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Teaching Conspiracy Theorists

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On the surface, a conspiracy theory may seem like misinformation regarding a specific subject. Details about a certain conspiratorial event or position may be correct, but the core of the conspiracy theory is a lie. For example, Joseph Uscinski et al. estimate that 30 percent of Americans believe that the media overhyped the problems of COVID−19 to destroy the reputation of Donald Trump, who was then president of the United States.[1] However, COVID−19 is a health problem in the United States: as of 2022, over a million Americans have died of COVID−19. COVID−19 causes fever, nausea and vomiting, debilitating muscle and body pains, headaches, a loss of taste, and shortness of breath.[2] While those who believe the conspiracy theory are correct about the inordinate amount of attention COVID−19 received from television news (especially CNN and MSNBC), they are incorrect when they assume news coverage was designed to take down the Trump presidency. If anything, Donald Trump, who initially scheduled regular media briefings on COVID, talked about how COVID−19 was a hoax (it is not) and how it was nothing more than the "common flu," which is also untrue.[3] If anything, Trump courted the media and gave misleading information. As a result, Trump's ignorance about COVID−19 (and other issues) ultimately led to him losing the election.

According to J. Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood, over 50 percent of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory.[4] This is a problem, since believing in conspiracy theories can lead Americans to forego vaccinations, such as the COVID−19 vaccine, mistrust objective research, and act out violently (such as what occurred on January 6, 2021, when Trump supporters, believing he had won the election, stormed the Capitol building). Moreover, it can divide Americans by

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1. Joseph E. Uscinski et al., "Why Do People Believe Covid−19 Conspiracy Theories? ," *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, Special Issue on COVID−19 and Misinformation Received (April 2020): 1.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Covid Data Tracker Weekly Review," August 19, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/.

3. Uscinski et al., "Why Do People Believe Covid−19 Conspiracy Theories? ," 3.

4. J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *The American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 956.

othering either the conspiracy theorists who have a specific belief or the non-conspiracy theorists who do not believe in conspiracies.

While there are academic articles on conspiracy theories, there is a dearth of academic articles about what happens when American college students voice conspiracy theories in the classroom or in their papers. Those who teach at the college level need to know how to address conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists. Thus, the questions this paper seeks to explore include the following: What conspiracy theories have circulated in the United States? How can college professors address students who believe in conspiracy theories? Is it possible for conspiracy theorists to give up their beliefs? After all, because conspiracists can find justifications for the adoption of conspiracy theories, it is difficult to help them see the lies that are a part of these conspiracy theories.

The conspiracy theories addressed in this paper include the "no go" zones in European countries; the U.S. government's creation of AIDS to kill black people; the conspiracy theories regarding the "gay agenda"; and the conspiracy theory regarding the 2020 presidential election. This paper is written from the viewpoint of a teacher who has discovered that two of her students believe in conspiracy theories. The conspiracies she discusses are actual conspiracies the author has had to deal with in the classroom. By creating a third person account, the reader can see the complexities of dealing with student conspiracy theorists; the problems the teacher encountered when trying to address them with students; and the issues related to race and gender in the American college classroom and how they relate to addressing conspiracists.

I: Teaching Conspiracy Theorists

Paul is a student in a university-level writing class who either seeks attention from his classmates or validation from his professor. At the beginning of a semester, Paul not only confirms that he is a homophobe, but he also confirms that he is a conspiracy theorist. During a presentation, he casually stated that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her husband, former President William J. Clinton, killed hundreds of people, including Deputy White House Counsel Vince Foster, who committed suicide, and Secretary of Commerce Ronald Brown, who died in a plane crash. The teacher takes off points for this "misinformation," especially since cursory research on Foster and Brown would have revealed the actual cause of their deaths.

In the same class, Lonnie writes his major paper on Muslims who have created "no-go" zones in Europe. No-go zones, he explains, are areas controlled by Muslims. These Muslims refuse to allow people, typically whites, from entering specified communities unless they dress and act according to Sharia law. The teacher, knowing that this is a false narrative perpetrated by conspiracy theorists in the media, tries to correct Lonnie; Lonnie, however, is not deterred. He

continues the discussion of no-go zones in his final paper.

