

The Little White Lie: Twisting the Truth to Improve Student Motivation

Kacie York

Texas State University
601 University Dr.
San Marcos, TX. 78666
512-245-2130
Nes69@txstate.edu

Ryan G. Anderson

Texas State University
601 University Dr.
San Marcos, TX. 78666
512-245-3325
r_a461@txstate.edu

Bradley D. Borges

Texas State University
601 University Dr.
San Marcos, TX. 78666
512-245-7106
b_b518@txstate.edu

The Little White Lie: Twisting the Truth to Improve Student Motivation

Introduction

Learning is a critical component that takes place inside and outside of classroom settings. For example, students are given motivation from the age of three by getting told a ‘white lie’ from their parents. Expressing how great their project was; allowing their child to be proud of themselves, boost their self-confidence and motivation in a task (Heyman et al., 2009). Likewise, educators continuing where parents left off to create a learning environment actively involved in their academics will improve their interest in the class. Motivation can affect how students approach the school, instructors, or time and effort invested into a class; no matter how effective the instructor or curriculum is can affect the well-being of the entire course (Usher & Kober, 2012). Higher motivation increases academic performances, comprehension of a subject, and self-confidence in students (Usher & Kober, 2012). Motivation is difficult to find a specific meaning for; split up into two primary forms: intrinsic and extrinsic, that both have integrated benefits.

Intrinsic motivation comes from within an individual, enjoying something and gain personal satisfaction from it. Extrinsic motivation uses a tangible reward or expectation out of completing a task. Extrinsic motivation is beneficial because it achieves the student’s goals and earns a bonus of a reward in the end (Richards, 2006). If students are not motivated, it will not be easy to improve their pre-existing academic skills. A task can be encouraged by combining intrinsic and extrinsic factors, but students may be motivated differently between the two (Usher & Kober, 2012). Engaging the learning environment for students is unique for every student since the learning process can vary. Ensuring that students are motivated to benefit all students in the classroom is crucial to the learning environment overall.

A white lie is an intentional twist of the truth without malicious intentions (Bok, 1978). For decades, the purpose of telling a white lie was to avoid hurt feelings, boost confidence, and motivate individuals to do their best in a task. Motivation is vital to allow students to achieve their desired goals. However, it is problematic to get students interested and exceed expectations in the classroom. A little white lie can solve this problem by giving students the motivation to perform a particular task successfully.

How it Works

A little white lie was used in a postsecondary agricultural structures course that uses team-based learning. The instructor informed the teams that they would construct a project using the following instructions. Each team built a picnic table of their choice. The students had the last twenty minutes of class time to collaborate with their teams’ members on what types of materials, the design they want to create, and the overall budget of the materials needed. Students were required to inform the instructor about their materials, design, and funding at the end of the next class period, allowing the instructor to be aware of materials needed to secure between the end of class and the beginning of lab for the students to complete their picnic tables. Students were to complete their tasks promptly in the duration of the following three one-hour and fifty-minute laboratory classes.

The instructor announced to the teams before beginning their project. The projects would be looked at and decided upon for first and second-place winners. The first-place winner would be selected to be auctioned off at the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo gala and dictate how

the proceeds would be reinvested into the lab. The runner-up would partner with a local building supply store to sell their picnic table. The remaining picnic tables not selected would be sold to the general public.

The white lie was the two teams selected would go to the auction at the San Antonio Gala or partner with a local building supply store. It was used to see if turning a project into a competition boosts their motivation, increases the quality of products being constructed, and improves student engagement.

Results to Date

When the white lie came into effect, it boosted the student's motivation to construct projects with the best design and work together to achieve the top placing in the class. Furthermore, the student engagement and quality of products being developed as a result of the white lie led the instructor to tell the future classes the same white lie for their projects.

The white lie turned an average project into an astonishing one, motivating. Students communicated and collaborated with their team members on completing the project. Students exceeded expectations compared to just an average project—only two out of 12 picnic tables constructed were basic models that had been traditionally built in the class. Therefore, 85% of the teams exceeded the instructors' expectations for the project, using innovative and unique designs.

Future Plans & Recommendations

Learning is crucial, but not every student is interested in a topic taught in class. Telling little white lies to students improves their skills in communicating with individuals, teamwork, time management, knowledge of the task, and most importantly, collaborating for a successful project. I would recommend using white lies that create competition between students on team-based activities. This motivational white lie can be integrated into future plans for multiple agricultural courses such as construction, structures, floral design, and metal fabrication. Students can build custom metal gates, signs, floral arrangements, resulting in a reward for students by selling their projects or entering them in competitions as a little white lie.

Most team-based competitions require students to take on challenging tasks. Teams achieving the same goal motivate team members to be more cohesive and collaborate better. They are enhancing the thought process, communication, and collaboration between each individual. White lies are not to be used constantly in the class, but every once in a while, when a topic is not that interesting to your students, they boost motivation. White lies are not intended to affect students negatively but are to benefit their learning process.

Costs and Resources Needed

Costs associated with this innovative idea were minimal due to the materials purchased for the projects had already been calculated into the budget for the course. However, it should be noted the prices could vary based on student's elaborate designs. For instance, students added cup holders, used different dimensions of lumber, and other finishes on the Adirondack chairs. In addition, the students added hinges on picnic tables to fold into benches; some added potted plants in the middle of the picnic tables while others mounted bottle openers. No costs were associated with this innovative idea of a white lie.

References

- Bok, S. (1978). *Lying: moral choice in public and private life*. 57-61. Harvester Press.
- Heyman, G. D., Sweet, M. A., & Lee, K. (2009). Children's reasoning about lie-telling and truth-telling in politeness contexts. *Social Development, 18*(3), 728–746.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2008.00495.x>
- Richards, A. (2006). *Motivational strategies and student participation*. Education and Human Development Master's Theses. 360.
https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/ehd_theses/360
- Usher, A., & Kober, N. (2012). *Student Motivation: An Overlooked Piece of School Reform. Summary*.