

# Students' Attitudes Toward A New Method For Preventing Loafing On The Group Project: The Team Activity Diary

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## ABSTRACT

*The Team Activity Diary (TAD) is designed to prevent social loafing on the team project. This paper describes the TAD and reports on students' perceptions of it. Although students appeared fairly indifferent to the TAD, 25% of the students indicated that it increased their contributions to the team project. Moreover, 16% of the students felt the TAD increased the contributions from some of their teammates. The authors present recommendations for use of the TAD and offer suggestions for future researchers.*

## INTRODUCTION

Students who complain about their experiences with team projects often cite social loafing as the main problem (Mello 1993; Strong and Anderson 1990; Williams et al. 1991). Social loafing occurs when one or more team members do not do their fair share of the work. Explanations for social loafing are varied. It is believed that some students withhold their team contributions because they see other students doing the same thing, and they do not want to be the “sucker” who does all the work (Kerr 1983; Robbins 1995). Another explanation is lack of motivation due either to low self-esteem (Shepperd 1993) or lack of incentive (Albanese and Van Fleet 1985; Shepperd and Wright 1989). Also, individuals who have serious time constraints, language difficulties, cultural differences, learning disabilities, or personality problems may find it difficult to fully involve themselves in group activities. Additionally, high expectations of one's teammates' performances may cause one to withhold contributions from the team (Williams and Karau 1991). Further, an individual's contribution may be related to team size, as some research has shown that social loafing is more likely to occur in large groups (North et al. 2000; Kerr 1983; Strong and Anderson 1990). However, research conducted by Latane et al. (1979) and Ingham et al. (1974) reveals the relationship between team size and individual effort is curvilinear: individual effort decreases as team size goes from one to three, but then appears to grow stronger with teams larger than three.

A variety of strategies has been devised to minimize social loafing on the team project. Perhaps the most commonly used method is peer evaluations gathered at the end of the project. While there is some evidence that peer evaluations improve communication between members and reduce free riding (Druskat and Wolff 1999), they may be most effective when gathered periodically throughout the term (Brooks and Ammons 2003). Self-evaluations are also used by professors to assess and prevent social loafing, but, unfortunately, these ratings are often misleading, as self-raters tend to inflate their contributions (Haas et al. 1998). Another strategy to combat social loafing is the “jigsaw technique,” an approach that holds each team member accountable for a specific component of the team project (Mesch 1991). Other recommendations that have been offered for preventing or dealing with free-riding include the following: 1) use a grading system that gives weight to both individual and group accomplishments (Beatty et al. 1996), 2) allow students to select their own teammates (Strong and Anderson 1990), 3) use small team sizes, i.e., two or three students (North et al. 2000; Strong and Anderson 1990); 4) encourage students to confront “loafing” teammates (Strong and Anderson 1990), 5) require individuals to rotate from one team to another (Joyce 1999), and 6) require team members to establish criteria by which they will be evaluated (Grieb and Pharr 2001; Siciliano 1999).

## **THE TEAM ACTIVITY DIARY**

The purpose of this paper is to describe a new method for preventing social loafing, namely the Team Activity Diary (TAD), and to report students' reactions to it. The TAD requires that each team maintain a diary that details times at which the team members met or communicated with each other, team member assignments, and any problems that the team is experiencing. Students are required to submit the TAD to their professor with their final written report.