After the semester ends, the teacher looks for information on how to deal with conspiracy theorists in the college writing class, and specifically how to encourage students to more critically evaluate the theories that they believe, but it is hard to find information on that. In an interview, Dr. Joseph Uscinski explained how he had his students create a conspiracy theory and then had other students in the same class discredit the conspiracy theory through facts and logic. Uscinski, however, teaches a class specifically on conspiracy theories, and the teacher assumes that Uscinski is not teaching actual conspiracy theorists. The teacher teaches writing, where she tends to encounter misinformation (that students generally correct) rather than conspiracy theories, which is a "worldview" that students insist is correct.[5]

II: What Conspiracy?

Conspiracies do exist. After all, if they did not, we would not have laws dealing with racketeering, bribery, and aiding as well as abetting a crime.[6] However, as Daniel Pipes asserts, conspiracy theories are "perceptions" of crimes, chaos, events, and conduct; actual conspiracies are "acts."[7] Brian L. Keeley states that conspiracy theories "offer explanations of the event in question."[8] To believe and justify a conspiracy theory, a conspiracy theorist has to engage in higher order reasoning, such as critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis of evidence.[9] A devoted conspiracy theorist has to be aware of all evidence, including those that contradict his or her worldview, and be ready to defend that worldview when necessary. Most importantly, a conspiracy theorist has to have a pessimistic worldview. As Keeley notes, conspiracy theories generally do not center on people conspiring to do good.[10]

Charlie Campbell likened conspiracy theories to scapegoating and hysteria.[11] For example, academics who study conspiracy theories have pointed to one that is popular in the black community: it centers on the U.S. government's attempt to

5. Stephen Kolowich, "What Does This Professor Know about Conspiracy Theorists That We Don't? ," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 6, 2018, https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-Does-This-Professor-Know/244163.

6. Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 20.

7. Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 21.

8. Brian L. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 3 (March 1999): 116.

9. Kolowich, "What Does This Professor Know."

10. Keeley, "Of Conspiracy Theories," 117.

11. Charlie Campbell, *Scapegoat: A History of Blaming Other People* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2011), 167, 171.

create AIDS and distribute the AIDS virus to black people.[12] According to research compiled by Ted Goertzel in the early 1990s, "Thirty-one percent [of the 74 African American respondents in the Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester, New Jersey areas] believed that the government deliberately put AIDS into the African American community."[13] If one believes in this conspiracy theory, then African Americans, especially those infected with the AIDS virus, are scapegoats of the United States government. If you do not believe in the conspiracy theory, then the U.S. government is the scapegoat, since it is the one who is maligned in this conspiracy theory.

Nevertheless, this conspiracy theory is not true. Scientists, according to Jacques Pépin, could trace HIV back to the *Pan troglodytes troglodytes* chimpanzees who lived in central West Africa. During the twentieth century, the virus most likely entered human beings through hunters and their wives, perhaps through the cooking of chimp carcasses. After World War I, nurses might have inadvertently spread the virus in Cameroon, French Equatorial Africa, and the Belgian Congo when they reused unsterilized needles and syringes to treat patients infected with malaria, sleeping sickness, sexually transmitted infections, and other medical conditions. The virus ended up rapidly spreading through prostitution and prenatal transmission.[14]

James H. Jones traced the AIDS-as-a-manmade-lab-experiment-meant-to-destroy-the-black-community conspiracy theory back to the Tuskegee Study.[15] In short, the U.S. Public Health Service tricked approximately four hundred syphilis-infected black men in Tuskegee, Alabama, into believing that doctors had treated their "bad blood," while doctors were actually studying the way in which the disease progressed in black men. Despite the fact that health officials did not inject anyone with the syphilis bacteria, rumors of people being infected by government officials ran rampant.[16] Though news of the experiment came out in 1972, researchers Stephen B. Thomas and Sandra Crouse Quinn noted how nearly twenty years later, health officials felt uncomfortable discussing the Tuskegee Study when their patients (wrongly) compared the injection of syphilis in black men to the transmission of AIDS in the black community.[17]

Although some people rightfully disdain the unethical nature of the Tuskegee

12. Pipes, *Conspiracy*, 3.

13. Ted Goertzel, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 15, no. 4 (December 1994): 731−42.

14. Jacques Pépin, "The Origins of AIDS: From Patient Zero to Ground Zero," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 67, no. 6 (June 2013): 473−74.

