

# Managing Conspiracy Theories in The Classroom Through Research-Based Teacher Training

Clare Birchall (Department of English), Peter Knight (University of Manchester),  
Jeremy Hayward (UCL Institute of Education), Teachers (various schools)





**Conspiracy theories – emerging findings** Birchall, C. & Knight, P. (2023)  
<http://infodemic.eu/>

Characteristics of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories



- Mobilising:** Increasingly taken to the streets, displaying conspiracy theories on. (Capitol riots, UK:159 Phone masts attacked, protests outside schools)
- Convergence:** The combination of previously distinct conspiracy theories, e.g. anti-vaxx + Qanon, great reset.
- Enmeshed:** Now difficult to isolate conspiracy theories from other modes of information
- Grievances:** Some conspiracy belief may be formed from grievances (some legitimate)

Image still from the training provided

## PROJECT SUMMARY

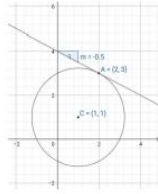
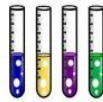
The *Managing Conspiracy Theories in The Classroom* project, led by Clare Birchall from the Department of English, sought to address the challenges educators face when discussing conspiracy theories with their students. Given the growing prevalence of conspiracy theories online and their influence on young minds, the project aimed to bridge the gap between academic research and practical classroom applications.

This collaborative effort brought together academic experts, such as Peter Knight, and experienced educational consultant Jeremy Hayward, to co-create a framework tailored for teachers. The focus was on developing practical, adaptable tools that could be integrated into everyday teaching environments, providing educators with the confidence and skills needed to engage in difficult conversations about conspiracy theories. The project included the development and delivery of workshops, as well as focus groups, to gather teacher insights and refine the materials to ensure they addressed the specific challenges faced in various classroom contexts. The training aimed to not only improve classroom dynamics but also to foster critical thinking and resilience against misinformation among students.

## HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

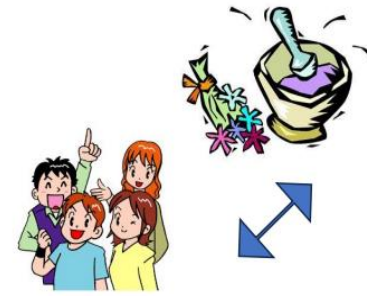
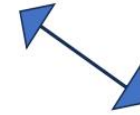
The project emerged from Clare's ongoing research into the social and cultural implications of conspiracy theories. Aware of the increasing visibility and influence of such theories, especially through digital and social media platforms, she recognised a pressing need to support educators in addressing this issue. Many teachers lacked the tools or confidence to discuss conspiracy theories in a balanced and informed way, making it challenging to foster critical thinking and open dialogue among students.

Clare collaborated with Peter Knight, an expert in conspiracy theories based at the University of Manchester, and Jeremy Hayward, a consultant with extensive experience in teacher training. Together, they formulated the idea of creating a research-based training program for educators. The project aimed to merge theoretical insights from academia with the practical experiences of teachers, ensuring that the resources developed were both academically rigorous and accessible for classroom use.



Official,  
'legitimate'  
knowledge

Official vs  
unofficial  
knowledge



Folk, popular,  
'illegitimate'  
knowledge'/ideas

'the velocity and scale of knowledge exchange... is unique' with "illegitimate knowledge" now enjoy[ing] mass participation' (Birchall 2006: 5).

Image still from the training provided

## WHAT HAPPENED?

The project was implemented in several stages, starting with the creation of the training framework and materials. Clare and her team designed a series of workshops and interactive sessions that combined theoretical knowledge about conspiracy theories with hands-on activities and strategies that educators could use in their classrooms. These sessions were designed to be adaptable, catering to the diverse needs of teachers working in various educational environments.

To ensure the program's relevance and practicality, the team organised focus groups with teachers, gathering their feedback and experiences. These sessions were crucial in shaping the training, as they highlighted specific challenges and concerns educators face when dealing with conspiracy theories. For instance, teachers expressed a need for strategies that went beyond mere fact-checking, focusing instead on fostering critical thinking among students and empowering teachers to manage the discussion when disinformation arose in educational settings.

Following the focus groups, the team refined the training materials and delivered a series of workshops. These workshops provided a supportive environment where teachers could explore different approaches, role-play scenarios, and discuss their own classroom experiences. The sessions emphasised the importance of creating a safe space for open dialogue, where students could express their views and learn to critically evaluate information.

The project culminated in the development of a comprehensive training framework that combines academic insights with practical tools, creating a robust resource for teachers. The project demonstrated the potential for long-term impact, as the training materials can be further refined and expanded to reach more schools and educators across the UK.

