The Fine Line Between Bravery and Conspiracy: Teaching Civil Disobedience and Conspiracy Theories in the Classroom

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This article is about teaching civil disobedience and conspiracy theories – two complex, sensitive, and emotional issues. By linking theory and practice in the form of a lesson sequence, it will illustrate that teaching is about empowering students in their development of skills toward independent, reflected, and critical thinking skills. The teacher only orchestrates the process by purposefully providing valuable input and offering a wide array of perspectives and strategies, which support students on their way to forming their own opinions and developing competences that last and make them capable individuals in and – most notably – outside the classroom.

*Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dem Unterrichten von zivilem Ungehorsam und Verschwörungstheorien – zwei sehr komplexen, sensiblen und emotionalen Themenbereichen. Durch die Verknüpfung von Theorie und Praxis in Form einer Unterrichtssequenz soll veranschaulicht werden, dass Unterrichten bedeutet, Schüler*innen in ihrer Entwicklung von Kompetenzen, wie unabhängigem, reflektiertem und kritischem Denken, zu befähigen. Die Lehrperson orchestriert diesen Prozess, indem zweckmäßige und wertvolle Inhalte sowie eine weite Bandbreite an Perspektiven und Herangehensweisen angeboten werden. Dies unterstützt die Schüler*innen auf ihrem Weg hin zur Bildung eigener Meinungen und Entwicklung nachhaltiger Kompetenzen aktiv und befähigt sie zu artikulationsfähigen Menschen in – und im Besonderen – außerhalb der Klasse.*

Planning Prerequisites

Teaching is many things. Above all, though, it is about empowering students to learn, question, develop, and flourish as autonomous people who will be well-prepared for future challenges outside the classroom. It is a common demand that school should prepare students for life. But what exactly does this mean, and how can it be accomplished? Surely school is about achievement: hard facts in the form of (general) knowledge and theory. However, it should most notably be about performance: the (soft) skills or competences and practice. Seneca did not criticize education for no reason when he claimed that it is rather the classroom and not life students learn for. He thought that by focusing on the study of literature, education was too theoretical (Seneca, 2016). Only later did people turn his initial quote around, and thus the renowned saying "it is life and not school that we learn for" was born. In the end, the bottom line is the same: practice, not without, but over theory. Theoretical input and content are important, but only as a means to an end. It will only be a vehicle to help students engage with, learn to understand – and even more importantly – assess an issue. It is the teachers' responsibility to accompany students on their way to independent and sensible reasoning. Modern society needs citizens who can independently and responsibly understand and assess facts and distinguish them from bogus information. Before students can reach this goal, content has to be offered and taught to them by teachers while always providing a safe environment where students have the possibility to train and hone their skills in decision making without being judged.

There is not only a fine line between bravery and conspiracy, but also between teaching content to students and empowering them to independent reasoning. It is important – and very difficult for many teachers – to teach merely content, but not opinions. Students need to form their own opinions; teachers will only see them through this process. How should teachers now go about this? The principle is to provide content, help students understand and find their way around it, and finally always endow them with the opportunity to form an independent opinion. The following approach aims at showcasing how the abovementioned principle can be applied to teaching civil disobedience and conspiracy theories, as carefully considered opinions seem to be especially vital for students to confidentially maneuver this topical area.

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By trying to offer a great variety of topics, textbooks are usually only able to offer a rather trivial and simplified overview, but not a diverse, in-depth approach, and they do not succeed in highlighting all aspects of a matter. Moreover, they will largely focus on historical but not current events, which is understandable, due to the time that passes between designing, writing, reviewing, and publishing a textbook. What may be a current and pressing issue at the beginning of the writing process might seem like ancient history some time later. Textbooks may still be a valuable source to some; still, it seems reasonable to go the extra mile and compile and curate one's own selection of texts and sources for students to work with. Against the backdrop of the complexity of the field and the students being learners of English as a foreign language, the material and lesson plan is geared toward academic secondary school students in years eleven and/or twelve.