15. James H. Jones, "The Tuskegee Legacy: AIDS and the Black Community," *Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 6 (December 1992): 38−40.

16. Susan M. Reverby, "More Than Fact and Fiction: Cultural Memory and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study," *Hastings Center Report* 31, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 22−30.

17. Jones, "The Tuskegee Legacy," 39.

study, its legacy not only contributes to a conspiracy theory, but also contributes to the distrust some African Americans have with health officials today. This is dangerous because it causes African Americans to forgo needed health services and prevents them from wanting to participate in important medical studies. According to Jones, Thomas felt "concern that conspiracy theories were impeding treatment and educational programs to combat AIDS."[18]

If we are to understand conspiracy theories and the theorists who believe them, we have to comprehend the concept of terministic screens. Kenneth Burke likened terministic screens to "different photographs of the same objects."[19] How the photographer photographed the objects depended on how he or she felt about what should be captured, highlighted, or downplayed in the photograph. How the observer understood the photographs depended on what the observer considered important in the photographs—the objects, the use of filters, and so on. The terministic screen highlighted the language used to create and interpret a text. When thinking of how some Black Americans believed that AIDS was a man-made disease, the teacher understands the terministic screen that they had centered on the long history of how the government disregarded the physical health of people of African descent. All they had to do was use the Tuskegee Study as a starting point, while also referencing the stereotypes that those in the medical profession held about African Americans. For example, Deidre Cooper Owens wrote that prejudices white doctors held about black people during slavery produced a "putrid environment that the black medical superbody was birthed and came to represent a being that was treated as something between human and lower primate in sickness and in health."[20] In other words, some blacks believe that doctors, especially white doctors, see them as less than human and believe that doctors will intentionally provide black patients with substandard care. Unfortunately, there is research to show that some white doctors do provide substandard care to black patients.[21]

III: People Who Believe in Conspiracies

In 2019, Senator Elizabeth Warren, who ran for the Democratic nomination in the presidential election, refused to attend a Fox News town hall because she

18. Jones, "The Tuskegee Legacy," 39.

19. Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 116.

20. Deidre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 109.

21. Kelly M. Hoffman et al., "Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296.

interpreted Fox News as "a hate-for-profit racket that gives a megaphone to racists and conspiracists."[22] One of the conspiracy theories Fox News had to retract centered on various 2015 news coverage of Muslim-created "no-go zones" in England and France. When a student, Lonnie, insists in a paper that Europe has "no-go zones," the teacher provides him with a link to a *Washington Post* article that talked about the series of retractions (and provided a clip of one) that Fox News issued regarding the so-called no-go zones. The teacher tells him that he is free to talk about immigration in Europe, but he cannot lie and say that no-go zones exist in Europe. In his next paper, he talks about a no-go zone in Sweden, and then provides a YouTube clip to back up his point. The problem is that he used the term "no-go zone" to describe Muslims who do not allow Christians or other non-Muslims to enter. The Swedish media, however, use the term "no-go" to refer to high-crime areas where police or other government officials do not wish to enter, not areas that are controlled and patrolled by Muslims; most importantly, in the spring of 2017 (the semester in which his paper was written), *BuzzFeed* published an article in which Swedish police lambasted the concept of no-go zones.[23] In 2019, CBS news interviewed a Stockholm police officer who said that he worked in high-crime or "vulnerable" areas and debunked the existence of no-go zones in Sweden.[24]

That does not matter now, the teacher realizes, since the class has long been over. What she wants to understand is who is most likely to believe in conspiracies. To do this, she thinks about James Paul Gee's concept of identity as being a Discourse. Gee defines Discourse (with a capital "D") as "any such group and the ways in which such socially-based group conventions allow people to enact specific identities and activities."[25] Thus, Discourse is the embodiment and acting out of identity. The people who believe in no-go zones in Europe are those most likely to see Muslims as threats to their community and most importantly, to Western identity. On the website *Ammo.com*, the creators said, "Uncomfortable for some to consider, it is an undeniable fact that most, if not all, of the No Go

22. Elizabeth Warren (@ewarren), "Fox News is a hate-for-profit racket that gives a megaphone to racists and conspiracists—it's designed to turn us against each other, risking life and death consequences, to provide cover for the corruption that's rotting our government and hollowing out our middle class," Twitter, May 14, 2019, https://twitter.com/ewarren/status/1128314854622859265.

