

# CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE CLASSROOM

HOW TO DEAL WITH THESE ISSUES AS A TEACHER



WHAT ARE THE DOS AND DON'TS?  
HOW DO YOU REACT?



HAN DE KOMP  
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# Conspiracy thinking

**A comment or an opinion from a student can sometimes give your lesson a surprising turn. The student comes up with an expected or unexpected story or idea that is diametrically opposed to your world view and the facts as you perceive them. 'One big conspiracy...'**

Usually, the immediate trigger is a plenary discussion about world politics, a major disaster, recent or not, a bloody attack, or a global conflict that is much in the news.

- 'Islamic State? They're not Muslims, it's all fuelled by the American Secret Service!'
- 'There is no such thing as global warming! It's all made up by those so-called scientists.'
- 'Don't you know that it was the Jews who blew up the Twin Towers?'
- 'Do you know who really call the shots? The Illuminati, they rule half the world... Just look at ... if you don't believe me.'

## Facts?

In April 2017, Dutch current affairs programme Nieuwsuur interviewed a social studies teacher. 'Students are obsessed with conspiracy theories and no longer believe the media or the government. This is a worrisome development. I spend at least one in three lessons in social studies or history disproving their theories.' A survey among 190 teachers of social studies and history showed that 80% of them sometimes or regularly disagree with their students about facts.

Conspiracy-thinking often surfaces when shocking events occur that call for an all-encompassing explanation. Conspiracy theories are characterised by the fact that they cast doubt on 'so-called' evidence or 'hard' facts.

Students question the dominant explanation disseminated in the mainstream media. They may show a firm belief in their own stories and have often done a lot of 'research' on the topic.

Nowadays, the Internet is the main source of information when searching for alternative motives or to apportion blame. A conspiracy theory is all the more credible when it provides answers to critical questions, draws historical comparisons, and is presented with great certainty.

## OF ALL TIMES

Conspiracies are not new to our turbulent and - to many people - uncertain times. It helps to realise that they are of all times. In the third century CE, for instance, the rumour was spread among Christians that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had been married; a myth that was to reverberate 17 centuries later in the successful book and film *The Da Vinci Code*. In the Middle Ages, Jews and Roma ('gypsies') were blamed for the outbreak of the plague. Jews were accused of murdering Christian children and using their blood to make matzos.

Religious and ethnic minorities often play an important role in conspiracies, both as objects of hatred and frequently also as objects of persecution.

For centuries, people in predominantly Protestant Western countries have suspected Jesuit (Catholic) conspiracies behind many unpleasant and hard-to-explain events. Pope Francis, the first Jesuit pope, is the subject of all kinds of conspiracy stories circulating on the internet, even today.

The fairly private masonic brotherhoods have often been suspected of secretly plotting to usurp the power of the state as well. When it comes to conspiracy thinking, there is nothing new under the sun.



# The appeal of conspiracy theories

**When major events occur, wild rumours abound. What makes conspiracy stories so popular?**

Information is abundant, and yet we seem to know less and less. We pick up snippets and fragments of information here and there, but do we still share the same basic, established knowledge? In today's society, many people, young and old, feel that 'truth' and 'reality' are up in the air. Young people no longer get their news from newspapers or TV, but from shared and barely verifiable reporting distributed on social media.

This state of affairs leaves a lot of space for the certainty and lack of nuance of conspiracy theories: these guys are the perpetrators and those guys are the victims. When a situation or event in the news is hard to digest, people look for alternative explanations. Moreover, alternative explanations are spreading ever faster. After the attacks carried out in and around Brussels in 2016 by jihadis who had returned from Syria, in which 35 people died, an animated film was put online in no time. This film, spread on social media, tried to cast doubt about who the actual perpetrators were, by claiming that the Israeli secret service was behind the attacks.






## THE DYNAMICS OF POLARISATION

Polarisation means the increase in thinking in terms of 'us versus them'. Two groups in deadlock, each badmouthing the opposite side, using one-liners and simplistic statements. When polarisation and extremism increase, so does thinking in opposites. When polarised thinking has become the norm, people sometimes become unwilling to accept deviant information.

The conspiracy theory becomes their refuge. It confirms the distrust of 'your' group versus one or more other groups. Moreover, a conspiracy theory is an extremely powerful tool for sowing doubt in the so-called middle group of peers who are less likely to take a stand. A conspiracy construct is also used to rally one's supporters in the rhetoric used to justify one's actions. To flesh out the image of the enemy. Not just out of ideological conviction, but also because there is simply a lot of money to be made in the world of fake news. People like to click on sensational news links; it's a fact that advertisers are known to exploit.



