# The Free Rider and Cooperative Learning Groups: Perspectives from Faculty Members

*Geri McArdle*
*American Red Cross*

*Kimberly D. Clements*
*School District of Lee County*

*Kim Hutchinson-Lendi*
*Nova Southeastern University*

*Free riders are individuals who decide not to participate in cooperative learning group activities and often lower the group's morale, productivity, and effectiveness. This research paper presents a review of free riding and the results of a research study to examine the perspectives of faculty members about free riders and how they address them. Implications for human resource development and adult education will be discussed.*

Keywords: Cooperative learning groups, Free riders, Group dynamics

The use of small groups engaged in working on a product or task together has been referred to as "cooperative learning" (Magney, 1996; Saunders & Batson, 1999). This type of learning can have great value, especially in graduate education, because cooperative styles of learning often create a model for working effectively in the workplace environment. For example, skills learned in the classroom through the use of cooperative learning groups can then be transferred to the employment setting (Jones, 1984; Saunders & Batson, 1999). Such skills may also positively shape each member's development in leadership, teamwork, and communication, which are all areas that have been identified as critical to employee personal and professional growth on the job (DeSimone & Harris, 1998).

Although cooperative learning has many positive aspects, including this perceived transfer of skills to the workplace, a potential problem is the occurrence of free riding by some group members (Giraud & Enders, 2000; Magney, 1996), which may negatively impact group productivity, efficiency, and morale. Free riding occurs when one or more group members decide to refrain from participating in the groups' task or assignment; this often creates difficulties with group dynamics because it places an added responsibility upon other group members to compensate for the free rider's lack of effort (Kerr & Bruun, 1983). Additionally, such free riding, which may largely be evidenced in the cooperative learning groups that are frequently used in undergraduate and graduate classes, may also be transferred as a 'learned skill' to the workplace setting.

As such behaviors may be learned and potentially reinforced within cooperative learning groups that are used in college, it is important to understand how faculty members respond to free riders and the strategies they use to deal with this type of behavior. Their methods of handling free riders within cooperative groups could provide valuable information for HRD professionals who often use similar small groups as part of their instructional strategies within training and development programs for employees. This paper presents a review of free riding and the results of a research study to examine the perspectives of faculty members and how they address free riders. Implications for human resource development and adult education will also be discussed.

**Problem Statement**

The entire valuable experience gained from cooperative learning activities such as learning to function in groups or teams should be applicable to the workplace setting. Indeed, this appears to be the case. Research findings have supported the use of cooperative learning as one instructional learning strategy to further promote individual cognitive and affective growth. In their research study, Saunders and Batson (1999) surveyed both adult graduate students and their employers regarding the impact of cooperative learning upon their personal and professional development. The graduate students reported that cooperative learning promoted intellectual growth, increased effectiveness, and helped to develop those skills considered necessary to become a reflective practitioner on the job. Moreover, surveys from employers confirmed the transfer of skills by employees through the demonstration of new skills, modified techniques, and technology use.

Additionally, Brewer, Klein, and Mann (2003) found small groups to be an effective method of instruction for adult learners. Many of the students in their research study reported that they felt more confident and motivated as a result of small group work compared to those who worked individually. Moreover, Moore and Bogotch (1993) found that graduate students felt cooperative learning was beneficial and the resulting learned skills would be reflected in future work on the job through project teams and group work. Thompson and Sheckley (1997) obtained similar findings in their study of nursing students that examined the needs of adult learners compared to traditional college age students. Specifically, adult learners reported that certain aspects of curriculum and instruction were important to them, including (1) the organization and knowledge of the instructor, (2) clarification of time on task, (3) encouragement of cooperative learning, and (4) promotion of active learning. Thompson and Sheckley outlined an example of how these aspects could be addressed through the application of the experiential learning cycle to course content and topics for discussion, including the use of small groups.

