What Undergraduate Business Students Say about Peer Evaluations in Classroom Teams: Preliminary Evidence and a Proposition for Future Testing

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Many business instructors assign students to project teams and require them to evaluate each other's performance by using peer evaluations. This practice, the literature suggests, often pressures participants to contribute equitably to the team's workload, and discourages free riders. Despite clear advantages, a preliminary study shows that the effectiveness of peer evaluations in terms of motivating participation and collaboration can vary significantly. This paper presents findings based on student voices that relate their experiences with peer evaluations, and the impact they produce in their teams. A proposition for future testing is also derived from the findings.

Keywords: peer evaluation, student teams, business classes, social loafing, teamwork, group projects

INTRODUCTION

Business school instructors frequently assign students to project teams in their classes. Among its many advantages, classroom teams can simulate work teams, create a dynamic, participative environment in which students can learn to communicate and collaborate with others and deal with difficult, unmotivated team members (Bowes-Sperry et al., 2005; Fellenz, 2006; Goode & Teh, 2005; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). Many instructors require students to evaluate their peers and use these evaluations to inform their grading—a practice advocated by scholars
There is wide agreement that peer evaluations have the potential to produce at least two beneficial outcomes. First, peer evaluations can help instructors administer social justice; i.e., they are better able to reward the key contributors and punish the social loafers (e.g., Bryant & Albring, 2006; Clinebell & Stecher, 2003; Hansen, 2006). Second, they can serve a self-regulation function; i.e., the awareness that other students will evaluate their contribution often helps them define and improve their own behaviors in teams (Baker, 2008). Current thinking suggests that peer evaluations produce positive attitude toward teamwork, likely because it helps students feel more in control of the team’s outcomes (Hansen, 2006).

To the uninitiated instructor, the literature provides much in the way of guidelines for designing the effective peer evaluation process. Briefly, scholars note that: (a) students should know about the peer evaluation at the beginning of the semester (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Good & Teh, 2005), (b) the peer evaluations should produce a significant impact on grades (e.g., Bryant & Albring, 2006; Clinebell & Stecher, 2003), (c) peer evaluation should provide multiple criteria for assessing others’ performance (Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006), and (d) students should have the opportunity to correct their behaviors based on mid-semester evaluations (e.g., Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004).

The current gap in thinking relates to the following. While peer evaluations have the potential to administer procedural justice, produce grades more reflective of individuals’ inputs, provide developmental feedback, and help students regulate their behaviors—the literature is mostly silent when it comes to empirical evidence about what they actually produce in practice. Additionally, the students’ perspective into peer evaluations remains poorly represented in the literature, and details of the impact they produce on their behavior remain largely unknown. The purpose of this article is to report findings from a preliminary study using qualitative research that aimed to investigate this gap. Students were asked to speak about their experiences with peer evaluations, and relate their
perceptions of how they impacted their own behaviors, and shaped the collaborative behaviors within their teams. The intent here is to present preliminary evidence, identify key issues that deserve additional thinking and research—versus the attempt to produce generalizable findings, and present a proposition for future testing.

The discussions in the rest of the paper are structured in the following way. First, the insights in the literature about designing effective peer evaluations are briefly discussed. Then, how data were collected and analyzed is described, and key findings are identified. Finally, new evidence that raises questions about the effectiveness of peer evaluations is presented. In particular, the proposal discussed is that while peer evaluations have the potential to help reduce social loafing and help instructors administer *posteriori* justice by varying the grades with the level of contribution; they largely hinder rather than help the level of communication and collaboration in the team.

**The Nature of a “Good” Peer Evaluation**

Figure 1 serves as a guideline for the following discussion and encapsulates the key points made by scholars about peer evaluations in classroom teams. The vast majority of instructors expect students to submit peer evaluations at the end of the semester, i.e. after the team project is completed (Brooks & Ammons, 2004; Clinebell & Stecher, 2003; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). However, informing students at the beginning of the semester, about the nature of peer evaluations they are required to complete can serve a warning to potential social loafers and slackers (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). Requiring peer evaluations at the end, without prior intimation, serves mostly to punish loafers without the opportunity to prevent the problem from arising in the first place (e.g., Clinebell & Stecher, 2003).

Mid-semester peer evaluations overcome many of the problems associated with those required solely at the end of the semester—largely because they provide students the opportunity to share their concerns and improve their own behaviors based on feedback received from others.
Peer evaluations that:
- Are clearly communicated at the beginning of the semester (Baker, 2008; Good & Teh, 2005).
- Use multiple performance criteria (Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006).
- Significantly impact each student’s grade (Fellenz, 2006).
- Include mid-term feedback as well as end-of-semester assessment (Baker, 2008; Goode & Teh, 2005).