**When a student in your history or social sciences class advances a conspiracy theory, you need to realise that your students are adolescents. Even more than most adults, they are on the lookout for new, exciting, and shocking stories. Conspiracy theories make the world an exciting place.**

And conspiracy theories make the world comprehensible. Our fast and rapidly changing world is (too) complex. Conspiracies give young people something to hold on to, which can be a relief. A conspiracy theory gives them a handle for processing reality and the torrent of (bad) news. A good theory, one that fits your own convictions, offers clarity. It confirms your pre-existing opinions and puts your doubts to rest. The tolerance for uncertainty is on the decrease in the Netherlands; these days, it is rare to hear people say: 'I don't know what to think'. In addition, we tend to search for, and more easily adopt, information that confirms and supports our views, rather than information that disproves them. Psychologists call this phenomenon the confirmation bias.

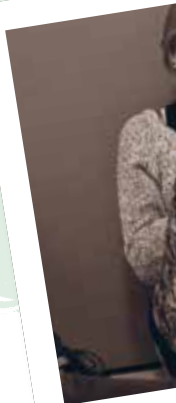
A conspiracy theory explains the world in a way that suits our ideas about 'us' and 'them', about our own group and the other one. It is sometimes hard to digest that a disaster was just an accident, an unfortunate coincidence. Or that an attack was committed by a violent loner or a small group. Situations in which information is lacking or unclear give rise to questions that are drawn out in the press. Extraordinary events or allegations require extraordinary explanations or extraordinary evidence.

Another explanation for the appeal of conspiracy theories is the fact that followers get to join a group. In this way, conspiracy theories meet our basic human needs for security, stability, and belonging.

## FAKE NEWS OR CONSPIRACY?

Not all fake news is part of a conspiracy and not all conspiracy theories can be traced back to fabricated news items that were spread on social media. However, there is considerable overlap between the two. Fake news is made and circulated in a similar manner in order to create political confusion, especially when done (semi-)professionally. Much of this fake news is created to make money; news sites that depend on advertising survive on sensational and shocking (fake) news. Refugees are systematically disparaged by some manufacturers of fake news.

The purpose of these fake messages may not be that we actually believe them, but ultimately that we won't believe anything anymore. Spreading doubt, cultivating scepticism, fostering cynicism and indifference: those are the objectives of many fake news manufacturers. At the same time, some people who are involved in the making and distribution of fake news are just pranksters. People who like to 'cut and paste' funny video clips that score many hits on YouTube and disrupt the debate. Either way, dealing with (social) media is an important skill for young people to master. Digital literacy is becoming an increasingly important subject!





## The role of social media

Bold declarations sound better than nuanced statements. Social media are overflowing with one-liners, unsubstantiated opinions, and strong contradictions. Young people feel compelled to take a stand on anything and everything. More and more, social media seem to keep users locked in their own bubbles. These bubbles are fed with recurring information of similar import.

Many people, young and old, are still insufficiently aware of the social media bubbles they inhabit. To some extent, their bubbles are reinforced by the use of algorithms. As a result, the news that reaches people has a confirming effect. Contact with like-minded people confirms the veracity of the so-called facts and strengthens the group's convictions. Dissenting opinions rarely penetrate the bubble. It is important that people understand this phenomenon and learn to deal with it.



# What do you see?

**You can laugh at or be shocked about the absurdity or gravity of the conspiracy theories that your students put forward with such conviction. Next, you can try to counter their ideas with factual information. Or you could try something else. What do you see when you try to understand the stories your students tell you? What are they involved with or looking for?**

The fact that your students consider or believe in a conspiracy, tells you something about their needs. Their behaviour and the theory are the tip of the iceberg; what caused them? What is it that these students can't accept? What does it say about their identity? What are the groups they identify with?

The increase in conspiracy constructs reflects growing distrust of the establishment and a lack of grand narratives for people to believe in. In the words of Leiden University academic Jelle van Buuren, a conspiracy theory can be seen as 'coded social criticism'. It can only be deciphered by talking with each other and maintaining a bond. And perhaps you could try to decipher it together with your students.

## **Boundaries**

It goes without saying that you need to draw the line if students go too far in their conspiracy theories. Incitement to hatred, violence, or discrimination cannot be tolerated. You will need to set clear boundaries, preferably at a much earlier stage.

For instance, a student who denies or ridicules the Holocaust (the murder of six million Jews during WWII) rarely does so in a neutral way, but usually only with the aim of challenging and hurting others' feelings. This is something you need to counter. Don't let them cross that line; set boundaries.

In almost all other cases, however, you can try to keep the discussion open and maintain a curious stance, inviting your students to explain how they came to their ideas.



Try to find out where students get their ideas. This will help you to get a better insight into the needs of your students and their world. And you can begin to help them form critical opinions and personalities.

