



Challenging Conspiracy Theories

*Teaching
Aid*

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Challenging Conspiracy Theories

What is a conspiracy theory?

“A belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for an unexplained event.”

SOURCE: Concise Oxford English Dictionary, ninth edition

The world is full of challenging complexities, one of which is being able to identify fact from fiction. People are inundated with information from family, friends, community and online sources. Political, economic, cultural and other forces shape the narratives we are exposed to daily, and hidden relationships between these forces add to the complexity. Because of the psychological and emotional need to make sense of information and to understand why something has happened, some people may fall prey to conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories attempt to explain distressing events as the result of the actions of a small, powerful group collaborating to promote a sinister agenda.

Such explanatory models reject accepted narratives, and official explanations are sometimes regarded as further evidence of the conspiracy. Conspiracy theories build on distrust of established institutions and processes, and often implicate groups that are associated with negative stereotypes, including Jews, particularly during times of social unrest.¹

The Internet has given conspiracy theories, including anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, increased reach and a veneer of legitimacy. This includes a plethora of websites and social media accounts providing platforms for the proliferation of false ideas, such as Holocaust denial. This fertile environment for the growth and spread

of conspiracy theories presents teachers with a challenge: to guide students to identify, confront and refute such theories.

This teaching aid will look at how conspiracy theories function, how they may relate to anti-Semitism, and outline strategies to overcome them in the classroom. It provides pedagogical techniques to enable students to build their critical thinking skills as they investigate conspiracy theories and debunk them. One outcome of the technique is that students go through a tangible and experiential process that leads them organically to the realization that not all theories they read or hear are based on facts.

¹ M. Abalakina-Paap, W. S. Stephan, T. Craig and W. L. Gregory, “Beliefs in conspiracies”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1999, pp. 637-647.

Background

There are many different reasons why people may be attracted to conspiracy theories. Disasters or crises that directly impact people's lives (such as a car accident, terminal illness or terrorist attack) can lead them to search for reasons or someone to blame. An attempt to understand "why" an incident has occurred can relieve some of the pain and confusion. When people face complex situations, conspiracy theories can offer simple answers.

Disseminators of online extremist narratives use "push" factors to draw in young people who feel socially excluded and "pull" factors to lure them into feeling a sense of belonging. Push factors can include social, political and economic grievances; a sense of injustice and discrimination; personal crisis and tragedies; frustration; and alienation. Pull factors can include a sense of belonging to a cause, ideology or social

network; the need for power and control; and a sense of loyalty and commitment.²

A recent study demonstrated that conspiracy theories can be comforting for those who are afraid to change the status quo. "By blaming tragedies, disasters, and social problems on the actions of a malign few," the researchers conclude, "conspiracy theories can divert attention from the inherent limitations of social systems."³

For example, there are those who call global warming a hoax or scam propagated by the scientific establishment. Accepting the reality of climate change as a result of human activity would logically demand that we make changes to reduce or reverse this trend. These changes may have negative financial or other impacts on certain groups or individuals. In such cases, conspiracy theories can help people deal with cognitive dissonance

A conspiracy theory is defined by four characteristics:

"(1) a group (2) acting in secret (3) to alter institutions, usurp power, hide truth, or gain utility (4) at the expense of the common good."

SOURCE: Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press) 2014

– having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs or attitudes, especially as relating to behavioural decisions and attitude change.⁴

Conspiracy theories allow people to relinquish personal responsibility in the face of complex situations in which anyone would feel powerless. Research has shown that it is possible to increase someone's tendency towards conspiratorial thinking by removing the sense of personal control they have over their life. The opposite is also true: someone who feels a sense of personal power in their life will be more resilient to conspiracy theories.⁵

² Steven Lenos and Jordy Krasenberg, "Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories, and propaganda in the classroom," Ran Centre of Excellence, 29-30 November 2017, Budapest, <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_dealing_fake_news_conspiracy_theories_propaganda_classroom_29-30_11_2017_.pdf>.