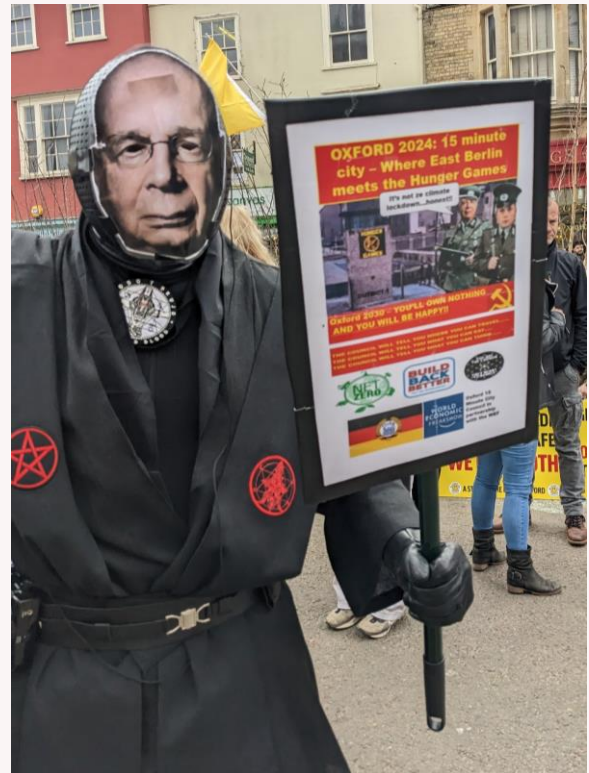
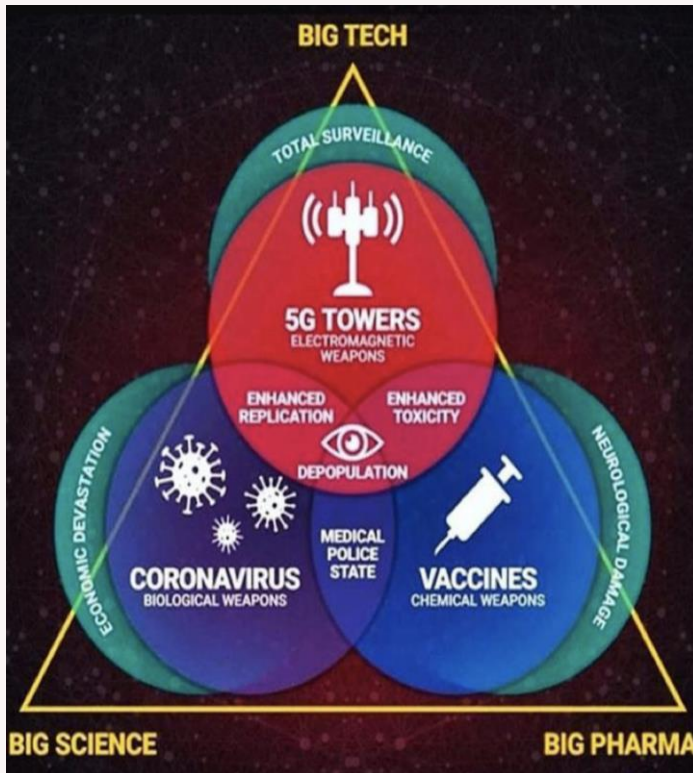


Photo © Annie Kelly

## WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The *Managing Conspiracy Theories in The Classroom* project had a significant impact on educators, students, and the broader academic community. The training sessions reached 866 teachers across multiple events, ranging from large conferences to smaller, customised professional development sessions. The feedback from participants indicated that the training had a tangible effect on their ability to address and manage conspiracy theories in the classroom. Teachers reported feeling more confident and prepared to foster balanced, open conversations with their students, effectively using the tools and strategies presented during the workshops.

The project also succeeded in bridging the gap between academic research and practical classroom applications. By incorporating real-world classroom scenarios shared by the focus group participants, Clare and her team ensured that the training materials were relevant and adaptable for various teaching environments. This co-production approach not only made the resources more effective but also highlighted the importance of collaboration between educators and academics.

An unexpected but positive outcome was the interest from school leadership teams, who saw the value in equipping their staff with the skills to manage misinformation and encourage critical thinking. The engagement of school leaders has opened up avenues for expanding the reach of the training framework to other schools and regions, providing opportunities for future development and long-term sustainability.

Additionally, the project provided valuable insights into the broader challenges of teaching in the digital age, highlighting the need for further research into effective strategies for handling misinformation and fostering media literacy. The project team plans to use these insights to refine the training materials further and explore additional partnerships to expand the impact of their work.

## CLARE'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Collaborate with Professionals: When planning and implementing impact activities, consider hiring skilled professionals who specialise in designing and managing public engagement projects.
2. Build Flexibility into Timelines and Funding: Collaborating with community participants often brings unforeseen logistical challenges, especially around timing and payments. A flexible timeline and pre-arranged contingency plans can be particularly valuable when working within institutional frameworks that may slow down processes.
3. Create Lasting, Accessible Resources: Designing resources that remain accessible after the project ends can extend its impact substantially. The project provided resources and training that can be revisited, adapted, and reused by educators, ensuring that the benefits continue well beyond the initial engagement.

## FURTHER READING

1. Hayward, J., & Gronland, G. (2021). *Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom: Guidance for Teachers*. Institute of Education, UCL. Available at: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10135938/>
2. Hayward, J. (n.d.). Responding to Conspiracy - Teacher Training. [YouTube Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNyTADoPTak>
3. Birchall, C., & Knight, P. (2022). *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19*. Taylor & Francis. Open access version available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003315438/conspiracy-theories-time-covid-19-clare-birchall-peter-knight>

Photo © Getty Images



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For further information:  
Email: [ah-impact@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:ah-impact@kcl.ac.uk)  
Or visit: [www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact)