit a schedule of tasks and who's performing each task by the second week of the project, because that gives students a chance to meet, to decide and to delegate who does what.

So after you've submitted the schedule of tasks and who's performing them, set up a report that has to be submitted several times during the project, to keep the professor abreast or aware of what's completed and what hasn't been completed yet. This takes away the tattletale issue, and makes the reporting objective, because in the setup report, it's "who is doing what or who will do what."

I would say, in week four, "what is each person doing so far?" And week six or seven, "what is each person doing? What needs to be completed?" And at the end of the project, "what did each person actually do?"

Adam: Now, I have an example from when I was first teaching, like, I was still in my dissertation year. And I was teaching a methods class, and two of the students in a three-person group brought in the surveys that had been performed by their third groupmate. It was about 20 surveys printed out, and they said, "These all have the same handwriting, and they all have really good responses, like, really happy responses, and we think it's her. We think she just did this at the last minute and gave them to us, but they don't look valid."

And so I had that student come in, and sure enough, you know, she had in fact filled all the surveys in herself. She hadn't done any survey work. But it also turned out that she was completely overwhelmed. In her personal life, she had a bunch of things going on that she didn't have a lot of control over. Her job was demanding that she work more hours, despite the fact that she was a full-time college student, and she was the sole caretaker of her ailing mother and a disabled little brother and she was just not getting any sleep. She was exhausted. She was overwhelmed.

This was not free riding. This was desperation.

Now, she paid the penalty for cheating, but we also got her respite help as I reached out to a center on campus and said, "Hey, I've got a student who's in really bad shape. They've got all these things going on,"

And they're all, "Oh, let's put her through to respite and let's put her through to this other place, and then these folks can help the job understand that they've got to back off because she's really, you know, overwhelmed. We don't want her to have a stroke at the age of 22."

So sometimes, you can look at these reports and say, "Okay, Jenny hasn't turned anything in. We're in a 15-week term and it's week 13. What's going on?" You might want to call Jenny in, and say, "Jenny, what's going on?"

Dinur: And I have an example from an intro class, and it was my first time teaching it at the semester length as an instructor. And I had my students do a group project where, kind of like Adam, they either had to do a survey or they had to do observations, they had to put all of their survey results or their observations together and make sense of it. They had to write a group paper, and they had to present on it.

Well, one of the groups comes up in front of the class, and I see a few of the members on their cell phone, and they're trying to reach people in the group. They're not able to. And for me that raises some red flags, but at the same time I really don't want to try and call out a student one, who isn't there, and two, I don't want, yeah, my students to snitch on one another, especially not in front of their peers.

And so I let it go. But it turns out that the two group members who weren't there did not participate equally in the group project. But I only learned about this after the semester had ended and grades were filed. Two of the students had talked to me privately after the term had ended and said something to the effect of "I don't know if you're aware of this, but these people really didn't do much."

And I said, "I had a feeling about that, but I also really can't call them out. But my big question was, why didn't you come to me earlier when I could have addressed this directly with them?"

Adam: And we've said this before, you know. If you know that there's a problem, if you're having a problem, the earlier you talk to your professor, the better. And so, teachers, we also really have to emphasize this about group work too. I mean, if you're having problems with your group and it's week four, now's the time to come talk to me, not week 14. I can't do much in week 14. In week four, we can still find a way to fix this problem.

So, how do students and teachers use this? We've already talked some about each of these, but let's go specifically. Let's drill down a little bit. So here are some things that students can do when you are setting up and working on group projects. First, when you're establishing those ground rules, bring up your concerns, bring up your past experiences with groups, with free riders, and suggest ground rules that will stop, or counteract, or in some way minimize those problems - make them harder to happen.

Dinur: Come up with clear ideas about who's responsible for what part or parts of the project. Who does the surveys? Who analyzes the data? Who writes it up? Who makes the PowerPoint? Who does the talking in front of the class? That way everyone knows what is expected of them.

Oh, help one another out. But help means that everyone is chipping in. It does not mean that one person does 90% of the group's work and everyone else does a combined 10%. That's not fair to the person doing 90; it's not fair to the people doing the 10% combined.

If you're doing a group project, then be an active, consistent participant in your group. Contribute to the discussion and the final product, whether that's the paper, the project, the presentation - because your group members are going to respect you and reward you if you do, and they can punish you with the low grade if they do not - and that in turn leads you to having to deal with a very displeased professor.

Adam: Yeah, avoid the displeased professor.

So, split up the tasks evenly. Or if someone just can't do one part, then allow them to substitute one task for another. So, if they can't present, they can write more of the paper. The groups that I have my students work in are usually six students, and there are three parts of the project. There are three main tasks, so each person should, there should be two people doing presentation, two people doing research, two people doing materials. But maybe there's a person who they volunteered to do presentation and they got laryngitis.

Okay, what are you going to do? Are you going to make them (whispering) talk like this? Or are you going to actually have them say, "Okay, you can go work on research. You can split that up with Tony and Jerry, because, you know, they're having a lot of trouble finding some of this research, so maybe you can help them." Okay.

Try to be kind when it comes to that. Don't demand that someone do what they really can't do. If you've got someone with social anxiety, forcing them to speak in public? That's not kind to them and it's not going to help them. And contrary to popular belief, not everybody has to know how to public speak in order to be successful.

Dinur: Now, when you're in a group, you want to communicate clearly with your group regarding your schedules, your expectations, progress, and problems. Problems are part of research. Research rarely happens in a smooth line. And so you have to learn how to work around obstacles that you did not expect, but don't keep your group waiting if something comes up. Let them know in a timely fashion, so that changes can be made, people can adapt.

Adam: And "a timely fashion" doesn't mean two weeks later. It means "on the day," if possible, and "the day after," if not. And this is why you should exchange text messages; this why you should exchange email addresses, and why you should check all of those things on the regular.