However, research findings have also indicated that cooperative groups may not provide entirely positive or productive results for students and adult learners. As explained by Ashraf (2004), although the use of cooperative learning groups may provide the context for developing teamwork and teambuilding skills, it also creates a small group forum for students to actively free ride and for such behaviors to be specifically reinforced. In his review of small groups, Ashraf maintained that small groups may not be the most effective tool for building teamwork and teaching productive skills to future workers. In fact, he noted that such groups could have the adverse effect of increasing the occurrence of free riding to the extent that such students who rely on these behaviors would become "proficient" at it. To counteract such free riding, Ashraf suggested that instructors develop methods for rewarding those students who work to complete the group task or assignment, and devise strategies to penalize free riders.

As such free riding may begin to occur within cooperative learning groups used as an instructional strategy in undergraduate and graduate courses with traditional students and adult learners, it is important to examine and identify specific strategies and methods to successfully address free riders. The use of free riding by individuals and the transfer of these behaviors to the workplace will present a specific challenge to those organizations that rely upon cooperative learning groups. Additionally, free riding may be problematic to those human resource development professionals who use it as a training and development instructional strategy. Those who free ride would potentially limit the skills and content that may be acquired from working in a group because of their destructive impact upon it. Thus, research efforts should continue to investigate the many factors that may be involved in free riding and the ways in which those who facilitate such groups, including trainers and educators, recognize and respond to it.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Free Riding: Definition and Related Aspects*

In cooperative learning settings, tasks are often structured such that, regardless of group size, when the task is completed, all members benefit from successful task performance. The key to the free riding effect is the perception of individual group members that their efforts may be "dispensable," or not required for the successful completion of a group task or activity. Specifically, as the group's task or activity increases, this perception of being dispensable increases, which results in decreased individual motivation to participate, which Kerr and Bruun (1983) defined as the "free rider" effect.

As explained by Kerr and Bruun (1983), in free riding, the notion that effort is dispensable, or unnecessary for successful task completion, has a specific impact upon the contribution of the individual to the group. This belief in being dispensable is shaped by the perception the individual holds about his or her personal effectiveness, and also the perception the individual holds about the effectiveness of other group members. As group members perceive their contributions are dispensable, and that other group member's efforts are successful, they will decrease their contributions and engage in free riding.

Essentially, these individuals view their contributions as unnecessary to group achievement or the attainment of a specific goal. Furthermore, as explained by Kerr and Bruun (1983), the more experience group members have with a particular task for which their efforts are perceived as dispensable, or unnecessary, the more likely they are to become free riders. This occurrence of free riding has specific negative effects for the group, specifically the reduction of group member's motivation to complete the task, and the perception of others that they are carrying the load for those who decide to free ride. As explained by Ashraf (2004), when such free riding occurs within the classroom setting, it may not only lead to greater free riding by certain group members, but also reinforce those behaviors, making free riders much better at it.

Issues of equity and fairness regarding the distribution of tasks and the individual and collective contributions of group members may further serve to reduce group effectiveness, efficiency, and morale. This is largely because as

students increase their free riding behavior within a cooperative learning group, other members will often compensate for it by expending more effort in order to successfully accomplish the task. Ultimately, the task motivation of group members is sensitive to the perceived dispensability of their efforts for group success, or whether each group member believes that his or her participation contributes to group success (Kerr & Bruun, 1983). In the case of free riding, the individual not only perceives that his or her contribution to the group task is unnecessary, but also that the efforts of other group members will result in task success. The fact that other members will usually compensate for the free rider's lack of effort may not only reinforce the behavior, but also lead to equity concerns related to the grading of a project or the amount of credit that is given to the small group.

*The Challenges of Free Riding in Educational and Workplace Settings*

The free rider effect upon cooperative learning groups often results in a variety of negative effects to the group. For example, when there is unequal contribution to group tasks, problems with group effectiveness develop, and the reality or the perception of free riding may also lead to conflict. A source of conflict or group dissatisfaction occurs when one member of the group becomes dominant. Other group members may reduce effort as a method of coping with the dominant person (McElhinney & Murk, 1994; Schoenecker, Martell & Michlitsh, 1997).