Lead to (during the team project):
- Reduced social loafing in teams (Goode & Teh, 2005).
- Increased self-awareness and self-assessment by individual members (Tu & Lu, 2005).
- Greater vigilance from each student and higher expectations of team mates’ performance (Paswan & Gollakota, 2004).
- Feedback that motivates members to improve (Goode & Teh, 2005).
- Better management of the team process (Fellenz, 2006).

Result in (at the end):
- More equity in work distribution (Baker, 2008).
- More accuracy in grade allotment (Fellenz, 2006).
- Students’ satisfaction with team performance (Baker, 2008).

(e.g., Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006). Baker (2008) describes mid-semester ratings as “developmental” feedback; i.e., it can raise self-awareness and motivate students to improve their performance on the team in time to positively impact on the project outcomes. The author contrasts this with “evaluative” feedback which only occurs after the project is complete by which time it is too late for students interested in making changes and correcting performance gaps. Aligned with the notion that frequent feedback enables rapid correction in behaviors, some scholars suggest that students should
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provide developmental feedback to participants at the end of each major learning unit or stage of the team project (e.g., Brooks and Ammons, 2003).

Some instructors ask students to rate participants on one criterion, often on one scale (e.g., “rate the extent to which the peer contributed to the team,” on a 10-point scale). This simple scale can reduce social loafing and inhibit non-performers and no shows, particularly if team members are aware that such peer evaluation is imminent. Many scholars, however, advocate in favor of requiring students to rate peers based on multiple criteria such as attendance, participation, cooperation, effort outside of meetings, and demonstrated leadership (e.g., Baker, 2008; Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). Once they are informed about the multiple yardsticks by which they will be judged, students are expected to better define their behaviors on teams, and improve the nature of collaboration that occurs within their teams. Finally, the impact of the peer evaluation on grades can vary substantially. Scholars suggest that peer evaluations should strongly (versus weakly) shape the grades received by students for their team projects (e.g., Bryant & Albring, 2006; Fellenz, 2006). In a related vein, Baker (2008) found that students had higher satisfaction when the instructor used peer evaluations to reward those who contributed more to the team’s performance.

To summarize, therefore, a good peer evaluation in classroom teams is characterized by the following. First, instead of requiring students to complete peer evaluations at the end of the semester without prior intimation, scholars advocate in favor of telling them upfront about the requirement (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Good & Teh 2005). Second, peer evaluations should reflect a considerable (versus an insignificant) part of the grade students receive (Fellenz, 2006). Third, instead of requiring students to rate their peers based on a global scale aiming to capture the totality of others’ contribution, and instead of viewing peer evaluations solely as a mechanism for providing posteriori justice to social loafers and high performers - providing detailed criteria for evaluating others is preferred (Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006). Detailed criteria not only help students rate others and provide detailed feedback to the instructors; awareness of these criteria can help them manage their own behavior (Paswan & Gollakota, 2004). Fourth, requiring peer evaluations mid-semester as
well as end-of-semester is strongly advocated (Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006)—even though instructors are known to mostly prefer the latter (Brooks & Ammons, 2003). Sharing of mid-semester peer evaluations allows students the opportunity to make improvements mid-semester, and learn and improve their participation as a result. Such peer evaluations promise reduced social loafing, increased self-monitoring, higher levels of collaboration, and improved team performance. Moreover, they promise equitable distribution of work load, grades more reflective of performance, and greater student satisfaction with teamwork.

**The Study**

Students enrolled in two sections of undergraduate ‘Organizational Behavior’ course were assigned the following questions for homework:

Think of a previous class in which the professor (a) assigned you to work on a team project and (b) utilized a peer evaluation system:

1. Describe the peer evaluation system in which you participated.
2. To what extent did the peer evaluation system help increase team effectiveness (e.g. reduced social loafing, caused members to work harder, etc.)? Please explain and support your answer with examples.
3. How did the peer evaluation system impact your actions on the team?

Fifty-five students turned in written homework assignments (33 males, 22 females), that we content analyzed. The content analysis was conducted in the following way. First, a data matrix was developed; each column was assigned to a homework question, and each row was dedicated to a student (i.e., it resulted in a matrix with three columns and fifty-five rows). In each of the cells, key points made by the student in response to the question were summarized. References to specific quotes from student responses were also made to help in illustrating the inferences that were later drawn. In the second stage, based on a comprehensive view of
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the data matrix, key inferences about peer evaluations were drawn, and each inference was supported with student quotes.