Fundamentals for Students – On Civil Disobedience

Before students can discuss and evaluate different viewpoints and take up a personal stance on civil disobedience or conspiracy theories, they need to develop a global understanding of both. It is necessary to provide them with material to foster knowledge of how these concepts came into existence, where their historic roots stem from and how society has practiced and handled the abovementioned concepts up to the present. Still, the first activity should be a short brainstorming to see what the class already knows. At first, students should brainstorm the term civil disobedience. It is the teacher's task to moderate and channel the ideas and to set right apart from wrong regarding relevance. The brainstorming is important in that it illustrates to students that the classroom as a collective usually knows quite a lot; however, it will also show that some of the students' knowledge might be quite superficial and not necessarily correct. This is where the teacher has a crucial role in helping the students understand what is factually correct and which ideas need to be abandoned due to being imprecise or simply incorrect. An activity like this should help students reflect and reclassify their own perceived knowledge and develop a grasp of what the concept is and means.

It now makes sense to let students work with the Declaration of Independence first, before then trying to fully establish a universal definition of civil disobedience. It would of course be easier to just provide students with a definition at this point; however, this would also mean that the character of independently exploring a new subject field would be lost. Remembering Seneca is crucial; this approach to teaching civil disobedience and conspiracy theories is centered around learning by doing – students should acquire skills themselves to have an enduring learning effect that persists in the world outside the classroom. When reading the text, students should try to identify passages that indicate civil disobedience. The following three passages show that by unanimously declaring independence from the British Crown in 1776, the thirteen American colonies have done nothing but practiced civil disobedience:

> That all Men are created equal […] with certain unalienable Rights. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.
>
> Prudence, indeed, will dictate, that Governments long established, should not be changed for light and transient Causes […] But when a long Train of Abuses and Usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security.
>
> We have warned them [the British Crown], from Time to Time, of Attempts by their Legislature to extend an unwarrantable Jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the Circumstances of our Emigration and Settlement here. We have appealed to their native Justice and Magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the Ties of our common Kindred to disavow these Usurpations, which

> would inevitably interrupt our Connections and Correspondence. They too have been deaf to the Voice of Justice and of Consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the Necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the Rest of Mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends. (Jefferson, 1776)

Based on these – and other quotes identified by students – the teacher should prompt students to discuss whether the actions of the Founding Fathers were justified or not. This will probably also open up new vistas on the founding of the United States. To promote active participation, the teacher can then point out that the Declaration of Independence does indeed justify acts of civil disobedience and above all it clearly demands of a government that it has to make sure that the people's fundamental rights are granted and protected (Rosen & Rubenstein, n.d.), and that a government which does not fulfill this task will have to undergo change. All of this can clearly be deduced from the text and, of course, it is wise to have students assess this particular approach to the U.S.-American government and its duties during a discussion, but also have them relate their thoughts to their own government afterwards.

History and Terminology

The next teaching sequence will focus on the historical background of civil disobedience and work toward a universal definition. Students will not usually be aware that the term civil disobedience was devised by Henry David Thoreau in his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" in 1848 – several decades after the Declaration of Independence had been written. So, based on the discussion of the previous lesson, students will recognize that civil disobedience had already been practiced before Thoreau defined it. To understand the origins of the theory, it is crucial to expose students to Thoreau's original text. As reading the whole manuscript would take a long time, excerpts could be used in class. Working with key statements is a very effective way to familiarize students with a topic; therefore, a selection of quotations is part of this lesson plan. Based on the quotations, students should work on a classroom definition of civil disobedience, which will later be compared with definitions from research literature.

It is necessary to know – especially for students – that Thoreau declined to pay taxes as he was not willing to support a government that engaged in a war and imposed the Fugitive Slave Act. His protest even had him incarcerated by the government, and many after him that have engaged in civil disobedience have been shunned by societies and viewed as opponents (Brownlee, 2021). Students should now get together in groups and analyze a selection of quotes from Thoreau's essay according to different criteria.

