



The Science of Persuasion: How to get Students to Engage with Course Materials

Dr. Bridget M. Miller

One of the challenges of teaching is getting students to do the things you know will help them learn the material without always requiring it as a graded assignment. If they aren't going to earn points for class, how do we persuade students to engage with the material?



Robert Cialdini is a social psychologist who outlined six core principles of persuasion: reciprocity, liking, authority, scarcity, commitment/consistency, and consensus (1993). Many of the research studies and examples supporting the six principles originated in the business world. However, I often find myself being a salesperson in class as I try to “sell” my students on the benefits of attending class regularly, reading the assigned articles before coming to class, and participating in class discussions. Thus, I think you can apply these principles in the classroom to influence your students to voluntarily engage in the behaviors that will help them succeed in your course.

Reciprocity is the feeling of obligation that one has to respond in kind when somebody does something for you or gives you something. It is why non-profits give you free address labels when they are soliciting a donation – you are more likely to give them money to reciprocate for the address labels. I do not use a textbook in my undergraduate course. Instead, I supply students with a number of topic specific readings that I post to Brightspace. I explicitly communicate to them at the beginning of the term that by not requiring a textbook, I am saving them money. As such, they have no excuses for not keeping up with the reading.

Liking suggests that people are more likely to adhere to requests from someone they know and like. This principle explains the success of so many direct marketing sales programs like Tupperware, Mary Kay Cosmetics, and any one of a number of nutritional supplement products. The ‘liking’ principle also shows that we are more compliant to requests coming from people who are similar to us. I’m not suggesting that you become best friends with your students, but they are more likely to do what you ask if they can know something about you and see you as a real person. During introductions on the first day of class, I always highlight the fact that I grew up in a small, rural town in Nebraska and then went on to attend a large university where I didn’t know very many people (it’s background information about me but is also a similar college experience to many of my students). Also, if I see students at the Colvin Center, I will either say ‘hi’ if they are nearby or ask them about their workout the next day in class. I try to make sure I acknowledge that I recognize them from class.

Authority implies that we are more likely to follow the recommendations of someone who we consider an expert on the topic. Advertisements for most pharmaceuticals include a quote of

support from a medical doctor to give the drug credibility. In class, when you are introducing yourself at the beginning of the semester, be sure to point out how many times you have taught the course or how the content fits with your research area to subtly signal to students that you are a credible, knowledgeable authority.

Scarcity describes the motivation people feel to have something others do not. Collectors of baseball cards are driven to pay more for a card that is rare or hard to find. If only 15% of the class earned an A on the exam, then those high-achieving students are going to be more motivated to continue to work hard than if 60% of the class earned an A on the exam.

Commitment and consistency defines the need to act in a way that is predictable and aligns with previous actions or values. Many people in sales recognize that the path to a larger sale often involves the customer making a smaller purchase first. For students, making smaller voluntary (and public) commitments will increase adherence. For example, have your students write down the exact time blocks they are going to devote to studying for an upcoming exam and then share the information with a classmate.

Consensus (Social proof) is the process of acting in accordance with the behaviors of others (or at least what we ‘think’ other people are doing). It is why street performers will prime their tip jar with a couple dollars to encourage people to give them money. I find that students are much more likely to participate in class discussions if the norm of the class is to engage and talk. Most students don’t want to be the first (and only) person to answer the instructor’s questions. So, we need to create a safe environment where students are comfortable participating. Starting with smaller group discussions (think, pair, share) is also a way to get everyone talking. You can apply the same principle to reading for class – find ways to highlight that students who are not reading are exhibiting the less prevalent behavior.

Effective teaching is often about developing trust with your students and selling them on the benefits of positive academic behaviors like reading for class, engaging in class discussions, and asking questions.

References

Cialdini, R. B. (1993). *Influence: the psychology of persuasion*. New York: Quill William Morrow.

