

‘Do the Research’: Conspiracy Theories, Justice, and the Teaching of Critical Thinking

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The traditional teaching of critical thinking has focused on developing in students the ability to become skeptical of received narratives. This worked well in a monoculture where information was scarce, and information was primarily presented by authority figures. Now, when there are so many online sources of non-official information – many of it much more available than official sources – it is often impossible to critically examine all of it.

As well, once young people are embedded in a stream of online misinformation, the critical thinking habits they have developed can be used to reject official sources, established science and demands for equality. The end result is people who use traditional critical thinking habits to dismiss climate change, BLM protests, and COVID vaccines, and to embrace reactionary politics.

In order to prepare students for this new world of information and misinformation, we cannot rely on old ways of thinking about critical thinking. We need to recognize that when we teach “ideologically neutral” forms of thinking, we are actually encouraging the entrenchment of traditional ideas and biases. If we want our students to “think critically” we have to recognize that their thinking has to expand to take in other viewpoints, to embrace discomfort, and to work towards a more just and equitable world.

At the end of this talk, concrete ideas about how critical thinking teaching can be revamped to address these challenges will be presented.

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