The rationale for use of the TAD comes from the self-monitoring literature. Self-monitoring (also known as self-observation, self-recording, self-graphing, and journaling) refers to the act of recording and observing one's own behavior. Requiring people to record their own behavior has sometimes had reactive effects, i.e., the recording process changes their behavior. The recording process can make a person more aware of his/her behavior, and this heightened personal awareness can change one's behavior (Snider 1987). Additionally, some believe that self-monitoring results in self-evaluation, which may lead one to covertly control and alter his/her behavior through self-reinforcement or self-punishment (Kanfer 1970). Regardless of the psychological mechanisms involved, it is clear that self-monitoring can affect behavior. It has been used to promote better behavior of adolescents in the classroom (Brodén et al. 1971; Freeman and Dexter-Mazza 2004; Todd et al. 1999), to improve the academic performance of students (DiGangi et al. 1991), to help college women maintain an exercise program (Forsyth 1998), to help students change their dietary practices (Schnoll 1997), to encourage healthy behavior among elderly citizens (Krampen 1996), to help people lose weight (Corrigan et al. 1987), to change people's smoking habits (Israel et al. 1979; Kilmann et al. 1977; McFall 1970; Rozensky 1974), to develop better study habits (Richards et al. 1976), to help adolescent boys recover from brain injury (Selznick and Savage 2000), and to increase the performance rating of bus drivers (Olson and Austin 2001). It is assumed that the TAD will have motivating properties similar to those of the self-monitoring techniques. That is, it is presumed that the process of maintaining the TAD will have reactive effects that decrease social loafing. Moreover, the TAD should not only make each team member more aware of his own behavior, but it should also make each team member more aware that his/her contributions to the team project will be closely monitored by other team members and the professor.

## **METHOD**

Three classes of marketing research students at a large college of business were informed that they were required to form research teams to conduct empirical research. The research project covered a 15 week semester and required teams to complete a project proposal, to review the relevant literature, to design a questionnaire, to collect and analyze survey data, and to provide both a written and oral report at the end of the semester. Although students were allowed to select their own teammates, they were told that team size was restricted to two or three students. Students were also told that throughout the semester they must maintain a TAD that chronicled the times when teammates conducted team business, the tasks that each teammate was assigned, and any problems that team was experiencing. They had the option of creating either one TAD for the team or individual TADs by each member of the team. The latter option was offered for students who might feel that a group TAD might not properly reflect each individual's contributions. They were told the completed TAD must be presented in the appendix of their final written paper. Although no points would be awarded to teams for submitting the TAD, they were told that failure to submit a TAD with their final report would result in their team grade on the project being lowered a third of a full grade. For example, a "B" report submitted without a TAD would be lowered to a "B-." In addition to the TAD, peer evaluations were gathered from the students at the end of the semester. On the first day of class, students were informed verbally and in the syllabus that all members of a team would receive the team grade on the project unless evidence indicated that one or more teammates did not contribute a fair share to the project. They were informed that students found to be contributing less than a fair share would be awarded a grade that was below the team grade.

After the research report was submitted for a grade, students were asked to complete a questionnaire that inquired about their approach to, and attitude towards, the TAD. They were asked how they maintained the TAD (i.e., one team TAD vs. multiple individual TADs), whether the TAD affected their own or their teammates' behavior, whether the TAD was a good or bad idea, what they liked and disliked about the TAD, how they felt

about various aspects of the TAD, and what they suggested for improving the TAD. In addition, students were asked to provide the size of their team, their gender, and their grade on the midterm examination.

**Survey Results**

The survey results are based on 65 undergraduate marketing majors in an upper division marketing research course. Most of the students were male (57%), and the students’ median grade on the midterm examination was a “C.” Thirty-eight percent of the students were on a two-person team, and the remainder were on a three-person team.

When asked how they maintained their TAD (i.e., with one team TAD vs. multiple individual TADs), 97% of the students indicated that they maintained one team TAD. The TAD appeared to affect the behavior of a minority of the students, as roughly 25% of the students indicated that the TAD increased their contribution to the project. Moreover, about 16% of the students felt the TAD increased the contribution from some of their teammates.

When students were asked to provide comments as to what they liked about the TAD, they indicated that it kept them on schedule, it indicated who did and did not contribute to the project, it summarized how the team was progressing, and it specified who was responsible for each area of the project (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Positive Comments About the Team Activity Diary<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Percentage (n = 40)</b>
It Kept Us on Schedule	37.5%
Indicated Who Contributed and Who Didn’t	25.0%
Summarizes How the Team is Progressing	17.5%
Made Clear Who Was Responsible for Each Area	7.5%
Miscellaneous	12.5%

<sup>1</sup>Based on the question: “What, if anything, did you like about the team activity diary?”