- The first group should work with Thoreau's (1995) quote that "all men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable." The teacher could ask students to focus on the issue of what students themselves would define as "great and unendurable" tyranny imposed by a government and where "great and unendurable" starts.
- The second group should discuss democracy and the power of the individual by looking at Thoreau's (1995) statements that "there will never be a really free and enlightened state until the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived" and that "any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already."
- A third group of students would then broach the issue of violence in acts of civil disobedience by examining the lines "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest" and "what I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" together with "a minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority" (Thoreau, 1995).
- A further group should then set priorities on possible violations of laws during periods of civil disobedience as Thoreau (1995) vigorously claims, "I say, break the law. Let your

life be a counter friction to stop the machine" beside "it is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually" and finally complements that "if a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible" (1995).

- Finally, a group could address alternative forms of government besides democracy when scrutinizing Thoreau's (1995) words, "I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically" as well as whether "a democracy, such as we know it, [is] the last improvement possible in government."

After the group work, there will be a plenary presentation and discussion of each group's findings to make sure all participants are well informed about every aspect that has been addressed by the various groups. The teacher will moderate the discussion and ask or answer questions accordingly to make sure that a great number of students participates. Following the discussion students will put their own definitions down in writing and then have a look at what all their classmates wrote. This will again help them to see what their definition might have missed or where they may also have included things that are not part of civil disobedience. The next step constitutes the transition from loosely-knit definitions of civil disobedience by students to scientific definitions found in academic literature. In this phase various definitions of civil disobedience are discussed and assessed. This is a necessary step to illustrate what a scientific definition can look like. It is also important to mention that students' definitions will very often already be close to academic definitions. Teachers should point out to their students that by only engaging with the topic they will have managed to define the concept quite well on their own. In this context it is not necessary to agree on a classroom definition; this would already be teaching opinions, which should be avoided. Students should now be competent enough – taking everything they have already learned about civil disobedience into account – to establish their own definition or choose an academic one that they consider appropriate. Teachers should, however, offer a diverse selection of definitions to highlight the fact that there are various definitions and – as this is not natural sciences – a single definition does not exist.

Familiarizing students with a selection of definitions helps them compare their own definition to those of scholars and consequently also sharpen it. A starting point could be John Rawls (1971), who described civil disobedience as a political act that is necessarily public and nonviolent but still breaks the law aiming at changing laws or policies, whereas the people who engage in acts of civil disobedience are still loyal to laws in general. According to William Smith (2004), civil disobedience is a public protest of a political nature against states and their policies. On top of that, constitutional democracies may even warrant acts of civil disobedience, and people engaging in these acts will argue that they are eligible to break laws for their cause. This is similar to Mathias Klang (2005) who adds that people involved in civil disobedience claim that their breaking a law is justified, because by doing so they oppose a higher injustice and therefore claim to act morally righteously, nonetheless. Thoreau, however, who coined the term civil disobedience, did not aim at defining the concept within a strict set of sentences as he did not look at it from a meta-level as many scholars after him did, but rather described what civil disobedience was to him by naming examples and reasons for him to engage in it. Looking at Thoreau's descriptions, though, one can say that civil disobedience meant to him what it meant to the abovementioned researchers, with the notable difference that he did not demand civil disobedience to be nonviolent, since – contrary to all other definitions – the absence of violence as a pillar of civil disobedience is not mentioned in his essay. After

having dealt with those definitions, every student should now be empowered to master the historical background of civil disobedience as well as the terminology autonomously and confidently.

