Conspiracy Theories, History, and Critical Thinking

Introduction

This SoTL project utilized a First-year Seminar on Conspiracy Theories and American History to examine how students think about conspiracy theories and how their thinking changes over time. The project draws on Anthony Ciccone's SoTL work (2008, 2016, 2018) to assess how first-year students engage in complex thinking. It seeks (1) to assess students' comprehension of conspiracy theories in American history and contemporary politics and society and (2) to assess students' comprehension of their own learning. It therefore engages in an inter-disciplinary approach to learning, drawing on history, political science, psychology, and cultural studies. As conspiracy theories often racial and ethnic minorities, the project also foregrounds equityminded pedagogy in an effort to raise awareness and improve student understanding of discrimination and racism.





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Methods

The project uses a series of three essays - at the beginning of the course, shortly after mid-term, and at the end of the course – to ask students to reflect on their comprehension of conspiracy theories, history, and critical thinking.

Reflection Essay 1

What is a conspiracy theory? Why do you think people believe conspiracy theories? Are there conspiracy theories that you find attractive? How did you learn about these theories?

Reflection Essay 2

Please spend some time reflecting on what you have learned so far about conspiracy theories and American history. How has your thinking changed? Based on your experiences in this class and others, how has your thinking changed about what learning is and what it is for?

Reflection Essay 3

Please spend some time reflecting on your understanding of conspiracy theories and American history. How have you come to understand conspiracy theories and their relationship to history? What do you believe are the most important things to understand about conspiracy theories and history? How has your thinking evolved over the course of the semester?

Essays were read for key terms and phrases as well as significant quotations. Although necessarily subjective, there was significant commonality among responses to draw some positive conclusions.







Observations

- Early in the semester, students most often appropriately described conspiracy theories as "explanations" (52%).
- Early descriptions of conspiracy theories as "crazy" subsided as the semester proceeded with more empathy expressed toward those who believe in conspiracy theories.
- 52% of students noted that people learned about, and believed in, conspiracy theories due to "social media".
- By midterm, 37% of students indicated their thinking about conspiracy theories had changed a lot, and another 37% indicated it had changed some.
- By midterm, many students noted the relation between conspiracy theories and racism (21%) and antisemitism (37%) and identified specific theories such as *The Protocols* of the Elders of Zion (5%) and the Yellow Peril (26%).
- At midterm, students also noted significant changes in their thinking in terms of **critical thinking** (42%) and **knowledge and skills** (42%). They also noted greater appreciation for **different perspectives** (37%).
- By the end of the semester, 59% of students noted the **impact of conspiratorial thinking** on history, and 29% noted the importance of understanding the **historical context** in which conspiracy theories develop.
- By the end of the semester, 47% of students noted improvements in critical thinking, 35% noted greater empathy, and 24% specifically mentioned increased scepticism toward social media.







Student Responses

Reflection Essay 1

- "I think that people believe in conspiracy theories because it is human nature to inherently distrust things that are not tangible or that people do not see themselves."
- "I think people turn to theories in an effort to explain why these things happen."
- "I think they appeal to a certain part of us, and of our brains, that enjoy musing about the 'what-ifs'."
- "That is another thing that is interesting to me that all throughout my schooling I have always just been informed of the truth instead of being challenged to make up my own mind about what I believe to be true."

Reflection Essay 2

- "When presented with information that goes along with their beliefs, people tend to accept that information as true without further investigation."
- "I never realized or understood how much of a grasp conspiracy theories truly have on our history. The biggest thing that has struck me throughout this semester is how deep rooted racism is throughout history and how there has been a large fear of different races throughout American history."

Reflection Essay 3

- "The most important understanding of conspiracy theories is context. They must be looked at through the lens of what it was like around the time it occurred and what transpired. Society changes as time goes on, and people cannot simply be labeled as crazy if they are just a product of the times."
- "One of the important takeaways involving history and conspiracy theories is that not everything is black and white. Sure most of the time conspiracies are proven to be false but sometimes they can be right. It's important not to say the other party is wrong, but to rather slowly understand how they feel and then try to make them see the truth."
- "These falsehoods and lies can cause people to come into power and stay in power, they can also hold a population in fear and dread."
- "After taking this course, I now realize that you can't believe everything you see online."

References

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Ciccone, Anthony, "Learning Matters: Asking Meaningful Questions" in Nancy Chick, ed. SoTL in Action (Stylus Publishing, 2018)

Ciccone, A., Meyers, R.A., & Waldmann, S. "What's so funny? Moving students toward complex thinking in a course on comedy and laughter". *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7 (3), 2008: 308-322.

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