

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF GROUP GRADED ASSIGNMENTS

Wayne Neu, College of Business Administration, California State University San Marcos,
San Marcos, CA 92096; wneu.csusm.edu

Boris Tkach, College of Business Administration, California State University San Marcos,
San Marcos, CA 92096

ABSTRACT

Published academic research on group assignments focuses on their intended consequences in the form of a range of benefits that accrue to students. While a few researchers have raised negative consequences such as disparity in learning due to unequal participation (Batra et al. 1997) or specialization of labor (McCorkle et al. 1999), little attention has been directed at formally investigating the ways in which group assignments can result in negative or unintended consequences. In addition, Peter and Olson's (2008) consumer analysis framework suggests that, similar to marketing strategies, a comprehensive understanding of pedagogical strategies requires a thorough analysis of how they affect cognition, affect, and behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the unintended cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences of group assignments experienced by undergraduate business students.

The discovery-oriented method of grounded theory was used (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A homogeneous sample of 31 subjects was selected from two sections of an upper division Marketing Research class. Data collection combined the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) (Zaltman and Coulter 1995) with an in-person semi-structured interview. All 31 interviews were audio recorded and transcribed which resulted in approximately 400 pages of single-spaced interview data that were open coded.

Results reveal four salient behavioral consequences of group assignments. First, as students progress in their academic program they tend to form and activate, when possible, a group-specific social network. The group network consists of a set of individual students whose connections are based on beliefs about trustworthiness. Students form beliefs about other students' trustworthiness through prior direct experience and by observing their behaviors and physical cues. Second, division of labor is an inevitable aspect of group assignments and labor is divided in several different ways, two of which facilitate specialization of labor. Third, students provide labor by performing as one of five common group member types: the

leader, the "hamster," and the "closer," and those who create inequity and those who deal with it. Finally, while evaluating their peers, subjects in this study tend to bias their evaluation responses in three primary ways.

Results also indicate that students commonly associate group assignments with the concepts of autonomy, learning constraint, grade boost, and injustice. These cognitive associations then appear to stimulate common negative emotions of anxiety, frustration, stress, disappointment, and anger. The negative emotions can manifest prior to group formation and continue throughout the group assignment. Relief is the one positive emotional consequence that clearly emerged in this study. Relief commonly occurs upon project completion when students no longer anticipate future "misfortune" in the form of negative emotions they felt while completing the group assignment.

An overarching rationale for the integration of group assignments into undergraduate business curriculum is that they benefit students by enhancing learning and preparation for the world of work. However, given that the value of an educational experience is a tradeoff between the total benefits received for the total costs incurred (Zeithaml, 1988), greater research attention should be given to fully understanding the extent to which the costs of group assignments offset the benefits and for whom the costs are the greatest. The extent to which negative emotions are experienced may, in itself, be a reason to seriously consider the benefit-cost tradeoffs. The seriousness was raised by one student who explained that he had difficulty remembering the prior semester's course content but found very interesting how he could vividly explain the "emotional scars" that were left behind by his group assignments.