



Applying the Science of Persuasion to Education

WHAT IS PERSUASION?

Persuasion is a purposeful attempt at getting someone to adopt a new attitude or behavior. A component of psychological science, the science of persuasion identifies active ingredients of behavior change. These ingredients are widely used to promote health, conservation, and behavior change strategies developed in the consultation setting with individuals who desire change.¹⁻⁶ The science of persuasion has much to offer, but it is most often associated with inappropriate or manipulative use.

WHEN THE USE OF PERSUASION BECOMES QUESTIONABLE

Advertising regularly uses the science of persuasion to shape the attitudes and behaviors of consumers. The use of persuasion in this context is questionable as it often infringes on freedom of choice. For example, some advertising campaigns aim to make a product desirable to teens by having celebrities endorse the product or creating a perception that “cool” people have, use, or own the product. Persuasion used in such ways is problematic because it sets up a false dichotomy for teens, whereby teens feel they must choose between owning something that will make them

“cool” or being less cool because they do not possess the product. Another reason the use of persuasion in this way is questionable is because the recipients are typically unaware of the extent to which they are susceptible to such tactics.⁷ Taking advantage of teens in this manner is inappropriate, yet persuasion in the context of advertising often results in establishing this type of dichotomy.

PERSUASION TO EMPOWER

The potential of persuasion can be used to benefit the field of education. For example, persuasion has been a critical component of the movement to increase the number of women pursuing advanced degrees in STEM fields. There has been an overall increase in the percentage of advanced STEM degrees awarded in recent years. Although a greater percentage of males pursue advanced STEM degrees than women, increases among women have outpaced those of men.⁸ Presenting girls and women with images of women in STEM fields or with female role models can lead to shifts in how women view their own ability and desire to pursue such degrees.^{9,10} In this context, persuasion is used to empower women by providing them with an additional choice they may have inadvertently ruled out.

PERSUASION IN THE CLASSROOM

Employing the “Decoy Option”

Student choice is central to increasing feelings of autonomy.¹¹ The science of persuasion has found that offering a third less desirable option when a person is choosing between two can impact their decision in predictable and important ways.¹² In particular, the third option can lead students to recognize the initial options as more positive. This is referred to as the decoy option.

Imagine, for example, a teacher who wants to offer opportunities for group learning. The teacher asks students to work in groups to complete a multi-step project. In prior years, the teacher has provided students with two options for grading this work. One option is to assign grades for each student according to their contributions to the group. Another option is to supplement the first option (i.e., individual grades based on contributions to the group project) with an overall group grade as well. If, from the teacher’s experience, neither choice excites students, she could draw from persuasion science to offer a third option to improve how students feel about the initial two options. The third option might be to assign the entire group the same grade, no matter how much each student contributed. After testing this and monitoring whether the original choices are viewed as more appealing after adding in the less appealing option, the teacher can debrief and explain the technique of using a decoy option.

CONCLUSION

Persuasion is an option for behavior change that can foster empowerment and open new opportunities to learners. However, using concepts of persuasion to reduce freedom of choice and doing so with knowledge that the recipient is unaware of this influence is questionable. Our goal is to bring principles of persuasion into the context of education to help improve student achievement outcomes. We further hope that incorporating principles of persuasion into the education context will afford new opportunities for teaching about these techniques that influence behavior change. The outcome of these efforts includes, but is not limited to, protecting learners from being manipulated by these techniques in other contexts.

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