Note

Cultivating a Critical Mass: Conspiracy Theories and the Composition Classroom

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Efforts at targeted resistance to disinformation have been underway at the elementary and high school levels for years, but recently there has been an increase in those efforts. Generally working under the framework of "information literacy," school districts have been updating their curricula to meet current challenges.

In Colorado, for example, State Reps. Barbara McLachlan and Lisa Cutter have cosponsored a bill that promotes media literacy in the state's curricula. The goal, of course, is to teach students not what to think but how to assess the credibility of a source. The resulting curricula would not address strategies of discerning real from fake news in a special, standalone unit or lesson but instead weave critical thinking into courses to make it a more fundamental aspect of education from the very beginning.

Likewise, at Normal High School in Normal, IL, history and government teacher Tracy Freeman has made "standards of proof" a central feature of all her classes. Reporter Sarah Schwartz (2020), who interviewed Freeman for *Education Week*, wrote:

> In the days after the [2020 presidential] election, one student said they'd heard that Pennsylvania had bused in ballots bearing the names of dead people. "The student wanted to say it was factual," Freeman said. "So then the class automatically said, 'What are our sources?'" (Evaluating Unknown Sources section, para. 3)

Questioning sources may not take hold with all students, but it may be possible to reach a critical mass against disinformation.

Scholarship on this matter as it pertains to college students has tended in two directions. First, there are studies that look at the effectiveness of using social media and online tools to improve critical thinking in specific populations.[1] Studies in the second direction use social media to talk about critical thinking for undergraduates in general.[2] The overall success of these studies shows that social media can be a potent tool in the use of critical thinking against disinformation. One way of extending this idea is to incorporate a web program called Hoaxy into a curriculum on digital information literacy. Hoaxy, hosted by Indiana University, allows users to visualize the spread of different ideas and stories across the internet by providing different charts and data analytics of Twitter posts according to user-selected criteria. Being able to track ideas in this way, users can visualize clusters of sources. This tool would be useful in Tracy Freeman's classes at Normal High School, for example. From the interview cited above, the student who wanted to know about potential election fraud had consulted *Fox News* and *The Gateway Pundit*. But other sources that do not necessarily share an ideology with those sources did not report the same

DOI: 10.37514/DBH-J.2021.9.1.09

instances of fraud, and an expert commentator also indicated that no evidence existed for that accusation. In the visualization model, the class would be able to see the separation between the cluster of sources around *Fox News* and other clusters offering different viewpoints. The goal, of course, would be to have an even distribution or one big cluster where all sources agree on at least the basic facts. This visualization method promises a more intuitive way of thinking about how different ideas proliferate in the media.

It is time that university composition instructors join these efforts in intentional ways. We have taught critical thinking in our composition classes for decades, but we should always be on the lookout for the latest threats to it and give them special attention when we address that portion of our syllabi. I argue that, right now, the most imminent threat to critical thinking is conspiracist thinking, thought patterns that undermine the possibility of reasonable discourse based on shared facts. In what follows, I outline two patterns of conspiracist thought and offer some suggestions for what we can do as instructors to focus our critical thinking curriculum on them.

Two Forms of Unreason

By highlighting pervasive forms of unreason that contribute to conspiracist thought, I am not asking composition instructors to do anything they are not already doing. I am arguing, rather, that we should make it a field-wide value to inoculate a critical mass of our students against these noxious modes of reasoning that they no doubt already encounter regularly. This inoculation involves, as State Rep. McLachlan has advocated, the constant presence of critical thinking virtues to match the vices under discussion here. The general classroom method, then, will involve the consideration of specific examples and the application of critical thinking to those particular contexts.

Denialism

The practice of denialism is nothing new. Denialist claims that the Holocaust did not really happen, for example, go back to the years immediately following World War 2. The primary danger in thinking this way is twofold. First, there is the bare fact of the denial, which is, at its root, a refusal to participate in the communally constructed nature of knowledge. Second, the practice of denialism allows us to fall even more deeply into our amniotic echo chambers because once we feel free to reject facts that have passed through traditionally reliable channels of verification, we can assemble our own individual versions of reality based on the information we decide to consider legitimate. The more disconnected we become from the shared communal reality we live in, the more difficult it is to achieve large-scale cooperative action.

By rooting out denialism in the first instance above, we can obviate the second. One method for countering denialism is to emphasize the contingent and constructed nature of most human knowledge. Often, opponents of this idea will object that the physical sciences are evidence that knowledge exists independently of our subjectivities. I do not intend here to get into the finer details of whether this is the case, but I will point out that it is invalid to jump from the physical sciences to other realms of knowledge that are less given to such specific and measurable claims. As Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2009) pointed out in *Nicomachean Ethics*, "Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions" (1.3).