**Findings**

Of the fifty-five participants, forty reported that their peer evaluations were conducted only at the end of the semester (73%), while nine (16%) were required to complete mid-term as well as end-of-semester peer evaluations (11% had no clear, relatable experience with peer evaluations). Of those that had completed peer evaluations (n = 49): (a) thirty (61%) were aware at the beginning of the semester that peer evaluations would be conducted, whereas 39% were caught by surprise during the final week of classes, and (b) thirty (61%) were asked to rate others on multiple criteria; the rest were asked to rate others on one overall criterion of participation or contribution made by others. In case of multiple criteria, these included effort, quality of work, punctuality, attendance, cooperation, leadership, creativity, communication, knowledge of topic, quality of contribution outside class, preparedness for meetings, and dependability. Of the 49, two suggested that the entire project grade was based on peer evaluations, and two reported that peer evaluations had no impact on the project grade; the rest of the responses ranged from 10–50% of the project grade. Most (n = 22; 45%) reported that peer evaluations had no impact on their behaviors, fourteen (28%) noted that they had a great impact (the rest agreed that the impact was moderate). Virtually no student had experienced a good peer evaluation (i.e., those that are specified early in the semester, that include mid-semester evaluation, use multiple criteria, and represent a substantial part of the team project grade).

Many of the student responses resonate with the cautionary issues raised by scholars. First, for instance, agreeing with Clinebell & Stecher (2003), students noted that knowing early about peer evaluations worked well in reducing loafing. A student noted:

The peer evaluation system benefitted the team because we knew we controlled part of each other’s grade. We might fool the teacher into believing we worked hard on the project but we couldn’t fool
our group members. It cut down social loafing because members knew they were being watched and could not breeze by.

Similarly concurring with current views (e.g., Baker, 2008; Fellenz, 2006), students discussed the disadvantages associated with end-of-semester-only peer evaluations. A student noted:

Only one evaluation was required and it was not assigned until the end of the (team) project. I do not think it helped increase team effectiveness because we did it at the end of the project after everything was already completed. My professor used it primarily for grading purposes but the team had the option of looking at it if we wanted to. The peer evaluation system did not have any impact on the actions of team members because it was done after everything was finished.

Further elaborating on the disadvantages of relying on end-of-semester-only peer evaluations, students suggest that knowing about peer evaluations did not help; the knowledge did not stay sufficiently current in their consciousness to guide their day-to-day behaviors in teams. A student noted:

This peer evaluation had little effect on the effectiveness of the team. Since the evaluation was after the presentation was completed it wasn’t real for some people. I feel that most members acted as if there wasn’t even an evaluation at the end.

Also concurring with prevailing thinking, students noted that peer evaluations failed to motivate performance when they had little impact on their project grade (e.g., see Clinebell & Stecher, 2004):

The peer evaluation was a mere 20% of the project grade which was 20% of the final (course) grade. The peer evaluation system hardly increased team effectiveness because it was such a minimal part of the grade. Social loafing and a general low quality of work were evident because peer evaluation only counted towards 4% of the final grade, it did not mean much to us.
There were, however, many unintended and negative consequences of peer evaluations that deserve the attention of scholars. The notion that peer evaluations likely shift the onus of responsible participation in classroom teams from students to the instructor, and hinder rather than help collaborative teamwork emerges from the following data-derived inferences. First, highly motivated students note that because peer evaluations were used to assess individual contributions and extent of social loafing, they consciously reduced their contribution and did only as much as everyone else. Voicing these troubling concerns about the negative impact of peer evaluations, two students noted the following:

Student A: Upon hearing that we would be evaluating each other, I was not particularly worried. I had been participating actively in group meetings and was not concerned with how I would be critiqued. In reality, I actually ended up contributing less because of the increased motivation to speak up and appear dedicated to the group.

Student B: The peer evaluation system didn’t have much impact on my actions. I completed my assigned work and didn’t research above and beyond. I didn’t contribute any more effort than my team members because I didn’t think it was fair to have to complete more work than everyone else. I knew that if I was contributing as much as my team members, that I would be getting a decent evaluation.

