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Teaching a Conspiracy Theory Unit to High School Students: Learning to Debunk Misinformation

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By Claire Breiholz and Rebecca Smith

With the omnipresence of technology and social media, students are increasingly exposed to misinformation and conspiracy theories that are harmful to democracy and civil society. Students are also regularly exposed to *alternative facts*, and they need to be taught skills to critically consume information. Social media appears to be a key platform for *fake news*. According to the Pew Research Center, 18 percent of US adults get their political news from social media (Mitchell et al. 3). Because of the saturation of news on social media, "we are all susceptible to the seduction of false or deliberately manipulative internet content and should be vigilant and humble rather than confident about our ability to detect it" (Gourguechon). Teachers can serve as the conduit for helping iGen students—born after 1995 into a technology-rich world—understand and navigate the overwhelming amount of information they consume daily (Twenge).

In an effort to assess students' critical thinking and digital literacy, MindEdge Learning surveyed just over one thousand Americans and examined how well respondents could locate faulty information. In 2019, "only [7 percent] of the respondents scored an 'A' on the test, answering eight or nine questions correctly. Three quarters of millennial respondents received an 'F' grade" (Gourguechon). Similarly, McGrew et al. found that iGen students are unable to distinguish between reliable information and misinformation. As teachers, it is our responsibility to help students practice assessing information for its validity so that we can better equip them to both seek accurate information and to be civically engaged.

The purpose of this article is to summarize an instructional unit taught to high school students that used conspiracy theories to teach skills for debunking misinformation. This article will provide a brief overview of the psychology behind conspiracy theories and provide an overview of how a conspiracy theory unit can be culturally responsive. We will summarize the unit's goals and learning objectives and provide a unit plan template that integrates culturally responsive pedagogy. We will also include a list of the conspiracy theories students chose to research and teacher perceptions on the student impact of this unit. This article provides a practical and research-based framework to help educators navigate teaching students to become critical consumers of information.

Author Positionality

We approach this work from both a practitioner and an academic lens. This article was written while Claire was a first-year high school English teacher; Rebecca was previously her professor and student-teaching supervisor, and she was a prior high school English teacher herself. We have found rich professional growth in our collaborations, and we felt that exploring methods for teaching students to be critical consumers of information, particularly related to conspiracy theories and misinformation, was a meaningful and relevant topic to dive into collectively. This article is written from the practitioner lens, utilizing the first person "I" perspective with the intention of speaking directly to our teacher colleagues who join us in this important and challenging work.

The Cognitive Allure of Misinformation

Why do people fall victim to misinformation and ultimately conspiracy theories? Karen Douglas, PhD, explains three motives for falling into the conspiracy theory trap: (1) epistemic motives, (2) existential motives, and (3) social motives. Epistemic motives relate to an individual's need to have information that explains an event. Douglas explains, "Conspiracy theories appear to provide broad, internally consistent explanations that allow people to preserve beliefs in the face of uncertainty and contradiction" (539). Individuals want to know the truth, and they also want to be certain of this truth. Second, existential motives refer to the human desire for safety and security in their world. People also want to feel in control and powerful, so when they are feeling powerless, they are more likely to be drawn to conspiracy theories (Douglas). Finally, social motives refer to an individual's need to belong and have a positive self-regard. A person who engages in conspiratorial thinking may view themselves as holding a position of power over others who do not have the same knowledge (Douglas). If educators can understand the psychology behind this conspiratorial thinking, they can more effectively help students debunk misinformation.

The motivation for my own exploration of conspiracy theories came when one student attempted to promote a conspiracy about the 2020 election—that Joe Biden stole the election and twelve-year-olds were casting ballots in Arizona. We were ending a political cartoon unit, and I simply complimented the student's cartoon and moved the class forward. In that moment, days before the inauguration of Joe Biden as president of the United States, I was desperate to keep the classroom calm and civil, but looking back, this could have become a moment for impromptu research and source evaluation. The student's comment made me think: Without exposing my students to the intricacies of my personal politics, how can I engage students in becoming critical thinkers about popular conspiracy theories? Without a doubt, teaching is a political profession, and teachers armed with the psychology of conspiracy theories, in addition to effective methods for teaching about misinformation, can help students engage in current events and conspiratorial thinking without putting themselves in compromising positions.