As shown in Table 2, students who were critical of the TAD were most likely to say that the TAD took too much of their time to maintain. Other negative comments were that they didn’t understand the purpose of the TAD, they would sometimes forget to record information in the TAD, and that information in the TAD might not be factual. A few students felt that the TAD should have no bearing on their grade.

**Table 2: Negative Comments About the Team Activity Diary<sup>1</sup>**

<b>Comment</b>	<b>Percentage (n = 41)</b>
Too Time Consuming	58.5%
Didn’t See the Need or Purpose for It	12.2%
Forgetting to Record the Team Activities	9.8%
Diary Information Is Not Accurate	9.8%
Should Not Affect Project Grade	7.3%
Miscellaneous	2.4%

<sup>1</sup>Based on the question: “What, if anything, did you dislike about the team activity diary?”

Table 3: Mean Item Scores and Factor Loadings after Varimax Rotation

Item	Mean <sup>1</sup> (n = 65)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1. The team activity diary helped each team member understand his/her responsibilities on the project.	2.82	.835	.112	-.640
2. The team activity diary helped keep our team on a timely schedule.	2.75	.768	.124	-.150
3. The team activity diary had no positive value to our team. <sup>2</sup>	3.15	-.722	-.236	.419
4. I wish all of my instructors required project teams to keep a team activity diary.	2.17	.691	.479	-.041
5. I enjoyed recording the team's activities in the team activity diary.	2.22	.682	.357	-.067
6. The team activity diary helped to prevent team members from slacking off on their duties.	2.55	.649	.541	-.054
7. Filling out the team activity diary was a complete waste of time. <sup>2</sup>	3.28	-.636	-.073	.391
8. Without the team activity diary, my teammate(s) and I might not have finished the project on time.	1.85	.581	.343	.407
9. The team activity diary should accurately reveal to my instructor the contribution that each team member made to the project.	3.19	.135	.856	-.123
10. The team activity diary should help my instructor determine the grade that each member of the team should receive.	2.64	.260	.795	-.077
11. The team activity diary should help our instructor understand how the tasks of your project were divided among the team members.	3.57	.125	.724	-.277
12. The team activity diary will help document the contribution that each team member made on the project.	3.02	.388	.536	-.350
13. It took too much time to maintain the diary of the team's activities.	2.69	-.039	-.230	.772
14. Having to complete the team activity diary made me feel uncomfortable.	2.31	-.102	-.246	.708
15. Sometimes my teammate(s) or I forgot to record our team's activities in the diary.	3.56	-.477	.028	.567
Eigenvalue after Varimax Rotation		4.41	3.15	2.17
Cumulative % Explained		29.38	50.35	64.81

<sup>1</sup>Mean scores are based on a five point Likert scale where 1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 5 = "Strongly Agree."

<sup>2</sup>Item was reverse coded when calculating total score on scale derived from Factor 1.

The students' general impression of the TAD was gathered by asking them the following question: "Do you think it was a good or bad idea to have teams maintain a diary of the team's activities?" Of those who expressed an opinion (n=45), 76% indicated the TAD was a good idea.

A more detailed understanding of students' impressions of the TAD was gathered by asking students to use a five-point Likert scale to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the fifteen belief statements in Table 3. As displayed in the second column of Table 3, the students' mean scores on the statements reflect a fair amount of indifference to the TAD.

So that the fifteen statements in Table 3 could be summarized in a meaningful way, factor analysis (with varimax rotation) was applied to the statements. The factor analysis indicated that three factors accounted for almost 65% of the variation in the data. The first factor had high loadings on items that suggested the TAD was benefiting the students, e.g., it increased their understanding of each team member's responsibilities, it kept students on a timely schedule, it helped prevent team members from slacking off on their duties, it was enjoyable to complete, etc.

The second factor had high loadings on items revealing benefit to the instructor, e.g., the TAD should accurately reveal to my instructor the contribution that each team member made to the project, the TAD should help my instructor determine the grade each member of the team should receive, etc. The final significant factor had high loadings on items that revealed that the TAD was a hassle to maintain, e.g., it took too much time, completing the TAD made me feel uncomfortable, etc.