Moral Implications

The next lessons will concentrate on deliberating two aspects of civil disobedience: at first, whether civil disobedience justifies breaking the law and possibly even committing violence, and secondly, whether people should still adhere to the law when it comes to their own punishment after engaging in acts of civil disobedience. As food for thought, students can be taught John Rawls' principle that "violent acts likely to injure are incompatible with civil disobedience as a mode of address" (1971, p. 366), whereas Thoreau, while never ruling out acts of violence, proclaims that "in fact, I quietly declare war with the State" (Thoreau, 1995). This should give the students enough material to debate the first aspect mentioned. It is probably best to have students discuss this in pairs first. The aim here is to have a discussion that leads into a brainstorming activity where students should eventually also consider possible approaches to civil disobedience that are not congruent with their own opinions. The teacher will point out that it is always important to look at the whole spectrum of opinions and approaches. This will help to better understand other people's reasoning and hopefully foster tolerance among students. Moreover, collecting arguments for or against violating laws (including or excluding forms of violence) will already be a preparational activity for a debate further down the line. In a next step students will then move on to conversing about the second issue raised above and answer the question whether someone who acts in civil disobedience and breaks laws should accept being punished for that. In this context it may be worthwhile for the teacher to mention again that Thoreau went to prison for his actions and that Rawls (1971) clearly states that people who willingly participate in acts of civil disobedience do accept the legal consequences for breaching laws, as this shows their general faith in laws. Next, students will do online research and explore various incidents of civil disobedience, what sparked them, and possible change they brought. They are instructed to pick one incidence that they present to the class and discuss whether the end justified the means. After having assessed other people's actions, it is important to reflect one's own behavior and muse about personal experiences with civil disobedience. Students will exchange views on their own points of contact with civil disobedience; they are, however, instructed to avoid judging their classmates' behavior.

The following lesson will then be devoted to setting boundaries of where civil disobedience ends and other forms of protest begin. Kimberley Brownlee (2021) argues that civil disobedience "is generally regarded as more morally defensible than both ordinary offences and other forms of protest such as militant action or coercive violence." By that time, the concept of civil disobedience has been defined thoroughly, which will allow students to judge actions more proficiently. Moreover, students will – based on their analysis of the theory as well as the reflection on their own behavior – by now also have a conception of what they might consider as appropriate or inappropriate. Should they have engaged in civil disobedience themselves, students will have experienced first-hand that they themselves consider their acts as morally justified, no matter what other people might say. This firm conviction can also be found with Thoreau (1995), who claims that

> under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison […] where the State places those who are not with her but *against* her.

The belief that his own acts were morally justified and time in prison acceptable is fortified when he continues reasoning that

> if any think that their influence would be lost [in prison], and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State […] they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person

By arguing that way, Thoreau defends his own acts as just and conversely depicts the government as unjust. It would obviously be one-dimen-

sional not to put oneself in the shoes of the authorities; therefore, students should now try to define limits of civil disobedience and differentiate it from other forms of violence as this is a challenge the authorities face; they will have to assert where civilized protest ends and forms of resistance that are a threat to public safety start. Carter et al. (2020) highlight that the city of Seattle has frequently been a place of social unrest and protest, most recently due to the Black Lives Matter movement. It is also a place that has frequently been criticized for its forceful and violent handling of protest, using tear gas and police violence while simultaneously being accused of institutional racism. While everyone involved agrees that there is urgent need for change, the question of 'how' remains unanswered. The protests may have been successful at first sight, but there is more to it. The success came at a cost. On the one hand, trust in police forces is lost and rebuilding it will require time and effort, whereas on the other hand those protests, according to Carter et al. (2020), "have given voice and momentum to an emerging social movement with an urgency and passion that made the Pacific Northwest a poster child for both ends of the political spectrum," which can lead to dangerous radicalism. Not only Seattle but also other cities in the region, such as Portland, saw – besides peaceful protest – an increase "in violence between police, protesters and emboldened adherents to armed alt-right and quasi-racist movements," as Carter et al. (2020) argue. Those protests and clashes continued and expanded to looting, arson and vandalizing property, such as shops, in city centers. Of course, the vast majority of protesters were peaceful and just wanted to make themselves heard, but those small groups of agitators caused massive problems and simultaneously illustrated the difficulties the authorities have. They seem to be unable to cope with various forms of protest and cannot react appropriately. Carter et al. state that "Seattle police were unprepared for the anti-cop anger expressed by the massive crowds burning five police cars and throwing rocks and bottles at officers" while "police often retaliated against the crowds with every less-lethal weapon at their disposal, including tear gas" (2020). They further elaborate that "the strategy spurred public outrage [and] political backlash," whereas at the same time "officers [were] lashing out indiscriminately against demonstrators, in violation of the [...] Constitution" (2020). In the end, even a lawsuit has been filed against the city of Seattle where Black Lives Matter Seattle King Cty. v. City of Seattle (2020) claim that demonstrators were only seeking a way to protest against injustices suffered by Black people at the hands of police forces while the Seattle Police Department (SPD) has repeatedly and indiscriminately used disproportionate force in the form of less-lethal weapons, such as tear gas and chemical irritants, to keep protesters from exerting their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech, although this is granted by the Constitution's First Amendment.