Debunking Conspiracy Theories as a Culturally Responsive Method

English language arts (ELA) teachers are uniquely situated to address misinformation and media consumption because the curriculum provides many opportunities for students to evaluate online information (Korona). A culturally responsive teacher is called to include relevant information that connects to students' lives (Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*), and debunking conspiracy theories is relevant as they are entrenched in the media. Geneva Gay advocates that "dealing directly with controversy... [and] contextualizing issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender" is also essential to culturally

responsive teaching ("Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teachings" 108). A safe and equitable school helps students develop their moral and civic positions, and debunking conspiracy theories in this environment can help heal some of our cultural divisions (Ross et al.). Teaching high school students in the midst of a contentious political environment, in addition to a global pandemic and multiple social justice movements, I felt it was imperative to embed in my curriculum both content and skills that would help my students develop as conscientious citizens and critical consumers of information.

Developing a Conspiracy Theory and Misinformation Unit

Questions to Ask Before Planning for Instruction

When planning a unit, it is paramount for culturally responsive educators to first consider their student body. Every school community is unique, and a culturally responsive practitioner must be engaged with their school's cultural make-up (Hammond). As such, the proposed unit outline should be adjusted to meet the needs of each specific community and help the teacher address their own implicit bias (Hammond). I suggest teachers ask themselves the following questions as they plan for instruction:

- What are my students' interests?
- How am I going to incorporate their interests into the unit and assessment(s)?
- Are there any topics that should be avoided to be sensitive to possible student trauma?
- How will I design space for students to investigate conspiracy theories while also privileging proven facts?
- Do I have any biases that need to be addressed before teaching the unit? Are there any topics that are potentially triggering or upsetting for me or my students that I should be aware of?
- How will I protect myself from potential caregiver/school backlash? Will my administrators support me if community concerns arise?

In addition to these questions, teachers should allot time for students to brainstorm norms that will help maintain a positive and safe environment during this unit given that the topic of conspiracy theories is contentious.

Context, Positionality, & Rationale

My rationale for choosing to teach and develop a conspiracy theory unit was based first in my commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy and my desire to bring current events and student interests to the forefront. As a young, first-year teacher, I experience news and social media similarly to my students, and I know firsthand how easy it is to find misinformation. I was also teaching a group of twelfth graders during a highly divisive political moment, in the midst of a global pandemic. I am committed to equity-based teaching, and with my students heading into the world as adults, I felt it critical to give them the skills needed to participate in democratic society and also the skills to effectively identify misinformation. I did hold my breath throughout the whole unit, fearful of pushback from parents or administrators, but a careful unit design, a focus on student autonomy in choosing their own topics, and deliberate attention to requiring students to use credible research resources helped this unit be a success.

Unit Overview

Given that my priority is providing culturally responsive instruction, the basis for this unit plan was connecting to students' lives and also providing student choice. Saifer et al. explain that "students are most likely to be engaged in learning when they are active and given some choice and control over the learning process—and when the curriculum is individualized, authentic, and related to their interests" (211). As such, the beginning of my unit

was frontloaded with background information and basic skill building so that students could spend the majority of the unit engaging with their chosen conspiracy theory and research question.

I designed the unit to start by defining basic terms such as truth, fact, opinion, post-truth, and conspiracy theory. I used the Oxford Languages Word of the Year 2016 "Post-Truth" article to help contextualize the growing conversation around misinformation and conspiracy theories since the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. In an effort to avoid ostracizing students, I located an informational video from Great Blue Hill (GBH) public broadcasting—"5 Reasons Why Conspiracy Theories Thrive in Politics"—to help students understand how conspiracy theories gain traction and authority. The 2020 Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* also provides information for how misinformation is spread during the digital age, which nicely complements the background information on political conspiracies in the GBH video.

Because my student body is highly involved in sports, I used the conspiracy about James Jordan, Michael Jordan's father, as my introduction. This conspiracy theory raises questions about James Jordan's murder and possible motivations people had for killing him. During the height of Michael Jordan's fame in the 1990s, Michael Jordan was in conflict with the NBA over alleged unethical gambling, so some think this could have played a role in the murder. James Jordan died in 1993, so the proximity of the conspiracy theory to my students' lives also made it an accessible starting point. I chose to present the conspiracy theory from a podcast episode, "Drugs, Lies & Conspiracies: The Murder of James Jordan," which gives an overview of the theory and also contextualizes Michael Jordan's conflict with the NBA in the 1990s. I played the forty-five-minute podcast during class time, and students took notes and completed a corresponding worksheet.