23. Ishmael N. Daro, "The Myth of Lawless 'No Go Zones' in Sweden Took Hold among Right Wing Media," *BuzzFeed News*, January 24, 2017. https://www.buzzfeed.com/ishmaeldaro/no-go-zone-myth.

24. "(Un)Welcome: Sweden's Rise of the Right," *CBS News*, video, April 14, 2019. Sweden's "no-go zones" -CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sweden-rise-of-the-right-immigrants-unwelcome-cbsn-originals/.

25. James Paul Gee, "Discourse, small-d, Big D," https://academic.jamespaulgee.com/pdfs/Big%20D,%20Small%20d.pdf.

Zones in Europe coincide with large Muslim populations. In these areas, large radicalized immigrant populations are indifferent or hostile to the central government."[26] In a discussion of no-go zones in Europe, the website *The National Post* declared that "in these no-go zones there is a push for the implementation of Sharia law and Sharia courts. Let us remember that Sharia law condones polygamy and recommends amputation for theft and the death penalty for any apostate who leaves Islam."[27] The teacher notices that both of these websites emphasize how "scary" the Muslim is. The Muslim is the prototypical boogeyman, the outsider and the Other. The Discourse of this group shows that the group is the embodiment of freedom, not the Muslims. Thus, it seems that when it comes to the construction of an identity, conspiracy theorists create a binary: "they" versus "us." Moreover, both websites emphasized that it was they, not the liberal media, that provided the truth about the existence of these communities. After all, like a "good" researcher, these website creators had provided extensive background information on no-go zones in Europe.

The difference, of course, is how the website creators engage in interpreting the information. As Pipes noted, conspiracy theorists "steep themselves in the literature of their subject and become expert in it. The difference lies in their methods; rather than piece together the past through the slow accumulation of facts, they plunder legitimate historical studies to build huge edifices out of odd and unrelated elements."[28] In other words, conspiracy theorists are well-read, and like the writers of *The National Post* and *Ammo.com*, they selectively choose what they will emphasize and what they will not.

The teacher then remembers the assertions by Daniel Pipes and Charlie Campbell. People who believe conspiracy theories tend to suffer from hysteria and from various degrees of paranoia. She also thinks about how her student, Paul, reacted when reading a paper about homelessness. Paul found it offensive that the authors talked about homeless women in Australia. He was particularly triggered by the idea that "strategies to mitigate [fears and risks] and overcome the problem of homelessness need to be inclusive of women and other various sub-populations."[29] The teacher remembers asking him to explain what was offensive about the section, and all Paul said was that it was "anti-male." She

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26. "No Go Zones: A Guide to Western Failed States and European Secessionist Movements," *Ammo.com*. https://ammo.com/articles/no-go-zones-western-failed-states-guide.

27. "Europe's No Go Zones: Inside the Lawless Ghettos That Breed and Harbour Terrorists," *The National Post*, October 11, 2016. https://nationalpost.com/opinion/europes-no-go-zones-inside-the-lawless-ghettos-that-breed-and-harbour-terrorists.

28. Pipes, *Conspiracy,* 33.

29. Gregory Saville and Randall I. Atlas, "White Paper on Homelessness and CPTED for the International CPTED Association" (April 8, 2016): 5. https://cpted.net/resources/Documents/ICA%20Resources/White%20Papers/White%20Paper_%202016_Homelessness%20and%20CPTED.pdf.

remembers thinking that Paul was crazy and had hoped that one of the women in the class would actually challenge Paul on that because the teacher, who was ill, felt too sick to engage him.