At the same time, the city of Seattle has publicly accessible documents defining various forms of protest and counter strategies. However, the incidences during the last wave of protests also show how difficult it might be to assess and react appropriately and correctly, especially in a situation where peaceful mass protest is infiltrated by disruptive and violent radicals. To help students understand the big picture, they should now investigate the city of Seattle's protocol regarding "social unrest." The city starts out by defining social unrest as "civil disorders, acts of mass civil disobedience, and strikes." Interestingly, the wording is quite negative as all these acts are considered "acts by groups of people that are intended to disrupt a community or organization" (Seattle, n.d.). The protocol goes on by stating that borders between the three are fluid. Civil disorder is described as violent riots where violence can either aim at other people or symbols that represent enemy images. It is very important that riots are not necessarily connected to civil disobedience as they can also happen after sporting events. Protest and civil disobedience are acknowledged as mainly peaceful and an American right. However, "the right of citizens to protest must be balanced against the rights of non-protesting citizens to conduct their own business" (Seattle, n.d.). This, of course, justifies police operation to ensure everybody's rights are granted. In the end, students should understand various forms of civil unrest, be able to assess appropriate measures,

and be prepared for a debate on civil disobedience. For the debate, students will randomly be put in two different groups, whereas one group argues for and the other one against the statement that "civil disobedience is a necessary form of protest for the people." They will then get together in their groups and prepare arguments for the debate. Debating will teach them to argue for a viewpoint, which can of course be especially difficult should the perspective one has to advocate not be their own. Usually, the first and last speakers of each group will have twice the talking time of the other students (two minutes versus one) to not only present their personal argument but also introduce the group's perspective or summarize it at the end. It is important that debates are not interrupted and that speakers will have to adhere to their time limits. The teacher will be in the position of hosting the debate and enforcing the rules. This can also be done by a student, should there be an uneven number of students in a class. After the debate it will also be the teacher's duty to assess which group was more convincing and therefore the winner of the debate. It makes sense to also provide individual feedback to each student personally afterwards. The end of the debate will then also mark the end of the teaching sequence on civil disobedience. From a teacher's perspective, content that has been worked on with students and the language competences students need to show when engaging with said topic will also have to be assessed. One way to do so would be to design standardized tasks (English level B2) to assess the students in speaking and writing. Sample tasks, for a speaking task that could either be used in class or for oral matriculation exams and a writing task that could be used for a homework or in a written exam, could look like Table 1 and 2.

From Understanding Reasons to Critical Reasoning – On Conspiracy Theories

The protests in Seattle came from both sides of the political spectrum (Carter et al. 2020). Where the ends of the political spectrum are, conspiracy theories may begin. This is also the reason for linking these two topics within this lesson sequence. The next sessions will teach students conspiracy theories and how to deal with them in a reflected and reasonable way. The first step would focus on defining conspiracy theories. Before definitions are discussed, students should explore cases of conspiracy theories. They can also focus on things that they might even consider as comical due to the theories' implausibility. They will, however, have to understand that conspiracy theories and conspiracists will have to be taken seriously as conspiracy theories have always been – and will probably always be – around and as Douglas and Sutton (2015) put it, "conspiracy theories range from outlandish […] to unproven […] to true (the Watergate affair)." When students have done their research, they will present their findings. It will be best to have them design a mind map on a large sheet with the most important facts. Those posters can then be put up on the walls of the classroom, similar to pictures in an art gallery. Students will then explore the exhibition at their own pace and reflect on the conspiracy theories on display. Based on their impressions, students can then start discussing what they have seen and how they would assess the individual cases of conspiracy theories. Probably the students could then also rank the theories based on how strong their reactions toward them were. At the end of the activity students will likely be able to define the concept. They should then write up definitions on the board and in a discussion agree on a classroom definition of conspiracy theories. This definition will then be compared to academic definitions.