Second, overt consciousness of impending peer evaluations did not appear to produce a beneficial impact; i.e., they changed participants’ behavior in negative ways. Students noted that the knowledge of detailed mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluations, and the strong impact they had on their project grade hurt spontaneity, and produced fake-niceness and pandering. A student, capturing the gist of the comments, noted:

The ever-present knowledge in each of our minds that we were being silently and constantly judged for every nuance of our behavior, stymied our productivity in some respects. I got the
distinct impression that certain team members were behaving with a stilted, forced niceness that made me wonder if they were being genuine. In a sense, we were all pandering to each other, lest we grade one another poorly. This palpable charade precluded some of the conflict that is so necessary to team effectiveness; I am positive that certain criticisms of existing ideas were suppressed for fear of how they would be perceived by other team members, and other ideas were never presented for similar reasons.

Third, collaborative behaviors were inhibited by peer evaluations; students reported a lowered tendency to admit weaknesses or ask for help for fear that others might view them as weak and trigger a negative rating. A student noted:

A negative impact the evaluation had was the fear that if you were weak or struggling in an area, peers may find that you are showing little effort when you’re not. This happened within a group until I informed the team that I was struggling writing my paper for the project. Afterwards some team members helped me in an area of the paper I was struggling to finish. If team members do not communicate their weaknesses, peers may evaluate other members inaccurately.

Fourth, knowing about mid-semester and end-of-semester peer evaluations increased quantity but not the quality of contributions. The following student voices provide three distinct perspectives into the peer evaluation-induced increase in “quantity” of participation:

I feel like the peer evaluation system really just makes people want to give their ideas to almost get points with the team as if its class participation. In this group, it seemed as if the other group members would sometimes just chime in and not say anything of great importance just to make it seem as if they were participating when they were relatively distracting.

One of the members lacked in the area of quality of work. She acted as though she was participating by agreeing with what other people in the group said, but very infrequently brought original ideas to the table. Simply agreeing with what everyone else had to
say hindered the group’s performance in that we didn’t advance in the assignment nor did we ever have to face conflict which potentially could lead us to look back over some questions and realize we had made a mistake.

The evaluations did not prevent any problems in our group. The member we had problems with only improved by showing up to our meetings more often but he still did not participate much during meetings.

Fifth, instead of helping, peer evaluations strongly inhibited constructive conflict and disagreement. Students withheld criticism for fear of making waves and inviting retaliatory low ratings from others. Students explained:

I was not as free with some of my ideas which I felt would meet with resistance. Also, there were a few instances where I did not agree with the direction the group was taking but remained silent so as not to “make waves” and possibly affect my grade.

Another student said: “I did not engage in conflict because I honestly wanted everyone to like me.” The fear of being judged by others was closely related to the low incidence of constructive conflict. A student explained:

Everybody on my team seems to work relatively hard since we are afraid of being judged by our peers. But we have no conflict. And without conflict we have not been creative or achieved consensus.

Finally, peer evaluations produced rating inflation. Students noted that even though participants were aware that they would be evaluated by their peers at the end of the semester, some students continued to slack-off, believing that their friends would give them high ratings regardless of contribution. A student noted:

The evaluation did not do much to improve our team’s effectiveness. All the members in my team had already been good friends. The evaluation did not really make me look at how we could have
improved in areas or really make me ask myself if I understood the group behavior.

Another student noted:

Another important trend that was visible was members feeling bad to give a mediocre grade risking another student’s grade who may have attended every meeting but did not participate fully.

From these key inferences, the following proposition is derived in the context of peer evaluations in undergraduate business classroom teams:

Peer evaluations:

a. Help reduce social loafing.

b. Lead highly motivated students to calibrate and reduce their contribution to the team.

c. Reduce spontaneity and increase the incidence of inauthentic and impression-management behaviors within teams.

d. Reduce the likelihood that participants will ask for help and admit weaknesses.

e. Increase the quantity of participation, without increasing quality.

f. Inhibit constructive conflict.

g. Produce inflated peer ratings.

CONCLUSION

Peer evaluations make intuitive sense to instructors; they help them manage the slackers and free-riders. If they cannot eliminate social loafing, they help instructors administer *posteriori* justice, and award deserving students a better grade on their projects. Student voices, however, tell a different story. This study shows that while the potential for beneficial outcomes exists, peer evaluations hinder rather than help in the emergence of collaborative behaviors in teams. New thinking about designing and administering peer evaluations in undergraduate business classroom teams is sorely needed.

1 Aligned with the original intent, this proposition aims to stimulate new thinking and research; it is not intended to serve as a formalized hypothesis ready for testing.
REFERENCES


