

Free riding

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1. What are free riders?

'Free riders' are students who, Y:, being part of a team, profit from the input and energy of their fellow students without making an equal contribution themselves in return.¹

Nine TU/e students interviewed characterised freeriding behaviour as

- Putting in less effort: for instance giving little input at meetings, displaying disruptive behaviour;
- Doing less work: staying in the background, profiting from others; and
- Failing to keep promises: non-attendance, being on time and distribution of work.

2. Causes of free riding according to students

- Intrinsic disinterest
- General lack of motivation
- Assessment system used: assessment at group level gives some students the feeling that it hardly makes any difference whether they do contribute substantially or not
- Extracurricular activities
- Other people taking on the work
- Lack of knowledge and prior knowledge
- Educational level too high
- Group is too large

According to students the causes of free riding behaviour lie within the sphere of motivation, within the free rider him or herself and to a lesser extent within the group or programme.

Basic elements of cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson (1994)

- *Mutual interdependence*: the student's results are positively influenced by the activities of other students. Students perceive that they need one another in order to achieve the group result.
- *Individual responsibility*: each student is assessed on individual performance and behaviour. Each student thus perceives that individual contributions are important for the group result.
- *Direct interaction* also called 'face-to-face interaction': students discuss and help each other within the group.
- *Interpersonal skills*. Collaborative skills in particular are needed to function effectively.
- *Attention for group processing*: the student evaluates the group process by reflecting on his own learning process and the functioning of the group.

A 1998 report by Dolmans, Wolfhagen and Van der Vleuten found that free riding, here defined as profiting from the input of active group members, indirectly influences the motivation of the tutorial group. Motivation directly influences the extent of free riding and the success of the tutorial group.

¹ Thanks to A.J.S.F. Visschers-Pleijers, D.J.W.M. Mulders and H.M.W.J. van de Wouw for their article *Meeliftgedrag bij samenwerkend leren* (Free riding behaviour in cooperative learning).

3. Effects of free riding behaviour according to students

- Irritation among group members;
- Group atmosphere turns negative, sometimes resulting in arguments within the group;
- Trust in free rider decreases;
- Educational profit diminishes;
- Reduced quality of end product;
- Deadline is obtained with more difficulty;
- Project becomes more time-consuming;
- The group has to do more work;
- In the long run free riding does not result in any long-term study delay according to the students.

4. Do students stand up against free riding behaviour?

Confronted with *systematic* free riding behaviour, students state that they do not tolerate this:

- Group members hold free rider to account for his behaviour;
- Possible solutions are specifically discussed;
- Punitive measures for the free rider: compensating for work that has not been carried out, for instance typing the report;
- Inform teacher in order for him to give an additional assignment (limited to structural free riding, because students are inclined to consider the supervising teacher's involvement as betrayal);
- A measure mentioned less often is removal from the group.

Other group members often tolerate free riding, out of some level of indifference, as long as the person involved does not push things to the limit. Measures taken by the institute are appreciated only in extreme cases. However, the students do note that the institute has an important role to play in free riding behaviour prevention, for example in the individual assessment of students.

Students mention that they do not primarily focus on helping each other, but they often indicate that they are particularly focused, individually, on successfully completing a subject. Everybody doing an equal amount of work is not something they consider very important, provided the inequality is not structural. Making clear arrangements on the mutual workload beforehand is considered as a possible solution for free riding by the students.

We distinguish two types of free riders: so-called 'structural free-riders' and 'occasional free riders'.

- Some students free ride occasionally (lack of interest in the contents of a specific subject).
- Other students free ride on a structural basis (general lack of interest in the programme).

The occasional free riders are generally not experienced as problematic.

5. What to do?

- Make an assessment of both the individual and the group;
- Introduce peer assessment: in this type of assessment students assess each other;
- Make the project task sufficiently complex, interesting and challenging;
- Allow students to choose or even formulate an assignment themselves rather than prescribing it;
- Prepare students in advance for the group process.