Now teachers, here's some ways that you can work on developing group projects that don't allow for free riders. First, set up an alternative assignment that free riders might have to perform if they're removed from a group for free riding. And make sure that this assignment is one that is valid, but is one that students will really want to avoid if they can, to give them an incentive to do the group work that they agreed to do.

Dinur: And both Adam and I tend to have several individual components on our group projects. So for me, students had to think of possible research topics, whether they wanted to research them by doing short surveys, or by doing field notes and observations. And I would group students based on either what they wanted to study or the way they wanted to study it. So if I had a group of three or four people that really wanted to do field notes and observations, more qualitative work, I put them together, even if they had different ideas.

If I have different students that are interested in looking at cheating at school, I would have them work together, and they could figure out how they wanted to do that. But once the students were in groups, I had them submit individual components. So they had to each give me five to 10 survey questions that they wanted to include. They had to include their own research observations, if they were doing field notes, so that I knew what each

person was contributing. And in the past, I have had students evaluate one another in terms of their contributions to the group.

Now, generally students tend to be really nice towards one another. If we're grading one another on a scale of one to 10, most students are pretty generous and give scores of 8 to 10 out of 10, because no one wants to look like a jerk who's just downgrading their peer. So, if I see that a student is consistently getting scores of seven or lower, that's a really big sign of concern for me, because that's pretty harsh by student standards. And I let students know this. Now that might not eliminate the free rider completely, but it reduces it, because no one wants to look bad in front of their peers, and they know that I'm aware that students can be pretty generous towards one another.

Adam: And one thing that I do with my methods classes, specifically, is I will have them come up with a hypothesis on their own. So every student comes up with three hypotheses that they would like to test. And then, if that's as far as they want to go, that's fine. It's, it's kind of like the equivalent of the annotated bibliography. Develop a hypothesis, right? And develop some research. Find some sources for it.

But then if they want to go further, they have to build their own research team. And what they do is, they take their hypothesis that they liked the best, and they put it up on the learning management system in a message board that I established for this, "Hey, I want to research how poverty increases crime. Anybody want to work with me?"

And this is something that they have to do in the real world. If you want to assemble a research team, right, you've got to find people who want to work with you. And so then I will have them rate each other in similar ways, but I'll have them pick their own groups - because if they pick their own groups, they're more likely to actually work on the group work, because they know each other, they're friends, right? They like each other. Okay.

Dinur: Now we've talked a lot about the free riders, but another issue to watch for is group chemistry and communication. So I was teaching a methods course, and this was at a school that used the quarter system, meaning 10-week terms, and in week eight out of ten, one of my students asked to meet with me privately because there was a conflict within the group.

And the student came to me, she was in tears, she was frustrated, and she says, "I'm being shut out by my group. I'm being frozen out of the group chat."

So I ask, "Okay, where is the rest of your group?"

She goes, "Well, they're meeting with the teaching assistant."

I said, "Okay, let me talk to the teaching assistant. We'll see what's going on and what we can do."

And either later that day or the day after, I met with the TA, and the TA tells me, "Yeah, the group was complaining about the student because they're saying she called their ideas stupid."

My initial response was, "You have got to be kidding me." (And I used a much stronger term than "kidding.") But I asked, "Is there any chance that this could be a misunderstanding? Maybe it was meant in jest, or something got lost in translation?"

And she goes, "No. Like they were pretty adamant. She called their ideas stupid and they're upset about it."

Well, this highlights the importance of being able to work productively together and how words and attitudes can really shape a group dynamic, because how would you like it if you're on the receiving end of that comment? You know, you're trying to think of a problem for this class. You didn't have it ton of control over the assignment, and now one of your peers is calling your ideas stupid? That's not going to make you feel good. If it wouldn't make you feel good, why do that?

There are constructive ways of phrasing it. You could say, "I don't think that's the best way we could approach this question. I think we could do A, B or C," or, "I like this approach, but what if we tweak the question a little?" Because part of working in a group is learning to communicate and compromise and see what works well together.

Now, because it was so late in the term, I didn't feel comfortable telling that student, "Well, you're going to do a group project individually on your own," because I don't think that I could have fairly asked a person to come up with a survey question, analyze it, write a paper, and then present in front of their peers. And so I asked the group, "Would you be willing to tough this one out and to work together? I'm not asking you to love one another, but I am asking you to work together."

And to their credit, the group said, "You know what? We'll work together on this."

Now, that said, in the workplace, after you graduate, there are jerks and there are free riders, and learning how to overcome these obstacles now, in class? Well, that's a skill that's going to help set you up for success in the workplace. And look, Adam and I realize this is not ideal, but it is a way of framing a bad situation as something better - knowing that this might not be the only time that someone's being a free rider, or the only time that someone's not communicating clearly in a group, or that someone's a jerk. It's - and it's unfortunate life and work experience, but it is eventually a resource that you may have to draw on.

Adam: Now, if you have group projects, have one or two people per group act as spokespeople or liaisons. If there are concerns like this within the group. Or, offer a chance for group members to evaluate one another and have that be part of their group grade, 'cause that acts as a reward for working well together. And it also acts as a punishment for people who are trying to be free riders.

And if you assign group projects, make sure that there is work that each member can do, and offer a variety of tasks inside the project. For example, if you have a group presentation and a paper about it, ideally everyone helps with both the writing and the presenting, but if there are especially shy members in the group, make it so that they can do the lion's share of the writing. Then they don't have to speak. Allow for task substitution, but not total avoidance of the task. We want them to learn something, even if it's not everything.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 45. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. Also, we'd appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 46, when we'll talk about how to approach a professor when you need help that isn't academic.

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Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!