## ICEBERG

American psychologist David McClelland used the concept of an iceberg to illustrate how the audible statements and visible behaviour of people – the tip of the iceberg – are controlled by the much larger part of the iceberg – the part that is under water.

In order to understand your students, you need to look below the water line. This is where our personal characteristics, standards and values, our motives and our convictions lie. The components below the waterline in McClelland's iceberg model can reinforce or block visible behaviour. If you want to bring about a change in students' behaviour, you must always involve these underwater components.



### Engaged students

It may sound odd, but the fact that students voice a conspiracy theory may indicate that they have already mastered a certain level of critical thinking and have the guts to express it. Although some students who adhere to a conspiracy theory simply repeat what their parents say, most of them have strayed off the beaten track in their quest for answers. The information they find may be one-sided and superficial, but that is something you can address.

They need to become aware of their 'confirmation biases' and above all learn to look for facts that broaden or contradict their ideas. Still, a conspiracy theory can be indicative of some degree of engagement, a desire for a better world. These students are therefore well on their way to achieving two of the main goals of education: critical thinking and engagement. Perhaps in a different way than that envisaged by the system, but there you have it.

Besides, you could - or should - argue that the conspiracy theory is part of the student's identity. If you focus on trying to refute the conspiracy, students may perceive this as an attack on their identity. If you, their teacher, come at their conspiracy theory with all the facts, figures, and arguments you can find, the divide in the classroom will only grow wider.



## **POOR WEAPON AGAINST PREJUDICE**

Social psychology has taught us that facts make a poor weapon against prejudice. Prejudice - and conspiracy constructs - are emotionally charged points of view and opinions. Will you reach students by offering factual counterinformation and make them change their minds? Probably not. Almost everyone, young or old, suffers from the ingrained tendency to accept facts that support their opinions and to reject facts that contradict them.

# Don't add fuel to the fire

**You hear of a conspiracy and your first response is to disprove it. That makes sense. You've become a teacher to tell your students how the world works. However, you risk polarising the situation even further, by antagonising the students who believe in the conspiracy. You become one of the 'other side'. This doesn't benefit the discussion.**

## **Don't add fuel to the fire**

One of your jobs as a teacher is to coach your students in finding out how the world works. Things aren't as clear-cut as they may think. It is a complex world with diverse realities. Who are you to tell them what's what? What are your sources and what does your bubble look like? Do you keep an open mind to different conceptions of reality, or do you firmly believe in one truth? It's a challenge: on the one hand you are setting boundaries and passing on knowledge, on the other, you are inviting further research in which both sides participate.

The teacher's primary task is teaching students to take a critical view and stay open to counter-information. Pupils need to learn to consider other options and challenge their own assumptions. Don't exaggerate the risks involved, for that will get in the way of an open debate. Besides, real conspiracies do sometimes occur.

## **Questioning your own beliefs**

By not coming on too strong but instead facilitating the discussion, the exchange of thoughts, and the joint search for facts, you keep the lines of communication open. You become their partner in the investigation rather than 'the enemy' who only contradicts conspiracy thinking. This doesn't mean that you have to qualify every fact. Find the balance! The truth is not democratised to the extent that there is no truth left. You can claim your truth, but you must be willing to question it, and have it questioned. It is what you ask of your students; it is what you must be prepared to do yourself.

Are you willing to question your own beliefs? To start out by listening to your students, even if you disagree? Note that you can counteract their beliefs without taking an opposing stance. You can have students search for information, question each other, etcetera.

## ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A conversation in class about a conspiracy theory is best started off with some open questions. Can you explain...? What do you mean by...? Does anyone have a question about...? If you want to encourage students to explore counterarguments, you could ask: 'What would someone who disagrees with you say?' Or 'Can you give a counterexample?' Or you could ask all students: 'How can you check if this is true?'



### Focus on the appeal

If you can find the time to question and deconstruct a conspiracy theory with your students, keep in mind that its origin is emotional rather than rational. Try to get a feel for its appeal.

A conspiracy theory has appeal because it simplifies a complex reality. Try to find a creative way to question thinking in terms of 'we versus them'.

Conspiracy theories that students really believe in have become part of their identity. Refuting them or simply making fun of them equals attacking the students' sense of identity. As a result, the safe classroom climate and the rapport you have with the student go right out the window... So, there's a lot at stake!

**DO:**

## **GET TO WORK!**

You can visualise the appeal of conspiracy theories or fake news by having your students create them. Design a conspiracy that people will believe in; write a made-up news report, preferably with a photo or video, and try to convince people that they are real.

On [www.gestolengrootmoeder.nl](http://www.gestolengrootmoeder.nl), a Dutch website created by Peter Burger, researcher and teacher of journalism and new media, you'll find a variety of examples and tips. The best way to learn how (not) to do something is by trying it out for ourselves.