Ten tips to prevent free riding

Source: *HBO Journaal – Geert Kinkhorst*

- 1 Formulate assignments that are sufficiently complex**

Is the workload enough to keep the whole group busy? When just one or two students can carry out an assignment or a part of an assignment, this will open the door to free riding behaviour. Formulate assignments that entail a certain complexity where the group, even with a minimal effort, has to make choices *and* shares the workload. The diversity in tasks also plays a role here. If an assignment involves all group members doing the same, efficient students will say: 'Why should I do it if somebody else is already doing it?'
- 2 Call for a clear planning**

Have students work in a project with a professional project planning, consisting of a plan of action that clearly indicates when certain interim results must be achieved and who is responsible for them. This is a clever tool to structure the supervision. If necessary the planning is re-adjusted.
- 3 Let the group divide the tasks**

A project group has the collective responsibility to operate as a team. One student can be made exclusively responsible for a specific task, for which this person is supposed to take the initiative. Have the project group divide the tasks at the first meeting. This involves aspects such as: presiding consultations, making and monitoring agreements, informing the supervisor and helping to monitor the negotiation process as regards effort, time, quality and quantity.
- 4 Every work group its virtual office**

Project work may result in a mountain of paperwork; the supervisor easily loses track of the process. It is more convenient for every project group to open its own virtual office. Have them put your name down as supervisor. In this way you can view their progress and monitor the individual participation; you can see when a group member has last visited the office and what he has left behind. This also rids any free riders of some of their excuses, such as I lost the piece of paper, I could not get hold of you and I thought this had to be finished by next week.
- 5 Have the students solve their problems together**

Although the tasks are divided among them, members of a group are always collectively responsible for free riding behaviour prevention. Please discuss this subject at an early stage. Let the students decide what happens when someone neglects his duties. For instance, someone who cannot keep an appointment must inform the others as soon as possible; from someone who has not done his work an additional effort may be demanded; and we support each other to talk about arrangements that are made and we support each other to solve problems.
- 6 Make sure the group members have similar ambition levels**

An important cause of free riding can be a difference in ambition within a group. If one student wants a maximum result and another student is satisfied with an average result, then free riding behaviour will be the inevitable result. Let the students discuss this at the start. If they do not want to negotiate, they will have to split up as a group.
- 7 Reconcile stayers and sprinters**

Students roughly display two work styles: stayers who spread their workload and sprinters who start to work as the deadline really approaches. Sprinters who participate in a group that also contains stayers, quickly adopt to a role of free riders. In practice, it is rather difficult to reconcile the two work styles. What often happens is that students with the same work style seek each other out and form a group. A possible solution is to include a number of hard deadlines for delivering partial tasks. An open discussion on this phenomenon may also result in both parties

making concessions. A prerequisite is, however, that all students concerned consider both work styles as a legitimate way of studying and not as any shortcoming.

8 Ask specific questions in your role as supervisor

A conversation between a project group and a supervising teacher often proceeds in the following way. The teacher asks: "Well, how are things going?", addressing the group at large and no one in particular. Consequently, the active students take the floor. As a teacher you may ask specific questions as well, but not in the form of an unexpected exam. You explain beforehand that you expect everyone to be informed about the process. You may also present your impressions about the participation to the group by saying: "I think Pete is only contributing little. Is that correct and why is that so?" Or the other way around: "I have the impression that Maria does most of the work". An option is to give specific individual assignments to stimulate participation.

9 Prevent students from 'screwing their mates'

Whether students take issues like cooperation seriously, strongly depends on the amount of attention you pay to this. When you give them an assessment form to assess their contribution to the team and the contribution of others, this will have little influence if the results are not discussed. Their acceptance may remain difficult if the main focus is on criticising each other's failings; students do not like to discuss these in front of a teacher. Before you know it the student is seen as someone who screws his mates. It is much more productive to locate, nominate and stimulate above-average contributions by means of self-assessment and peer assessments.

10 Test individual performance

It does make a difference whether you consider free riding to be a lack of adequate effort or lack of optimal learning yield. The first is not necessarily related to the latter. A student may do nothing and still learn a lot and a student can work hard and still learn nothing, because he had already mastered the skill. Group work does not lend itself to testing the individual performance. Therefore, it is useful to individually test those things that you really want everyone to master thoroughly.