Though Paul is perfectly calm when he and the teacher engage in this conversation, the conversation makes the teacher wonder if there is a correlation between those who believe conspiracy theories and those who have biases against women, gays, blacks, and other groups. After all, well-known conspiracy theories, especially those that deal with the "gay agenda," the Jewish takeover of Hollywood, or the African American attempt to start a race war, are embraced by homophobes, anti-Semites, and racists. For example, those who believe that part of the "gay agenda" includes the propagation of homosexuality to the masses may believe what Sancha Smith believed: homosexuality was part of Satan's plan to increase the number of people who commit suicide and contract AIDS; [30] or some may believe what the Family Research Institute did in that homosexual men sexually targeted young boys in order to make those young boys homosexual. Of course, LGBT individuals do commit suicide, but they do so not because Satan commands them, but because many reside in communities that see their sexuality as a sin—something abnormal and abhorrent. Likewise, there are male pedophiles who target young boys, but the Family Research Institute does not mention the typical male pedophile that objectifies and goes after young girls.[31]

Thus, as the teacher continues her research, she realizes that she has dealt with students who are steeped in the conspiracy theory they have adopted. If she were to teach other conspiracy theorists, she would have to find ways of helping them see the fallacies of their argument. The question is how.

IV: Teaching Conspiracy Theorists

One of the main problems the teacher has with confronting Paul and Lonnie about their conspiracy theories deals with her race—she is black—and Paul and Lonnie are white. According to Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar, white male students have no problem questioning the authority of women professors, especially those of color. "The questioning of authority is even more pronounced for female faculty of color who, regardless of discipline, are often challenged or tested publicly in class, especially by young white men."[32] The teacher suspects that Paul

30. Sancha Smith, "Understanding the 'Gay' Agenda-Part One." *Covenant Spotlight* (July 2016): 27; "Understanding the 'Gay' Agenda-Part Two," *Covenant Spotlight* (August 2016): 28.

31. Peter Sprigg, "Should Christians Recognize 'LGBT Pride'? ," *Family Research Council* (blog), June 11, 2019, https://www.frcblog.com/2019/06/should-christians-recognize-lgbt-pride/.

32. Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar, "Pretenders on the Throne: Gender, Race, and Authority in the Composition Classroom," in *Calling Cards: Theory and Practice in the Study of Race,*

wants to use his conspiracy theory to bait or berate her in class. Since she has already read his papers bashing the identities of the LGBT communities, she worries that if she questions or corrects what Paul has said about the Clintons in front of the class, he will use her questions to query her about her political ideologies, which she does not want to expose. She thinks, "Will I be able to teach him or will he respond by claiming I'm part of a liberal establishment designed to control or eradicate conservative students?"

And so, she finds herself with a white, male student who is a homophobe and who will eventually voice his dislike for feminists, rap music, and Democrats. As the semester progresses, she hears other teachers are also dealing with conspiracy theorists. They blame President Trump for this. The teacher knows the adoption of conspiracy theories are more complex than Trump. Privately, she worries that she is teaching in a school—at a midwestern Catholic university no less—where students harbor dislike or even hatred for various groups of people.

Likewise, the teacher wonders about the conspiracies that Lonnie and Paul believe. Lonnie's conspiracy theory is essentially a white supremacist one, which is much different than the AIDS-as-a-manmade-conspiracy theory that a few in the black community believe. Lonnie's conspiracy theory is designed to justify the subjugation of a group of people, namely Muslim immigrants or the descendants of Muslim immigrants, in Europe. In contrast, the AIDS conspiracy theory is designed to help black people understand *why* the United States government, which has a history of oppressing blacks, is seeking to diminish the black community's political, cultural, and socioeconomic power at a specific point in time.[33] Paul, on the other hand, seems to embrace conspiracy theories that are designed to either defame political leaders or to uphold the conservative values he holds dear.

The next semester, she talks about various conspiracy theories and warns students that she does not like conspiracy theories and does not want to see them in their papers or hear them in their presentations. Luckily for her, she does not see or hear of any conspiracy theories. But she worries that in the future these conspiracy theories will reappear, and she wonders if students, especially white male students, will believe her if she explains to them that they are believing false narratives (about immigration, politicians, Muslims, and foreign governments) and then provides them with documentation of the truth. She thinks, "Will they refuse to believe me because they don't trust who is delivering the truth—a black woman whom they suspect is a liberal? Or will they refuse to believe me because they refuse to believe 'the truth'?"