In addition to this general response to the objection, I would point out that, even in the sciences, culturally selective forces are at work—consciously and unconsciously, individually and systemically—that make certain aspects of modern science subject to the constructed nature of shared knowledge. This does not mean that we cannot achieve practical results in the physical world by means of our scientific observations; it points out merely that we are subjectivities constructing frameworks for understanding the world from our perspective, and we have historical evidence to demonstrate that those frameworks are subject to revision.

In terms of classroom practice, I have had some success with an exercise I use to demonstrate the constructed nature of what we call "history." I organize students into groups and give them a variety of historical questions, ranging from "When was George Washington born?" to "What did you do last weekend?" Then I ask the groups to work together to prove that they have the true answer. Because of differing calendars in use at the time, Washington's birthday is not as easy to confirm as the students believe at first. The question about what the students did last weekend elicits the most interesting kinds of evidence. Some bring in timecards from work; others sign in to Xbox Live to show us a log of time spent playing online with witnesses. Interesting attempts at proof, but their classmates almost always find ways to challenge the veracity of the evidence. In the end, some students come to understand history as a construct consisting of varying kinds of evidence that are subject to serious critique. Truly, a lie agreed upon. But it is the "agreed upon" part of that aphorism that matters most here. Yes, we construct history, but that does not mean our construct is meaningless or baseless. The same epistemology holds in the composition classroom.

I believe that this epistemological flexibility is valuable to students as they go on to learn how to write in their specific disciplines. When they understand that various discourse communities construct knowledge differently and that these differences are reflected in the language of that field, they are prepared to enter their major/career and to acquire fluency in the relevant writing styles and genres. We are well placed in composition to introduce the idea of communally constructed knowledge, and understanding this idea transfers to every other department on campus.

Whataboutism

Addressing whataboutism is more straightforward, since the response to it consists of having a clear conversation about what it is and why it leads to absurdity, followed by pointing out examples of it when discussing readings and case studies. The primary danger of this pattern of thought lies in the proclivity to engage in increasingly unethical behaviors because one is convinced that one's opponent is doing the same thing (or would, given half the chance!). That parenthetical demonstrates how smoothly we switch from what we *think* people have done to what we "know" they will/would do. Tense and mood matter.

This tendency to believe the worst of our opponents promotes acceptance of conspiracist thinking because it encourages us to inflame our already negative view with increasingly outlandish accusations. QAnon, for example, accuses certain politicians of some especially horrendous acts. It is entirely possible that QAnon believers would still have made their way to the Capitol on January 6 without the push of whataboutism, but I believe they found their way much more quickly and efficiently by pointing fingers at the alleged crimes of their putative antagonists.

To demonstrate the futility of this thinking to students, we can examine the whataboutism currently being engaged in by the United States and China (certainly others could be added to this list). News articles from various sources will show that each country's official position on different matters of international interest relies, to some extent, on defending itself by shifting focus to the other country's actions. In response to accusations by the United States that China is committing human rights violations against Uyghurs, China points to the children still separated from their families, living in cages at the border with Mexico. The United States will then respond that China failed to be transparent during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, and on it goes. No progress is ever made because the issues being invoked are not meaningfully related to each other.

The underlying assumption is that a kind of ethical calculus exists that can be balanced by varying levels of moral transgression. The powers engaging in this practice act in bad faith; they are usually scoring temporary points for fleeting purposes. At this point in the conversation, we can ask the students, "What does this achieve? Does it even make sense to ask who is 'right' in this situation?" Not everyone will buy into it. Some, out of patriotism, will not accept that their side is sometimes in the wrong; others, unwilling to criticize another culture, will not acknowledge the culpability of the other side. For many others, however, this conversation about a specific geopolitical situation will contribute to engendering a view of the world where people take rhetorical responsibility instead of passing the argumentative buck because to do so is to squander time and resources, accomplishing nothing substantive.

We can show our students, then, that arguing from whataboutism produces no new content and leads, therefore, to a discursive impasse. This kind of argument does not construct knowledge—it stops it in its tracks. Writing in the disciplines requires our students to construct new knowledge and to participate in a good-faith exchange of data and argument. By exposing the flaws in whataboutism, we set the ground for students to succeed in writing in the disciplines by teaching them to value productive discipline-based arguments.

Conclusion

As composition instructors, we are positioned to join the resistance to conspiracist thinking. School systems throughout the country are beginning to address this issue head on, and it only makes sense to continue that same focus in our college composition courses, where we are already accustomed to teaching critical thought. No one is under the delusion that these actions will cure the problem or remove the human tendency to engage in denialism and whataboutism. I am hopeful, however, that we can contribute meaningfully to counteracting these patterns of unreason while simultaneously preparing our students for the rigors of writing in the disciplines.

Notes

[1]See, for example, DuBois et al. (2019) on environmental educators and Al-Zou'bi (2021) on education majors.

[2]See, for example, Sinprakob and Songkram (2015), Wells (2018) and Lutzke et al. (2019).

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