Another problem related to free riding is how a group project is graded, given the disproportionate participation and contribution of group members. Numerous suggestions have been offered to deal with this issue such as openly discussing group dynamics and the topic of free riding and using peer evaluations from all members of the group as a whole (Magney, 1996; McElhinney & Murk, 1994).

Brooks and Ammons (2003) developed a program of peer evaluation that was used with cooperative learning groups that was found to not only impact student learning, but also reduce the occurrence of free riding. Their program for peer evaluation of small group functioning was presented to students early in the small group, included multiple forms of assessment, and focused on specific criteria/expectations for group members. This system of ongoing peer evaluation provided students with feedback that helped them to recognize and address their contributions to the group and its success. Such feedback kept group members' on track and held them accountable to participating in the accomplishment of the assigned task.

The use of peer evaluations for reducing free riding has also been advanced by Paswan and Gollakota (2004), who developed a scale that included areas students felt should be considered when evaluating group member contributions. Those areas that were identified included such factors as group member dependability, task and maintenance behaviors, domineering behaviors, free riding, and personal competence. The researchers suggested the use of multi-item scales for peer evaluations of group activities because their content may cover those areas that were identified by students as needing to be assessed in order to determine group effectiveness.

However, despite all of the above suggestions, the issue of grading in a cooperative learning environment has not been satisfactorily resolved, so that free riding continues with negative effects upon the group, especially when individual or group grades are awarded based on group products or outcomes. Moreover, the fact that free riders may not be penalized may lead more industrious students to engage in similar behaviors as well. As cooperative groups are often used within educational settings, it is important to conduct research related to the examination of how faculty members perceive those who free ride and what they do about it. These perceptions and strategies may provide possible suggestions for others in dealing effectively with free riders.

*Free Riding and Human Resource Development*

Dealing effectively with free riders is something that HRD professionals should be concerned about. Specifically, as cooperative learning groups have become increasingly used within educational settings as one way to encourage teamwork and team building, this may also encourage the development of free riding behavior (Ashraf, 2004). As noted previously, such free riding may serve to decrease group efficiency, effectiveness, and morale.

Moreover, it may adversely impact the perceptions of group members regarding the use of small groups as an instructional strategy. Free riders may view such groups as unnecessary and recognize that others will compensate for their lack of participation in the group. Those group members who feel they must or should make up for this lack of participation may feel negatively about the use of groups and view them as facilitating or reinforcing a lack of teamwork and team building. Additionally, they may become resentful regarding the use of such groups and believe that they are better able to learn through the use of individual strategies in which their contributions and efforts are recognized.

Thus, it is critical for HRD professionals, who often use cooperative learning groups as a method for enhancing leadership skills, as well as developing team building and worker cohesiveness, to recognize free riding and have the necessary tools in place to effectively deal with it. As free riding represents one type of learned behavior that may be transferred to the workplace setting, it is crucial that HRD professionals understand its existence and negative effects upon the group and its functioning.

Furthermore, such an awareness of free riding and its impact upon the group is necessary because several of the HRD theories that are used as a foundation for practice-based interventions involve the use of cooperative learning and its relationship to reflection upon experiences, both individually and collectively. For example, the learning principles of andragogy focus upon the unique needs of adult learners and emphasize the belief that educational experiences should include the application of material to the workplace setting (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998). Additionally, the components of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and transactional learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) also advocate the importance of reflection upon experiences and how that may influence the development of adult learners' knowledge, skills, and abilities. In this sense, small groups should serve to enhance adult learners' experiences through the interaction and communication that is required for their successful functioning. They should also provide a context for learning through the exposure of group members to the diverse opinions and perceptions of others. However, the occurrence of free riding would severely limit the potential benefits of such learning because of its impact upon group dynamics, individual motivation, and the collective morale of the group. HRD professionals who are not able to immediately recognize free riding and then effectively address its occurrence within cooperative learning groups may find their training and development programs to be unsuccessful and unproductive as a method of instruction.