Gender, and Culture, eds. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Anne Marie Mann Simpkins (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 151.

33. Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African American Culture* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 162.

Part of the problem of teaching conspiracy theorists deals with the conflict of terministic screens. The teacher wonders, for example, if Lonnie did not believe the teacher's assertion about the no-go zones because she used the *Washington Post* as her main reference. To her, the *Washington Post* is a credible newspaper, but to a conservative, perhaps like the student, the *Washington Post* is a liberal newspaper that one should not trust. Maybe, the teacher thinks to herself, if she had just linked the Fox News clip and not the *Washington Post* article, the student would have trusted her more.

The teacher realizes that this issue is more than just the teacher understanding the student's terministic screen or the student understanding hers. No, this is about identification. Kenneth Burke says that there is a difference between person A being identified with person B and person A being consubstantial with person B. In the former, person A remains "unique" despite being identified with person B; in the latter, person A and person B "have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*."[34] Of course, there is no way that the teacher can ever be consubstantial with Lonnie or Paul: one is outright homophobic, and the other anti-Islamic.

The teacher continues looking for material on how to teach conspiracy theorists in a writing class. She comes across an essay by Renee Hobbs called "Teach the Conspiracies." The article focuses on the importance of talking to students—especially secondary students—about conspiracy theories so that they are able to know the difference between information, which a conspiracy theory is not, and disinformation, which Hobbs said represented a form of a conspiracy theory.[35] Hobbs highlighted a semester-long high school course in New Jersey taught by Dave Fosco and Rebecca Russo. In the course, the students compared and contrasted conspiracy theories, while noting how they were reflective of the society in which the theories originated. The students in the class studied source evaluation and research and evaluation bias.[36] At another secondary school in Atlanta, English teacher John Bradford and librarian Anne Thiers developed a five-week unit on conspiracy theories that included students studying and writing their unit papers on a conspiracy theory. Bradford forced them to learn what sources were reputable (*New York Times*) and less reputable (*National Enquirer*).[37]

The teacher obtains some ideas of how to approach the teaching of conspiracy theories. She would love to create a unit course on conspiracy theories, but knows that because the freshman English program has a common curriculum, she cannot do this. (A common curriculum means that all freshman writing courses must use

34. Burke, *Of Symbols and Society*, 180−81.

35. Renee Hobbes, "Teach the Conspiracies," *Knowledge Quest* 46, no. 1 (September/October 2017): 18.

36. Hobbes, "Teach the Conspiracies," 20.

37. Hobbes, "Teach the Conspiracies," 21.

the same writing prompts and books.) Can she create a day in which she asks students to name all of the conspiracy theories they know of? Can she have them get into groups and have each group research a particular conspiracy theory?

According to the article she has just read, she can have them examine reputable and non-reputable sources. Will she have to tell them ahead of time given the time constraints or will she have to have them figure it out themselves? She and the students will definitely need to talk about how to recognize bias and will certainly have to talk about the purpose of journalism.

Then the teacher thinks about Lonnie and Paul. Will this activity work with them? If a student already believes a conspiracy theory, can a teacher, preacher, mother, or employer get that student to modify that view? According to Hobbes, the answer is most likely no. "Sadly, once a conspiracy theory is believed to be true, it can be difficult to displace."[38] In other words, trying to get a student to change his or her view on a conspiracy theory is like trying to convince a devout Christian that the Virgin Mary was not a virgin when she birthed Jesus.