After the whole-class exploration of conspiracy theories, I planned for students to choose a theory to research. Wikipedia has a list of popular conspiracy theories that I located to give students a starting place. Using Wikipedia as a starting place for ideas can lead to conversations about the efficacy of the website and effective ways to use it. After some preliminary research on their chosen theory, the unit guides teachers to instruct students on how to write a research question, create an annotated bibliography, and locate high-quality sources.

Following the research portion, students had the opportunity to create a research paper in which they took a position on their research question. I used templates from Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* to teach how writing is a conversation. The templates also provide a high-quality scaffold for elements of writing, such as developing thesis statements, introducing quotations, and addressing naysayers. Figures 1–5 are slides that I used to teach thesis statement writing. The templates used are from *They Say/I Say*. I like the thesis/introduction templates from *They Say/I Say* because they help students break away from the

Figure 1: Explanation of academic writing

Academic Writing 101

- Academic writing is all about engaging in a larger conversation about a topic
- The key to successful academic writing is expressing your ideas as a response to some other person or group. You want to be "deeply engaged in some way with other people's views."
  - This creates the "They say / I say" format
  - Ex. "They say that dogs are the best pet, but I say that cats are the best pet."

Figure 2: Discussion of engaging in larger conversation

Academic Writing 101

- Argumentative/persuasive writing is driven by disagreement, but that doesn't mean that there is no agreement between the "They say / I say"
- Examples
  - She argues ___, and I agree because ___.
  - Her argument that ____ is supported by new research showing that ___.
  - He claims that ____, and I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I agree that ___. On the other hand I still insist that ____.

Figure 3: Retyped template from They Say/I Say

Academic Writing 101

In recent discussions of ___, a controversial issue has been whether ___. On the one hand, some argue that ___. From this perspective, ___. On the other hand, however, others argue that ___. In the words of ___, one of this view's main proponents, "___." According to this view, ___. In sum, then, the issue is whether ___ or ___.

My own view is that ___. Though I concede ___, I still maintain that ___. For example, ___. Although some might object that ___, I would reply that ___. The issue is important because ___.

Figure 4: Model paragraph about unrelated topic written by Claire

Academic Writing 101

Example Paragraph: They say that dogs are the best, I say that cats are the best.

In recent discussions of what the best house pet is, a controversial issue has been whether cats or dogs are the best. On the one hand, some argue that dogs can go on more adventures outside compared to cats. From this perspective, dogs are more versatile. On the other hand, however, some argue that cats are snugglier and more compact compared to the average dog. In the words of Mr. Cat, one of this view's main proponents, "Cats are lovers." According to this view, cats seek to love humans. In sum, then, the issue is whether cats or dogs make better pets.

My own view is that cats are the best pet. Though I concede dogs are better adventurers, I still maintain that cats have more benefits. For example, cats are easier to clean-up after because they use a litter box. Although some might object that litter boxes are disgusting, I would reply that picking up dog poop is grosser. The issue is important because it shows that cats are lower maintenance and this adds to their pros as the best house pet.

Figure 5: Instructions for how to develop they say/I say from research with example using a conspiracy theory that was not chosen by any students in the class

Academic Writing 101

1. Figure out your "I say."
   a. Now that you have completed your research, what is your stance on your conspiracy theory?
2. Once you know your "I say," what would "they say" about your stance?
   a. Example:
      i. Conspiracy: The circumstances of Princess Diana's death were suspicious and planned.
      ii. They Say: Princess Diana was killed by the royals.
      iii. I Say: Princess Diana's death was a tragic accident and not a conspiracy to protect the royal family's reputation.

three-prong thesis and from the notion that a thesis statement should be only one sentence. I used the provided template to create a model paragraph; I used an unrelated topic—cats are better than dogs—so that students would not simply copy what I had done. Using an unrelated, low-stakes topic also helped me avoid revealing any personal beliefs.