**Research Questions/Propositions**

Free riding represents a learned behavior that may be evidenced in college and then transferred to the workplace setting. Such behaviors, once transferred to the workplace setting, may seriously undermine the efforts of HRD professionals who use cooperative learning groups as an instructional strategy within their training and development programs. Therefore, it is critical for HRD professionals to understand what kinds of strategies may be most effective for addressing free riding when it occurs.

As such behaviors occur earlier in college before students move to the workplace as employees, faculty members represent a group of educators who may be best able to provide those necessary strategies for HRD professionals to use. Thus, the specific research question that addressed in this investigation is *what are the perceptions of faculty members about those students who free ride and how do they respond to free riding when it occurs?*

**Methodology/Research Design with Limitations**

A qualitative case study design was selected in order to most effectively investigate this research question. As noted by Creswell (1998; 2003) and Stake (1995), the case study represents one form of research that allows the researcher to specifically examine an area of interest that is based upon identifying and understanding the perceptions and experiences of subjects. Additionally, case study research provides a context in which the researcher is able to work closely with participants so that the research question is examined from multiple points of view.

This study included eight university faculty members who volunteered to participate and share their experiences and perceptions regarding free riders and how they deal with such individuals. Study subjects participated in one audio-taped individual interview (semi-structured) with the researcher and then reviewed the transcripts of that interview approximately two weeks later to ensure the information was accurate and did not reveal their identity. Participants were asked the following five questions:

(1) Have you had a student you thought was a free rider?
(2) What adjustments did you make to deal with this person?
(3) How does the free rider differ from traditional team players?
(4) What impact does the free rider have upon the group?
(5) Do you feel such behaviors could transfer to the workplace?

Their responses to these questions provided information that illustrated their thoughts and feelings concerning those who free ride within groups and how they addressed such individuals. Data that was collected through such interviews was examined to identify specific categories which were then collapsed into themes related to group members' responses to free riders. Limitations regarding this research design included the small sample size and the use of volunteers to participate in the study. They may have very different experiences and perceptions regarding group work compared to those who decided not to participate.

**Results/Findings**

The faculty in this sample, which included business, counseling, education, and psychology professors, was divided in their opinions about the utility of using project work for learning. Collectively, the sample agreed that two

dynamics emerge during group projects, which are (1) group productivity and (2) work ethic. This faculty considered small group learning as a part of the extensive "…study of how people behavior and towards others…." as noted by Yin (1994; pg. 3) in McElhinney and Murk (1994). The term "productivity" according to Cohen (1994) is measured by standardized tests and can also be measured, he concedes, by conceptual learning and higher order thinking (McElhinney & Murk, 1994). All eight faculty agreed that productivity and work ethic consistently emerged as a legacy of group work from their observations of student groups.

The business faculty were more likely than the counseling, education, and psychology faculty to maintain that project work clearly reflected an individual's contribution to the task, and to the group's productivity. The clear distinction between the faculty group was in the method of introducing and monitoring the task. The business faculty made themselves available as judicious consultants. They provided an overview of the task, clear directions for completing the task, and a task completion deadline that was not negotiable. The counseling, education, and psychology faculty viewed the group project as an opportunity to stress values as the enduring evaluative criteria or standard for how the group process should happen now and in the future.

*Two Types of Free Riders*

All participants agreed that there are two types of academic free riders. The first is the "savvy drop out," which may be used to describe a student who initially surveys the group membership and decides that there a couple of people in the group that will get the group project completed despite what the other group members do. One of the group members will inevitably assume a leader position within the group and complete the task, while allowing the free rider to not participate in the group, but share the final grade. The second type of free rider is the "project pretender." This student will accept the group assignments; however, he or she will either produce minimal work or work which is inadequate according to group standards. This type of free rider will usually cause the group to come together and work to complete the project for the sake of the group and the grade. However, in some cases, the free rider's name is not included on the final project. In these instances, faculty members were aware of group dynamics and decided to refrain from interfering; however, they did agree to consider this situation and the non-participation of the free rider when awarding grades for the project or task.