### **Safety first**

Casting doubt, questioning things, and putting them into perspective are all well and good, but, as mentioned before, you need to set boundaries. The main rule is that no one may consciously promote violence, incite hatred, hurt others, or stigmatise entire groups. The classroom is not an excuse for the development of 'enemy-thinking' or a search for scapegoats. This would endanger the safety of the classroom and the school climate.

For a debate on conspiracy thinking, you need a safe climate and a shared framework of standards and values. It is undoubtedly important to set boundaries in order to create the required safe climate. However, in order to keep the conversation going, you need to invite participation. It's a way to stay in contact and open up the discussion. In this discussion, the emphasis is on how people think, rather than on what they think.

**DO:**

## **MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES**

Find a photo that relates to a social issue, with a lot to see and people in it. With the class, look at the photo and start off by having students write down what they see. Next, have them write down which thoughts come to mind and what they would like to know about the people in the photo. Have students discuss what they have written down in pairs or small groups and have them share their groups' views with the whole class.

What were the differences?

Did student X notice different things compared to student Y? Why do their answers differ when the photo was the same?

**DO:**

## **MULTIPLE REALITIES**

You can use this format when discussing a major global conflict. Divide the group into four smaller groups and have one group follow the news on Facebook. The second group follows Dutch news network NOS, the third checks Twitter and the fourth group focuses on CNN. How is the conflict presented? Who gets the floor? Come up in advance with a number of questions that all groups need to consider. This activity illustrates the fact that we only see a small part of a very complex reality. You could also turn this into a physical activity. After one week, each group presents their results in a live news show in the classroom. Make sure that each student takes part in the activity. Subsequently, each pupil moves to another news channel at least once to experience a different perspective, a different 'reality'.





**DO:**

## **THINK FIRST, REACT LATER**

Provide students with a copy of a newspaper article on a complex social issue that you would like to discuss with them. It may concern a topic related to a conspiracy construct that you have picked up on, but it is not necessary. [Alternatively: have them watch a film clip.] Start out by giving them a few questions that they have to answer on their own, before giving them the opportunity to discuss the issue, for instance in small groups. Prepare a number of factual questions - open or multiple choice, whichever you prefer. For example: what did you see, what did X say, who did...? In other words, you ask students to think and reflect first and only give their opinion at a later stage! Experience shows that with this approach, students are less likely to throw in random opinions. Have the students use their answers to the questions to create a mind map before kicking off the discussion/conversation.



### **In conclusion**

The school is responsible for creating a pleasant climate in which everyone feels safe and can be themselves. A school must also ensure a good learning climate; students must be equipped for their lives in (future) society. Your students make up tomorrow's society. And a school should strive for an inclusive society with a place for everyone. An inclusive, safe learning environment can only come about by investing (or continuing to invest) in students' socio-emotional and civic skills.

## PRACTISE

How do you react to conspiracy thinking in your students? If this is a common occurrence at your school, it's smart to train yourself how to respond. It helps to practise! You and your colleagues can set up something yourselves, or you can take the 'Dialogue under Pressure' workshop of the School & Veiligheid Foundation. Or contact the Anne Frank Stichting's Educational Projects department and take the workshop on 'Responding to Discriminatory Remarks' or one of the other workshops. You can practise online as well. For more tips, see the last page.




## DON'T!

- Don't be alarmed by a student's conspiracy story.
- Do not silence a student, unless they propagate hatred or violence.
- Refuting or undermining a conspiracy construct by providing factual counter-information is often counterproductive.
- Don't try to win the debate; instead, try to have the discussion.

## DO!

- Try to find out where the conspiracy theory came from. What does this say about the student?
- Go on a search for the truth with your students. Be open and curious.
- Keep the balance; people can say or research as much as they like, but not all truth is relative.
- Find a format that questions thinking in terms of 'us versus them' or a format that encourages students to be open to counter-information and different perspectives.



THE TEACHER IS TRYING  
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BUT I HELD  
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PROUD OF  
YOU, SON..

SCHOOL  
REPORT  
D-  
C-  
C+  
B

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Even more information on the topic of conspiracy thinking can be found on the websites of the Anne Frank Stichting and the School & Veiligheid Foundation.

For additional activities, tips, training sessions, and teaching materials:

- 📄 [www.annefrank.org/educatie](http://www.annefrank.org/educatie)
- 📄 [www.schoolveiligheid.nl](http://www.schoolveiligheid.nl)
- 📄 <http://burgerschapmbo.nl>
- 📄 [www.gestolengrootmoeder.nl](http://www.gestolengrootmoeder.nl)

#### Credits

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