

## Reconnecting with the Truth: Conspiracies, Perspective Taking, and Misinformation

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## **Reconnecting with the Truth: Conspiracies, Perspective Taking, and Misinformation**

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### **Abstract**

“I’ve done my research.” Misinformation has become a prevalent topic in communication courses, particularly those focused on argumentation, public speaking, or even interpersonal and family communication. Students thus benefit from adapting public speaking-focused assignments to illuminate how to understand - and thus combat- disinformation in their own lives. This assignment works toward this goal in two stages, allowing students to argue not just against misinformation and conspiracies, but also to argue for them as an act of empathy and understanding. The applied nature of this exercise also empowers instructors with a way to concretely address this issue in the classroom. In doing so, students are armed with real-life tools to address misinformation and false claims of “research.”

### **Courses**

Public Speaking, Argumentation, Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication

### **Introduction and Rationale**

Conspiracy theories have become an embedded part of our culture, and because of social media’s involvement, we have seen an explosion of these theories over the last several years, including in reference to the COVID 19 pandemic (Romer & Jamieson, 2020), and the 2020 United States Presidential Election (Chen, Deb, & Ferrara, 2021). Many remain skeptical of these theories, but others put time and effort into their popularity and spread, be it out of a legitimate belief, for their own financial profit, or both. The reality is many people are swept up in misinformation for arguably noble reasons (Tavernise, 2021), and are deserving of sympathy and patience rather than anger and further stigmatization.

The fact of the matter is even if students are sympathetic to situations where a conspiratorial belief is demonstrably false, it remains difficult to know how to productively engage in discussion or argumentation when the other party or parties are not creating messages founded in truth. For this assignment, we will take a look at both sides of these arguments, and thus be able to better understand their appeal and how to discursively push back against them

### **Objectives of Activity**

- To increase students' ability to speak persuasively
- To engage in perspective taking
- To better refine students' critical thinking regarding research and sources
- To foster empathy and understanding for those who are victims of misinformation
- To create the potential for deeper or healthier interpersonal connections with key others

### **Description of Activity**

This activity requires a total of 120 minutes of class time, spread out across two sessions. Holistically, this assignment is designed to expose students to the “research” process that facilitates individuals being swept up in misinformation, and then how to better address that misinformation through effective, well-sourced refutation. Students identify their own key conspiracies, seek out the surface level false “research” that leads to the adoption of these beliefs, and then present them as a mock-persuasive speech. Students then dismantle these false pieces of information through a properly sourced and researched presentation.

### **Procedure/Steps**

For the first phase, students will list five different prevalent conspiracies they think are ridiculous, without merit, etc. The instructor will assemble students into groups where they must create an argument FOR one of the specified theories, requiring them to find “research” in memes, viral content, and anything they may find relevant to support the theory. The student groups will then give a “persuasive” presentation on their findings.

In phase two of the assignment, students will return to the same groups and create a presentation based on legitimate, peer-reviewed sources, statistics from reputable outlets, etc. debunking the same theory they had previously advocated for. The students will look at the credibility of their sources, learn how to evaluate the content, and read data correctly.

### **Debriefing**

Phase one will conclude with a debrief where the class as a whole will discuss why these memes, misleading research, etc. can be persuasive and effective for so many. This often allows students to disclose to the degree they are comfortable situations in their own lives where friends, loved ones, and even parents have adopted conspiratorial beliefs.

Phase two will conclude with another debrief for the process as a whole. Discussion points can include (but certainly are not limited to):

- Which content was better designed (aesthetically)?
- Which content had more “face” credibility?
- What is it about misleading or false content that is so appealing?
- Was any disinformation legitimately compelling?

- Some (former) conspiracy theories have ultimately been proven to be true. Discuss and have students search online for examples.

Conclude by emphasizing that individuals who are caught in conspiracy theories are human beings and worth understanding. Once again, this creates an opportunity to encourage students to share, if they so choose, any personal experiences with family or other significant others who have subscribed to such content. Discuss how issues such as lack of control, social isolation, and other communicative factors can make conspiracies and their social groups more appealing (Douglas et al, 2019). It should be discussed how anyone is vulnerable to some degree of misinformation or manipulation, and it is a situation to be approached with a degree of empathy and understanding.

### **Appraisal**

This activity is a very popular one. Students find the activity relatable, exciting, and entertaining. The applied and current nature of the assignment is not lost on students and often results in significant levels of engagement. It is also well designed for online learning, either through synchronous, asynchronous or hybrid modalities. Students have reported a greater level of empathy and understanding for those, both online strangers and people in their own lives, who have adopted conspiracy theories as facts. Students come away from this activity with a real-life skill; being able to properly articulate the difference between “Research” (aka peer-reviewed sources) and searching for information online.

### **Conclusion**

Misinformation is not going to cease being an issue in public life any time soon, and thus neither will it stop being an important and popular source of discussion and pedagogy within the communication curriculum. This assignment engages students in a unique way while still retaining a foundation of proven persuasive speaking pedagogy. This is by no means a solution to the issue of misinformation. However, it is a tool that can be used not only to spark significant classroom discussion, but also to help students in their real lives.

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