*Coping and Countering Actions: Three Faculty Strategies*

A number of emerging themes and strategies were discussed among participants regarding as how to successfully manage these situations. The first obvious strategy is recognizing that a free rider is in the group; however, a few faculty members stated that in the past they were indifferent to group dynamics and group behavior and that each student was accountable for his or her own work. Given the current emphasis upon the role of teamwork within organizations, faculty members noted that their tendency to ignore such free riding has decreased. Moreover, they maintained that to ignore a free rider would be potentially destructive to the future use of groups as an instructional strategy because students would not want to participate.

Thus, three specific instructional strategies were discussed among the surveyed faculty that served as remedies to counter the free rider behavior. The first strategy was to use a pass/fail system of grading for group projects. Although this may appear to be a very democratic process for managing grades, one faculty participant noted that the "pass/fail" system might prove problematic. Specifically, such a grading process could encourage the free rider to evolve into a blatant parasite and become a non-productive member without penalty because group members usually cope with the individual by not showing or discussing their concerns over such parasitic behavior. One of the consequences of this group's action was reluctance to participate in a future group in either graduate school or the workplace. The second strategy of professors was to eliminate group projects and give an individual research paper with an in-class written final examination. This method of addressing the free rider did preserve each student's contribution to the class and his or her final grade; however, the benefits of group work never emerged because each student worked an as "individuated" whole, and not as part of a collaborative group. The third strategy was the use of peer grading, in which group members were asked to give each other an evaluation regarding the participation and contribution of other members. This was reported to be an effective and viable method of successfully addressing the free rider because it challenged that person's ability to not participate within the group.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The findings from this research study indicate that faculty members have very specific perspectives and experiences regarding students who are considered free riders. Interviews with faculty members who agreed to participate provided information on the types of free riders that exist and the methods by which group members deal with them. Although some faculty members admitted that they ignored free riders, such indifference to these group members was recognized as potentially counterproductive to the intended goals of cooperative learning groups as an instructional method. Three types of strategies were identified that faculty members used to address free riders,

which included the use of a pass/fail system, the elimination of group projects from the course, or the use of peer grading to provide feedback to members.

Each of these strategies may be considered a viable method of addressing students who may be considered free riders. It should be noted that the use of peer grading has been previously found to be an effective way of dealing with free riders because of the impact that such continuous feedback has upon shaping the behavior of non-participants within the group (Brooks & Ammons, 2003). It may be that peer grading has a larger impact upon free riders and their behavior because the evaluation is conducted by group members who are able to witness the behavior of free riders 'first hand' and are best able to comment upon it as they see it. Additionally, such evaluation may illustrate a positive peer pressure which collectively forces the free rider into participating because other members are aware of the behavior and able to address it through their own assessments of each member's performance and contribution to the group. Given these findings, it is important to examine the impact of these three methods of dealing with free riders to determine their advantages and disadvantages. It may also prove useful to interview students within groups to obtain their perceptions and experiences of working with free riders and their feelings regarding the way in which faculty members have addressed such behaviors. This information could not only provide additional strategies that may help in dealing with free riders, but also illuminate the thoughts and ideas of those students who have first hand experience with free riders. This may be especially helpful since peer grading was one strategy that faculty members used and believed to be an effective method of handling free riders.