Conclusion: When Conspiracy Theories Go Wrong

When Donald Trump lost the presidential election in 2020, he pushed the conspiracy that the election was "rigged" and "stolen" from him. His associates, Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell, and Michael Lindell, who had spread this conspiracy, were sued for defamation by Dominion Voting Systems for $1.3 billion dollars for asserting that Dominion's voting machines flipped votes from Trump to Biden.[39] Meanwhile, Fox News and their personalities Jeanine Pirro, Lou Dobbs, and Maria Bartiromo were hit with a $2.7 billion dollar defamation lawsuit from Dominion Voting Systems rival, Smartmatic, for claiming that Smartmatic was controlled by socialist dictators from abroad, and that its machines had changed the votes from Trump to Biden.[40]

Nevertheless, Donald Trump refused to be swayed from what the Democrats called the "Big Lie," which was another phrase for his conspiracy theory. This conspiracy theory played a role in the January 6 insurrection at the United States Capitol in 2021. On that day, while Congress was officially set to certify Joe Biden as president, an estimated eight hundred people practically declared war

38. Hobbes, "Teach the Conspiracies," 18.

39. Merritt Kennedy and Bill Chappell, "Dominion Voting Systems Files $1.6 Billion Defamation Lawsuit Against Fox News," *NPR*, March 26, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/26/981515184/dominion-voting-systems-files-1-6-billion-defamation-lawsuit-against-fox-news.

40. Bill Chappell and David Folkenflick, "Election Tech Company Sues Fox News, Giuliani and Others for $2.7 Billion," *NPR*, February 4, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/02/04/964097006/election-tech-company-sues-fox-news-giuliani-and-others-for-2-7-billion.

and captured the Capitol. Some, in the name of QAnon (another conspiracy theory that declared Donald Trump would be the inevitable winner on January 6, 2021, and when that did not happen, then on March 4, 2021),[41] proceeded to vandalize the building. Perhaps the most well-known of the insurrectionists, QAnon follower Jacob Chansley, the so-called "QAnon Shaman," wrote on former Vice-President Pence's paper, which Pence left behind as he was scrambling to leave the chamber, "It's only a matter of time. Justice is coming."[42] Then, when speaking to the FBI, he called Pence "a child trafficking traitor."[43]

It is one thing for a conspiracy theory to only affect the person who believes in it, but when it leads to people believing that they have a right or duty to invade a government building and stop government from functioning, then it affects everyone. For those like Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, thinking about the insurrection brought back traumatic memories of rape. For others, it brought back memories of injustice surrounding the arrests and beatings of Black Lives Matters supporters in 2020, especially since there was an initial refusal of the police to arrest the insurrectionists despite inflicting bodily harm on fellow police officers and threatening death to Mike Pence. Indeed, as the conspiracy theory of Donald Trump's 2020 election shows, the belief in conspiracy theories can literally destroy the structure of society and disrupt the democratic process.

The teacher now has an idea of addressing conspiracy theories with students. Instead of just noting in their papers that the students have adopted conspiracy theories as fact, she will now call the students to her office to talk more in depth. She will try to find out why they believe these theories and how they come to see these theories as true. If it looks as if multiple people in the class embrace a particular conspiracy theory as fact, she will address the conspiracy theory in class. In both the office visit or class, she will talk about what are reputable sources and what are not, as those in Hobbes' article did. Likewise, she will talk about the problems that come as a result of adopting a conspiracy theory. She will mention how black Americans are less likely to participate in medical trials because of the theory that AIDS was developed in a lab to destroy the black community. She may even mention how the Capitol was vandalized because people believed the conspiracy theory that President Trump had won the 2020 election.

The teacher recognizes that there are those who may still uphold the conspiracy

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41. Kaleigh Rogers, "QAnon Has Become the Cult That Cries Wolf," *FiveThirtyEight*, March 26, 2021, https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/qanon-has-become-the-cult-that-cries-wolf/.

42. Letter quoted in Jaclyn Diaz, "Jacob Chansley, Self-Styled 'QAnon Shaman,' To Stay in Jail Pending Trial." *NPR*, March 9, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/09/975097124/judge-rejects-qanon-shamans-bid-for-early-release-from-jail.

43. Jaclyn Diaz, *NPR*.

after discussing it in the office or class. However, the teacher knows that she has at least given her students facts, which represent an alternate view of what the conspiracy theorist believes. Likewise, the teacher knows that providing consequences for believing in a conspiracy theory as truth may even help students to look for the truth. These consequences can include lowering of grades or refusal to write letters of recommendation for a student. Like others in American higher education institutions, the teacher will encourage students to search for the truth and recognize the lies that are a part of a conspiracy theory.