



## Bias Bite #6: The Bandwagon Effect

BY SUE JIN KIM

### Overview

This mini-lesson is designed to help your students recognize and better understand the bandwagon effect. This cognitive shortcut can increase social cohesion by creating a sense of belonging and identity, but it may also suppress individuality and critical thinking in an effort by the individual to conform to group norms. The following activities will guide students in an exploration of the way the bandwagon effect works, when it happens, and most important, how to recognize it in themselves. By developing this self-awareness, students can become more open to different perspectives and engage in more thoughtful, civil discussions both in and out of the classroom.



## Driving Question

Why do people often support popular opinions?

## Objectives

- Explain the bias.
- Provide examples of the bias in practice.
- Construct strategies for overcoming and dealing with the bias.

## Materials Needed

- A popular song with lyrics or the "Sasquatch Music Festival 2009—Guy Starts Dance Party" video
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

## Bias Description

The bandwagon effect is a cognitive shortcut that leads individuals to adopt certain behaviors and beliefs, primarily because others are doing so. This phenomenon is fueled by the perception that the majority's actions or opinions are indicative of correctness or desirability, often resulting in individuals conforming to group norms.

### PROS AND CONS OF THE BIAS

#### Pros

- Can create a sense of belonging and group identity, which increases social cohesion
- Increases efficiency, especially when information is limited or time is constrained

#### Cons

- May suppress individuality and critical thinking as people conform to group norms
- Can lead to poor decision-making if decisions are based on the popularity of an idea rather than its merits

### REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF THE BIAS

- Students adopt a negative attitude toward performing well in a class when they base their decisions on their peers' opinions and don't form their own judgments.
- Some students buy certain brands of clothing or shoes mainly because everyone else is wearing them, rather than basing their choices on their own style preferences.

## Learning Activities

### OPEN

Have students write the name of the day's bias and the driving question on their Mental Notes graphic organizer.

### ACTIVATE

- **Activity 1:** Select a popular song with lyrics OR facilitate Activity 2. Select several confidants in the classroom and instruct them to begin singing and dancing to the song when the music starts. Play the song and encourage your students to sing along with the people who started the singing/dancing. Engage students in the reflection questions below.
- **Activity 2:** Show students the following video: "Sasquatch Music Festival 2009—Guy Starts Dance Party."

### Ask

- Why did few people sing and dance (in Activity 1) or dance (in Activity 2) at the beginning? Why did some people decide to join in?
- Did you observe a change in the initiators' behaviors? Why or why not? (For example, did the initiators sing less loudly or dance differently after a while?)
- Think about a time when you were on the bandwagon and a time when you were not.
- Have you ever been in the public minority when making a decision? How did being in the minority affect your confidence in your choice? Why?
- How do you feel when others approve of your actions? How does this affect your confidence and behavior?
- Which do you think is generally more influential: others' opinions or facts? Which would you prefer to have supporting your decision?

### EXPLAIN

- Describe the bandwagon effect and explain why it occurs. Tell students that there are many reasons why we are more likely to take on an idea—or "get on the bandwagon," so to speak—as it becomes more popular.
  - To begin, the bandwagon effect acts as a heuristic, or "rule of thumb," helping us make decisions more quickly than we might otherwise.
  - In addition, we often do not want to stand out in a group or feel like we don't belong, so many of us align ourselves with our group's behaviors and ideas.
  - Finally, we tend to accept the opinions of the majority because we have a desire to be on the side that "wins"—usually, the side that "wins" is the side with more people.



- Tell students that they can effectively deal with the bandwagon effect in the following ways.

- Intentionally slow down your decision-making.
- Make decisions in environments where you don't feel pressured by other people.
- Consider a range of diverse viewpoints and perspectives.

## **DISCUSS**

Divide students into groups and have them discuss the following questions:

- In what situations can the bandwagon effect be helpful? Harmful?
- When have you seen this bias in action?
- When are people most susceptible to this bias?
- How can people recognize when they are being affected by this bias?
- What are some ways to overcome and deal with this bias?
- What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve our relationships with others?

## **SYNTHESIZE AND CLOSE**

Ask each group to share what they discussed for at least 1 of the questions. Revisit the driving question and make sure students have responded to the driving question in their Mental Notes for the day..