**How this Research Contributes to HRD**

Given the potential effects of free riding upon group process skills, group dynamics, and group task achievement, continued research within this area has strong implications within the field of human resource development. This is largely because cooperative groups are often used as one of many instructional strategies for not only enhancing individual learning and performance, but also facilitating the development of a variety of skills, including those related to leadership, group process, task analysis, and communication. Furthermore, research efforts continue to be directed toward identifying those factors that mediate group performance and productivity (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997). Research findings regarding free riding are important to human resource development because cooperative learning groups are often used as a component of training and development and as a tool to enhance individual performance and organizational learning (DeSimone & Harris, 1998).

Thus, the issue of free riding and its impact upon the group, its members, and the attainment of specific outcomes is one that should continue to be addressed through research efforts so that practical results may by applied within settings where such cooperative groups are used. Additionally, the importance of examining free riding becomes apparent in light of research findings that indicate skills learned within a group are often later transferred to employment settings. Such a transfer of skills would prove highly problematic to companies and organizations in which any kind of group, including one developed to enhance cooperative learning, may be utilized as a method for positively impacting individual learning, collective performance, and professional development. In this sense, an individual who has developed a behavior pattern of free riding will serve to negatively impact the group and its outcomes, which in the organizational setting, could have potentially disastrous results for group efficiency, effectiveness, productivity, and specifically, individual morale.

**Conclusions**

With the continued importance in companies and organizations of facilitating individual learning and performance, especially through the use of groups, the issue of free riding by group members becomes one in which increased attention is needed. As its occurrence negatively impacts group outcome, free riding should be further addressed in the fields of human resource development and adult education so that the benefits of cooperative learning groups may continue to be achieved. Such research is critical not only to addressing free riders, but also to improving the perceptions of those whose group work experiences have not been positive due to working with free riders.

**References**

Ashraf, M. (2004). A critical look at the use of group projects as a pedagogical tool. *Journal of Education forBusiness, 79*, 213-216.

Brewer, S.A., Klein, J.D., & Mann, K.E. (2003). Using small group learning strategies with adult re-entry students. *College Student Journal, 37*, 286-297.

Brooks, C.L., & Ammons, J.L. (2003). Free riding in group projects and the effects of timing, frequency, and specificity of criteria in peer assessments. *Journal of Education forBusiness, 78,* 268-272.

Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing.

Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

DeSimone, R.L., & Harris, D.M. (1998). *Human resource development.* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, TX: The Dryden Press.

Giraud, G., & Enders, C. (2000, April). *The effects of repeated cooperative testing in an introductory statistics course*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Diego, CA.

Jones, G. (1984). Task visibility, free riding, and shirking: Explaining the effect of structure and technology on employee behavior. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, 684-695.

Kerr, N. L., & Bruun, S. E. (1983). Dispensability of member effort and group motivation losses: Free rider effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 78-94.

Knowles, M.S., Holton III., E.F., & Swanson, R.A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development.* (5th ed.). Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Magney, J. R. (1996, December). *Using cooperative learning in the technical classroom.* Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention, Cincinnati, OH.

McElhinney, J., & Murk, P. J. (1994, November). *Using small learning groups in graduate education.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Nashville, TN.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moore, R. C., & Bogotch, I. E. (1993, November). *No longer "neglected": Adult learners in graduate education*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Paswan, A.K., & Gollakota, K. (2004). Dimensions of peer evaluation, overall satisfaction, and overall evaluation: An investigation in a group task environment. *Journal of Education for Business, 79,* 225-231.

Podsakoff, P.M., Ahearne, M., & MacKenzie, S.B. (1997). Organizational citizenship behavior and the quantity and quality of work group performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 82,* 262-270.

Saunders, N. G., & Batson, T. (1999, October). *Cooperative learning strategies in graduate education*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.

Schoenecker, T. S., Martell, K. D., & Michlitsch, J. F. (1997). Diversity, performance, and satisfaction in student group projects: An empirical study. *Research in Higher Education*, 38, 479-495.

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Thompson, C., & Sheckley, B.G. (1997). Differences in classroom teaching preferences between traditional and adult BSN students. *Journal of Nursing Education, 36,* 163-170.