The items comprising each of the factors were used to create summary scales. The eight items comprising Factor 1 were used to create the Student Benefit Scale. Persons scoring high on this scale reflect the belief that the TAD is providing benefit to the students, and vice versa. The four items of Factor 2 were used to create the Instructor Benefit Scale. Students scoring high on this scale reflect the belief that the TAD is offering benefit to the instructor, and vice versa. Finally, the three items on Factor 3 were used to create the Hassle Scale. Students scoring high on this scale believe that maintaining the TAD was a hassle, and vice versa. A student's total score on any scale was determined by simply summing his/her original scale scores on the items comprising the scale. It should be noted that two of the items on the Student Benefit Scale – items 3 & 7 - are negatively worded and have negative loadings. The original scale scores on these items were reverse coded before tallying a student's total score on the Student Benefit Scale.

Reliability analysis was applied to each of the above scales. Cronbach's alphas are displayed in Table 4, and they reveal that the reliability of the Student Benefit Scale is excellent, the reliability of the Instructor Benefit Scale is good, and the reliability of the Hassle Scale is poor.

**Table 4: Summary Statistics for Scales Derived from Factor Analysis**

Scale	Items Comprising Scale <sup>1</sup>	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean (n = 64)	"Indifferent" Mean <sup>3</sup>
Student Benefit	Item 1 to Item 8	.90	19.9 <sup>2</sup>	24
Instructor Benefit	Item 9 to Item 12	.81	12.4	12
Hassle	Item 13 to Item 15	.65	8.5	9

<sup>1</sup>Refer to Table 3 to see items.

<sup>2</sup>Items 3 and 7 were reverse coded when calculating scale mean since each item had a negative factor loading.

<sup>3</sup>Calculated by multiplying the number of scale items by the "indifferent" scale value of 3.

Mean scores for each scale are also displayed in Table 4. These means can be interpreted by comparing them to an "indifferent" mean score. The "indifferent" mean score was derived by multiplying the number of items in a scale by the "indifferent" scale value of 3. Since the mean score of 19.9 on the Student Benefit Scale is below its corresponding "indifferent" mean, this result suggests that students, on average, do not believe they received much benefit from the TAD. And, overall, they feel fairly indifferent as to whether the instructor received a benefit from the TAD. Similarly, their Hassle Scale mean score of 8.5 suggests they are not willing to commit one way or the other as to whether maintaining the TAD is a hassle.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if the students' sex, grade on the midterm, or team size had any effect on the students' scores on the three scales in Table 4. Of the three multiple regression analyses conducted, only one revealed any significant effect. When scores on the Student Benefit Scale were run against the three independent variables – sex, midterm grade, and team size – only the midterm grade appeared to have a significant relationship with the Student Benefit Scale. The beta value on the midterm grade variable was  $-.251$  ( $p = .06$ ), suggesting that lower scores on the midterm were associated with higher scores on the Student Benefit Scale. This result suggests that the weaker student (i.e., the type that performs poorly on the midterm) is more likely than the stronger student to receive benefits from the TAD.

When students were asked how the TAD could be improved, their main comment was that the TAD should be graded and be given more weight on the final project grade. As displayed in Table 5, students also recommended that all team members should participate in the TAD's maintenance, that the purpose of the TAD should be made clear at the beginning of the course, that the TAD should be handed in to the instructor more often than just once in the final report, and that the students should be given clearer instructions on the type of information to include in the TAD. A few students indicated that the TAD should not be graded.

Table 5: Suggestions for the Team Activity Diary

Suggestion	Percentage (n = 41)
Should be Graded and/or be Given More Weight	40.5%
Each Team Member Should Be Required to Record the Activities	14.3%
The Diary's Purpose Should be Made More Clear	11.9%
The Diary Should Be Turned In More Often	11.9%
Clearer Guidelines Should Be Given on the Diary's Contents	7.1%
Should Have No Effect on the Grade	4.8%
Miscellaneous	9.5%

<sup>1</sup>Based on the question: "Please complete the following sentence. I think the team activity diary would be an acceptable assignment if ..."