³ Daniel Jolley, Karen Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, "Blaming a Few Bad Apples to Save a Threatened Barrel: The System-Justifying Function of Conspiracy Theories," in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 39, Issue 2 (April 2018), pp. 465-478.

⁴ See, for example: "Cognitive Dissonance", *Psychology Today*, <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/basics/cognitive-dissonance>>.

⁵ Kim Whitson et al., "Regulatory Focus and Conspiratorial Perceptions: The Importance of Personal Control", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1 June 2018.

Conspiracy rhetoric can feature all, or a combination of, the following points:

- No event is random;
- Everything that happens is the result of hidden intentions;
- Nothing is as it seems;
- Everything is secretly connected;
- Although all facts must be carefully scrutinized through criticism, facts that do not fit the thesis are ignored or denied.

SOURCE: Pierre-André Taguieff, *Court traité de complotologie*, Mille et une nuits, 2013

Conspiracy theories that target specific groups, such as Jews, can be rooted in and propagate an “us against them” mentality. The creators of the conspiracy theory view themselves as the norm, and their theory has placed the target population in a separate group that they view as “the other”. In many cases, the conspiracy theory attributes responsibility for a certain occurrence or a sequence of occurrences to the group they have designated as the “other”, which is looked upon as the enemy. This is one way in which conspiracy theories are put forward for malicious political reasons – to offer the public a scapegoat.

One of the best examples of an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that still has widespread impact in the world today began with the 1903 publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion in a Russian newspaper*.⁶ It is one of the most widely distributed forgeries in history, purporting to record a Jewish plan for world domination. The Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe during World War II was also carried out based

in part on a conspiratorial idea of Jewish power.

Jews have historically been made a target of conspiracy theories, going back to the medieval idea of “blood libel”. In many formulations, the “Jews” or “Zionists” are claimed to form a powerful, global cabal that manipulates governments, media, banks, the entertainment industry and other institutions for malevolent purposes.

Anti-Semitic defamation frequently manifests itself through a conspiratorial worldview. For example, on both the political left and right, there are people who falsely claim that Jews planned the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. Today, claims of Jewish control of and fascination with finances, or depictions of Jews as wealthy, powerful, and menacing are

For a timeline on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, see the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007244.

For an update on currently circulating conspiracy theories, see the Conspiracy Watch website (in French): www.conspiracywatch.info.

found in references to “Rothschild money”, or the identification of a Jewish conspiracy with international banking and criminality. Recently, new conspiracy theories have emerged that falsely allege Jewish involvement in the European refugee crisis.⁷

⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion>>.

⁷ Péter Krekó et al., “‘Migrant Invasion’ as a Trojan Horseshoe”, in Péter Krekó et al. (eds.), *Trust within Europe* (Budapest: Political Capital, 2015), pp. 63-72, <http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_OSIFE_Trust_Within_Europe_web.pdf>.

“By teaching children analytic thinking skills along with the insight that societal problems often have no simple solutions, by stimulating a sense of control, and by promoting a sense that one is a valued member of society, education is likely to install the mental tools that are needed to approach far-fetched conspiracy theories with a healthy dose of scepticism.”

SOURCE: Jan-Willem Van Prooijen, “Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories”, *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 50-58.

A different, but related, anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that still exists today can be called the “Holocaust Hoax”, which represents a belief that the Jewish people have invented or exaggerated the Holocaust in order to gain political or financial advantage. This argument is used by Holocaust deniers, who claim that the evidence was fabricated by people working for World Jewry.⁸ The ODIHR teaching aid no. 6, “Addressing Holocaust Denial, Distortion and Trivialization” provides more information on how to deal with this particular fabrication.

Social media platforms have become essential tools for those who wish to harass Jews and spread disinformation or hate. They play an extensive role in the spread of conspiracy theories, which can also have an impact on efforts to uphold human rights and democratic values.

Education about conspiracy theories is important both for understanding anti-Semitism and for preventing extremism. Educators should guide students to develop media and information literacy competences that

will enable them to identify and reject anti-Semitic representations, extremist claims and conspiracy theories or calls to reject democratic values. It is important that learners be able to identify these elements as such, even against a background of emotional imagery or reference to suffering. Media and information literacy helps to build learners’ critical thinking skills and resilience to the allure of simplistic explanations provided by conspiracy theories and extremist propaganda.

⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Holocaust Deniers and Public Misinformation”, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/holocaust-deniers-and-public-misinformation>>.

Strategies for Addressing Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom

Easy, simple answers, such as those offered by conspiracy theories, can provide some false comfort when dealing with a frightening situation. Teachers can help students understand and articulate their emotions and needs, provide them reassurance and

open them up to the possibility of a “reality check” on their ideas about who or what is to blame. This will make it easier for them to learn how language or images can be used to manipulate emotions – especially at stressful times.

Looking beyond the words

When students offer a generalization or perception about another’s behaviour, ask them what the evidence for that statement is or how they know it is true. “Did X say those actual words? Could there

be another explanation for what X said or did?”

Students can sometimes think in “black and white.” A teacher can introduce the idea of “shades of grey.” Encourage students to look for red

flags, such as exaggerations – “We are the only people that have the answer or will tell you the truth”, or absolutist statements using words such as all, every, none, everybody, never, no-one and always.

To prevent vulnerability to conspiracy theories, it is important to teach students analytical skills and how to seek out a variety of different sources.

Activity

Use examples to debunk conspiracy theories

- Have students work in teams to investigate the origins of a stereotype and/or conspiracy theory; the most likely outcome is that they will realize there is not enough evidence to support the

stereotype or conspiracy theory and will be able to debunk it;

- During the investigation, have students list examples to demonstrate the negative impact of conspiracy theories;
- Create learning partnerships among students to create shared responsibility by work-

ing together and processing information together; and

- Encourage students to see how narratives change over time, turning one truthful element taken out of context into a simplistic, stereotypical view.

They will be more likely to continue to use this active investigative skill set, as they are exposed to other conspiracy theories, and they will be less likely to develop stereotypical thinking and prejudice that can draw them towards extreme or fanatical viewpoints.

What to do if ...?

...a student shares an idea linked to a conspiracy theory?

The student might simply be repeating a notion that they heard somewhere in or outside school, without being convinced of the ideology that underpins the theory. Nevertheless, it is still important to address the idea in a way that stops it proliferating and that develops students' resilience to other conspiratorial influences.

It is important not to immediately assert that the student is wrong, as this can cause the student to become defensive or ashamed. The student may have been thinking in terms framed by loyalty

to a simplistic group opinion seen as fashionable or humorous. It is important, first of all, to create a space for dialogue where the students feel comfortable expressing their ideas. This will help you to understand the key arguments that are most likely to lead the student to reconsider her/his position without fear of being judged.

Once a relationship of trust exists, the teacher will be able to use factual elements to probe the student's knowledge and motivate her/him to consider new ways of thinking about the situation. For this to be effective, it is a good idea to use questions rather than statements and, as much as possible, to base these questions on facts (see the source verification checklist, below).

Source verification checklist

As a potential research assignment, ask the class to investigate the sources of a piece of information, and other opposing (factual) sources, using the source verification checklist.

- CHECK THE SOURCE:**
Where is the news posted?
What kind of website is it? Can you see who is posting it?
- CHECK THE AUTHOR:**
Any serious source must reveal its author.
- READ BEYOND THE HEADLINE:**
Headlines are sometimes used
- CHECK OTHER SUPPORTING SOURCES:**
Check out the links indicated as sources and try to verify their legitimacy, as well.
- ASK AN EXPERT:**
Advice from a more knowledgeable person – such as a teacher, librarian or museum representative – can help to clarify the information.
- USE FACT-CHECKING WEBSITES:**
Encyclopaedias; Factcheck.org; the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

Digital literacy is the ability to find and evaluate information online, distinguishing what is true and what is false. It combines critical thinking skills, such as source verification, with new knowledge about how the digital world works, how search engines function. Using the source verification checklist, students can analyze verifiable sources of information on the Holocaust, for example.

...during online research, a student comes across information that leads her/him to a conspiracy theory?

Using online search engines can easily and quickly lead a student to false, and even dangerous, information. If they choose to search images instead of news, it is even more likely that they will end up on a website used to disseminate hate propaganda. To prevent students' vulnerability to such information, it is important to develop their digital literacy and capacity to distinguish credible sources of information through independent thought.

The searches they enter will also have an impact on the search results. For example, entering "Jews control the world" will bring up hundreds of anti-Semitic images, many of which will lead directly to hate group websites. The ODIHR teaching aid no. 9, "Dealing With Online Anti-Semitism" can be helpful for cases where digital literacy is essential to discern credible sources from false or misleading sources.

The conspiracy expert, Joseph Uscinski from the University of Miami, explains how he asks students to design their own conspiracy theory: "The crazier the better." His students are asked to gather all their information from the Internet. Once they string the evidence together they usually have a fairly convincing case. Each student must then present the theory to another student, who must debunk it. According to Professor Uscinski, the students can get quite attached to their theory and do not like being told they are wrong. Such theories can connect to their worldview about truth, power and identity, revealing some underlying prejudices.

During such exercises, the potential consequences of these invented or other circulating conspiracy theories can also be explored: distrust, paranoia, fear, hate, isolating oneself or isolating a group, making bad choices, hostility, violence against the supposed conspirers and so on. For example, one effect of the "anti-vaxxer" movement is the spread of childhood diseases that had essentially been eradicated. One effect of climate change deniers' activity is that efforts to put more responsible policies in place are being halted or diminished.

It is important to allocate sufficient time for such exercises. This is to ensure that students have the chance to thoroughly analyze how a conspiracy theory is constructed and notice the particular characteristics highlighted by authors on the topic.

SOURCE: An interview with Professor Joseph Uscinski published by Steve Kolowich in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "What does this Professor Know About Conspiracy Theorists that We Don't?", 6 August 2018.

Mémorial de la Shoah, France

The Shoah Memorial (Mémorial de la Shoah) has developed educational workshops for teachers and students on the topic of conspiracy theories on social media and their links to anti-Semitism. Based on examples taken from social media (messages, photo-montages and videos), the participants learn to identify and deconstruct conspiracy theories and related false representations and stereotypes. The workshops aim to stimulate critical thinking and active engagement, and to encourage fact-checking and caution in dealing with online messages.

For more information:

www.memorialdelashoah.org/pedagogie-et-formation/activites-pour-le-secondaire/ateliers-pedagogiques.html

Resources and Materials for Further Reading

To learn more about currently circulating conspiracy theories, refer to the Conspiracy Watch website (in French):

www.conspiracywatch.info.

To learn more about the history of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion:

www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007244.

Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press: September 2014).

Pierre-André Taguieff, *Court traité de complotologie* (Mille et Une Nuits: April 2013).

“Conspiracy theories, intuitions and critical thinking” from the Oxford Education Blog;

<https://educationblog.oup.com/theory-of-knowledge/conspiracy-theories-intuitions-and-critical-thinking-part-1>.

The Oxford Education blog also suggests some activities for addressing conspiracy theories in the classroom;

<https://educationblog.oup.com/theory-of-knowledge/conspiracy-theories-intuitions-and-critical-thinking-part-2>.

Steven Lenos and Jordy Krasenberg, “Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories, and propaganda in the classroom”, Ran Centre of Excellence, 29-30 November 2017, Budapest;

https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_dealing_fake_news_conspiracy_theories_propaganda_classroom_29-30_11_2017_.pdf.

Stanford History Education Group, Civic Online Reasoning;

<https://sheg.stanford.edu/civic-online-reasoning>.