After writing a first draft, students engaged in a peer-review process. Following final revisions, students presented a "Best Hits Presentation" to their peers. For the presentation, students shared their conspiracy theory, their position, two points of evidence supporting their position, and one fact they found interesting. I gave students a notecard on which to record this information. See Table 1 (pages 22—23) for a detailed unit plan template on conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Teacher Perception of Impact on Students

Based on student feedback during and after the unit, it appeared that using conspiracy theories was an effective method for teaching students to be critical consumers of information. Overall, students expressed that the unit helped them understand the importance of research and source evaluation; students also noted the unit helped them better understand that arguments are nuanced and complicated. In particular, students expressed that writing a counterargument reinforced that arguments have multiple sides. There were several other apparent impacts on student learning, including welcoming diverse perspectives, teaching students to justify and defend their views with high-quality resources, and improving academic writing, which are each explored in more detail below.

Maintaining an Inclusive and Supportive Environment

One impact of this unit was empowering students to be the drivers of their topic and of their research, and choice is part of my pedagogy as a culturally responsive educator. See Table 2 (page 24) for the student-chosen conspiracy theories. Though hesitant at the onset, I gave students the choice to either prove or disprove their chosen conspiracy theory with the caveat that they could change their position if needed during the writing process. My hesitancy came from my fear of causing harm by allowing students to prove a conspiracy theory that was rooted in racism or other -isms and phobias. To combat this fear, I proactively frontloaded the unit with an overview on misinformation and the psychology of conspiracy theories. I also did not want to alienate any students by making them feel inferior for potentially having subscribed to conspiratorial thinking in the past or present or having family members who still do. By doing this frontloading as a class, I effectively avoided having students aim to prove harmful conspiracy theories.

Justifying a Theory with High-Quality Resources

A second perceived impact of this unit on students was their improved capacity to defend their position on their chosen conspiracy theory with high-quality resources. The few students who sought to prove their conspiracy theory chose more popular (and less harmful) theories such as Area 51, Bigfoot, and the 2002 Western Conference Finals when NBA executives and officials were accused of rigging the games. One student, however, chose to prove the flat-earther conspiracy is true. At first, I was ambivalent, but then they explained that they did not personally believe the flat-earth theory, and they wanted to get inside of the mind of someone who did. This student worked hard to find reputable sources that proved the earth's flatness but came to realize that the websites themselves presented information that was downright illogical. Nonetheless, the student wrote an essay from the point of view of a flat-earther and later reflected that the experience was incredibly challenging but

rewarding to learn researching skills. Other students expressed similar trouble with finding high-quality sources that could be used to prove things such as the inefficacy of vaccines. These experiences as researchers led to conversations about *why* it was difficult to locate high-quality sources for conspiracy theories and the overall importance of source evaluation (author, website, and content).

Quality of Academic Writing

A third perceived impact of this unit was that students also learned how to bring their writing into conversation with others. By using *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, students understood that all writing is a conversation between their position and another's. As such, students developed sophisticated thesis statements that contextualized the issue at hand while explaining both sides and then ultimately stating their own stance. This understanding of academic writing as a dialogue will serve students not only as future writers but also as participants in civil discourse. In a historically partisan and divisive time, one of my goals was to help students see that they must always engage with their opposition civilly, and they must also seek to understand their opponent's stance. In their essays and their research, it was apparent that these goals were largely met.

Call to Action

Understandably, teachers may be concerned about teaching with conspiracy theories given the political tensions in the United States. However, teaching conspiracy theories actually reaches across the aisle in an attempt to unite people in accurate, scientific, and factual information; thus, teachers are working to "become more inclusive, antiracist, and nuanced, which is exactly what our students need in a time that is so divisive" (Breiholz and Smith 27). Debunking conspiracy theories and exploring misinformation

in a school setting can provide a safe and scaffolded environment in which students can learn the research process and acquire skills to effectively evaluate sources. Given that the unit is based in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teachers are also equipped to address questions about their instructional choices; if teaching to the standards is important, and teachers are addressing these standards, then teachers should be given the freedom to plan curriculum that is culturally relevant (Saifer).

Moreover, if we as a society hope to address urgent political, environmental, and social crises, teachers and schools must act with haste. Now is not the time to sit idly by when teachers can be addressing global, domestic, and local concerns in their standards-based instructional planning. Bringing conspiracy theories into the classroom does not give misinformation validity, but it instead empowers students to participate in civil discourse and arm themselves with factual information. Teachers can be the catalysts for healing a hurt and broken world by developing curriculum that helps students engage with civil society.