### Discussion and Recommendations

To a degree, it appears that the TAD accomplished its goal of reducing social loafing on the team project. A quarter of the respondents stated that the TAD increased their individual contributions, and 16% of the respondents felt the TAD increased the contributions of their teammates. While it is not completely clear the type of student that was most influenced by the TAD, one of the multiple regression analyses indicated that the weaker student was most likely to receive benefit from the TAD, e.g., it appeared to help the student understand his/her individual responsibilities, kept him/her on schedule, and indicated how the team was progressing.

While the majority of the students felt that use of the TAD was a good idea, the attitudinal measures suggest that most of the students were indifferent to it. This result is not that surprising when one considers that the TAD was designed to motivate contributions from only a minority of the students - those students who might have a tendency to contribute less than a fair share to the project. For the majority of students, i.e., the ones who contributed a fair share, the TAD may have been perceived as more of a nuisance than a benefit.

For instructors who wish to make use of the TAD, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Make the purpose of the TAD clear to all students. In this study, the TAD was given as an assignment, but the purpose of using the TAD was not explained. Students will no doubt find more value in the TAD if they understand that it is designed to help them in a number of ways, e.g., prevent social loafing, identify social loafers, clarify individual responsibilities, keep the team on schedule, and show how the team is progressing.
2. Clearly specify the contents of the TAD. In this study, the students were given general guidelines for creating the TAD, but insufficient directions were given. For example, students were instructed to comment on any problems their team was experiencing. Using this instruction, some teams, for example, described problems they were having with the statistical software or with the potential respondents. If the goal of the instructor is to minimize social loafing, students should be told to focus on reporting teammate problems rather than project problems. An example of a well designed TAD should be submitted to the students so there is no confusion as to what is expected of them.
3. The TAD should be a graded component of the project. Grades reflect importance to students. If the TAD has little weight in the project's grade, students will place little emphasis on it. The TAD should count for anywhere from five to ten percent of the project grade. Students should be given a clear understanding of how the TAD will be graded, e.g., on content, clarity, completeness, grammar, and presentation.
4. Every team member should be required to be involved in the maintenance of the TAD. Since it is assumed that the process of maintaining the TAD can have reactive effects that will prevent social loafing, it is important that each team member have the opportunity to experience the reactive effects. Involvement among each team member can be achieved in a number of ways. For example, all team members can be instructed to sign the TAD that is submitted to the professor. In addition, the task of maintaining the TAD can be rotated in a systematic manner among the team members. If an instructor wants to maximize his students' involvement with the TAD, s/he can ask the students to maintain individual TADs.

5. Students should be required to submit the TAD to the instructor on a regular basis. In this study, students were asked to submit the TAD only with the final report. The problem with this approach is that some teams probably fabricated their entire TAD at the end of the project. So that students do not fall behind in maintaining their TADs, they should be required to submit them to the instructor on a regular basis, perhaps every other week and with the final report. The periodic submission of the TAD will not only promote more student involvement with the TAD, but it will allow the instructor to detect and deal with teammate problems as they occur.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS**

This study could have been improved in a number of ways. First, convergent validity for the TAD could have been established by examining the correlation between information in the TAD and peer group evaluations. That is, if the TAD were accurate in revealing social loafing problems, one would expect that those identified as social loafers in the TAD would also receive low ratings in the peer evaluations. Second, future researchers should consider adding questions on the survey that inquire about the respondent's contributions to the group project. A person's self-rating of his/her contributions could help not only in establishing convergent validity for the TAD, but it could also be used to establish the type of person who is most likely to be affected by the TAD. Third, the belief statements used in the survey to gather students' impressions of the TAD may not have tapped into all relevant dimensions. For example, none of the belief statements in this study related to the TAD's ability to cause an individual to engage in self-reinforcing or self-punishing behavior. Also, none of the statements related to the perception that teammates might be watching a fellow teammate more closely. Future researchers should consider adding statements that reflect these dimensions. Finally, future researchers should engage in controlled experiments that isolate the effects of the TAD. Instructors could randomly assign classes that have team projects to either the TAD or "nonTAD" condition, and then both types of teams (i.e., TAD users vs. nonusers) could be compared on group cohesion, teammate satisfaction, and group performance.

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