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Table 1: Conspiracy Theory Unit Plan (template modified from Mirra)

Essential Questions/Enduring Understandings
Essential Questions • How is misinformation spread? • Why is it important to study conspiracy theories and to debunk them? • How can individuals help combat the spread of misinformation? Enduring Understandings • It is critical that individuals do thorough research and review of sources to determine the best information available. • Combating misinformation is paramount for the functioning of a democratic society. • Misinformation and conspiracy theories have negative consequences when they persist.
Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
• Reading • Writing • Speaking/Listening • Language
CCSS (Grades 11–12)
Reading informational texts • Cite strong and thorough textual evidence • Analyze the presentation and development of ideas in a text • Determine an author's point of view or purpose by analyzing their rhetoric and style Writing • Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of texts • Write informative/explanatory texts that examine complex ideas • Engage in the writing process • Conduct sustained research projects • Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, avoid plagiarism, and follow standard format for citation • Write routinely over extended time frames Speaking and Listening • Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions • Integrate multiple sources of information to draw conclusions and evaluate source material • Present information, findings, and supporting evidence • Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks Language • Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking • Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words • Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases
Culturally Responsive Focus
Students will choose a conspiracy theory to research. Teacher will provide supports in the form of possible options, but student interest will drive the project. In addition, students are involved in sports, so James Jordan's death and Michael Jordan will be the "anchor conspiracy theory."

Summative Assessment(s)
• First, students will create an annotated bibliography with a minimum of 10 sources. Sources must include a variety of top-level domains, in addition to sources that aim to prove or dis-prove their conspiracy theory. Their research will be based on a research question. • Second, students will write paper on a conspiracy theory of their choosing. Their paper must be a minimum of 5 pages using a minimum of 5 sources from their annotated bibliography. Students will develop a they say/I say thesis statement to guide their position on their re-search question. Their paper will either be in support of or in question of their conspiracy theory. Students will participate in a peer-review process while drafting their paper. After completing the paper, students will present a "Best Hits Presentation" of their essay, explaining and defending their position on the theory to their peers, sharing what they discovered in the research, and answering any questions from their peers.

Text Set

Nonfiction (newspaper/magazine/blog articles, speeches, informational texts)

- Oxford Languages Word of the Year 2016—"Post-Truth"
- Student dependent research
- Wikipedia list of popular conspiracy theories

Multimedia (film clips, online content, podcasts)

- The Social Dilemma, Netflix original film
- "Drugs, Lies & Conspiracies: The Murder of James Jordan," The Score: Behind the Headlines
- "5 Reasons Why Conspiracy Theories Thrive in Politics," GBH
- "Speaking of Psychology: Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories, with Karen Douglas, PhD," Speaking of Psychology
- OWL Purdue resources on annotated bibliographies, annotations, and citations

Authors

- Student dependent research

What do students need to know and be able to do in order to successfully complete the summative assessment?	
Content	Skills
• Conspiracy theory information, defini-tion, history • Annotated bibliography over-view/formatting • Psychology of conspiracy theories • Research methods • Spread of misinformation in the Digital Age • Post-truth in the 21st century • They say/I say writing formula by Birkenstein and Graff • Historic and modern conspiracy theo-ries, such as James Jordan conspiracy theory and Michael Jordan background information	• Define conspiracy theory • Define truth • Define fact • Define opinion • Define post-truth • Write a research question • Compare facts and opinions • Apply post-truth to the 21st century • Conduct research and refine searches • Write an annotated bibliography • Use MLA format for in-text citations and Works Cited • Write an extended paper (5+ pages) • Develop a they say/I say thesis statement • Write a counterargument

Table 2: Student-chosen conspiracy theories

- Vaccines and autism
- Bigfoot
- Freemasonry
- Flat earth
- 9/11 as an inside job
- Malaysia airlines flight MH370
- *Apollo 11* moon landing
- Michael Jordan's suspension from the NBA
- Murder of Jennifer Cave
- COVID-19 and 5G
- 2002 Western Conference Finals
- Alternative medicine suppression
- Area 51
- Wendigos/Native American folklore
- Former President Park Geun-hye of South Korea and secret adviser Choi Soon-sil
- Chemtrails

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