Table 1: Individual long turn: Civil disobedience

I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. *Henry David Thoreau* Give a five-minute talk about the topic of civil disobedience in which you • **interpret** the quotation • **analyze** whether violence can be justified as an act of civil disobedience • **highlight** personal experiences with civil disobedience

Table 2: Blog writing: Civil disobedience

You have read the following post on young&politics.org, a blog on teenagers and politics.

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Francine B.
Yesterday, 7:56 a.m.

Yesterday was exciting. I was part of a demonstration for climate action. There were many people and some very inspiring speakers. Some protesters also blocked the roads with sit-ins. When the police tried to make them move again, things got heated up. People started insulting and attacking the police. I don't know what to think about it…

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You have decided to comment on this blog post. In your **comment** you should:

- give your opinion on Francine's experiences
- argue whether you think civil disobedience can bring a change
- outline your personal experiences with protest

Write around **250 words**.

Pummer et al. (2021) argue that "conspiracy theories are built on the notion that a powerful group is acting in secret, thus building on (and potentially also creating) suspicion toward the powerful such as the government." They add that conspiracy theories also undermine solidarity within societies. Conspiracy theories about vaccinations or global warming will reduce pro-vaccine or pro-environmental behavior (Jolley & Douglas, 2014, Van der Linden, 2015, as cited in Pummer, et al., 2021). Van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) are very precise in their definition by claiming that several ingredients make up a conspiracy theory: those include a hypothetical pattern and deliberate plans by a coalition in the fom of a group of people working together, posing a harmful threat, and acting in secrecy. Interestingly they also provide a worthwhile take at why conspiracy theories exist by claiming that either "conspiracy theories are a by-product of a suite of cognitive mechanisms (e.g., pattern perception, agency detection)" or that they are "evolved (a) to alert ancestral humans to the possibility that others were forming dangerous coalitions against them and (b) to stimulate appropriate actions to fend off such threats." Should evolutionary resaons be responsible for the existence of conspiracy theories, they will not be a product of our modern times but have been around for much longer. This is also supported by Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas (2017), who argue that it is understandable that people assume that conspiracy theories are a modern phenomenon and on the rise, especially with the internet offering an abundance of material. However, studies show that the prevalence of conspiracy theories in letters addressed to American newspapers has not significantly increased from 1890 to 2010 (Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, 2014, as cited in van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). What is evident, though, is the fact that the prevalence of conspiracy theories correlates with events of major crises such as economic and financial crises, climate change or wars (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Naturally the COVID-19 pandemic has been a breeding ground for conspiracy theories, and as Monica Stephens (2020) writes, it went hand in hand with "a social media 'infodemic' [that] has bolstered fears by amplifying misinformation with misconstrued statistics, conspiracy theories, rumors, and propaganda," claiming that the virus had been created in China or "could spread through 5G technology." The fact that people, including American politicians, think or at least claim that COVID-19 has been created in a lab is a vital feature of conspiracy theories as they

> provide people with simplified answers, specifically to questions of how a certain crisis situation emerged, and which societal actors can and cannot be trusted. These answers are highly relevant for how people cope with crisis situations [and] help people to make sense of the world by specifying the causes of important events, which further helps them predict, and anticipate, the future. (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017)

In an interview with the American Psychological Association, Douglas (2021) elaborates that conspiracy theories "can normally be defined as a proposed plot carried out in secret, usually by a powerful group of people who have some kind of sinister goal" while emphasizing that conspiracy the-

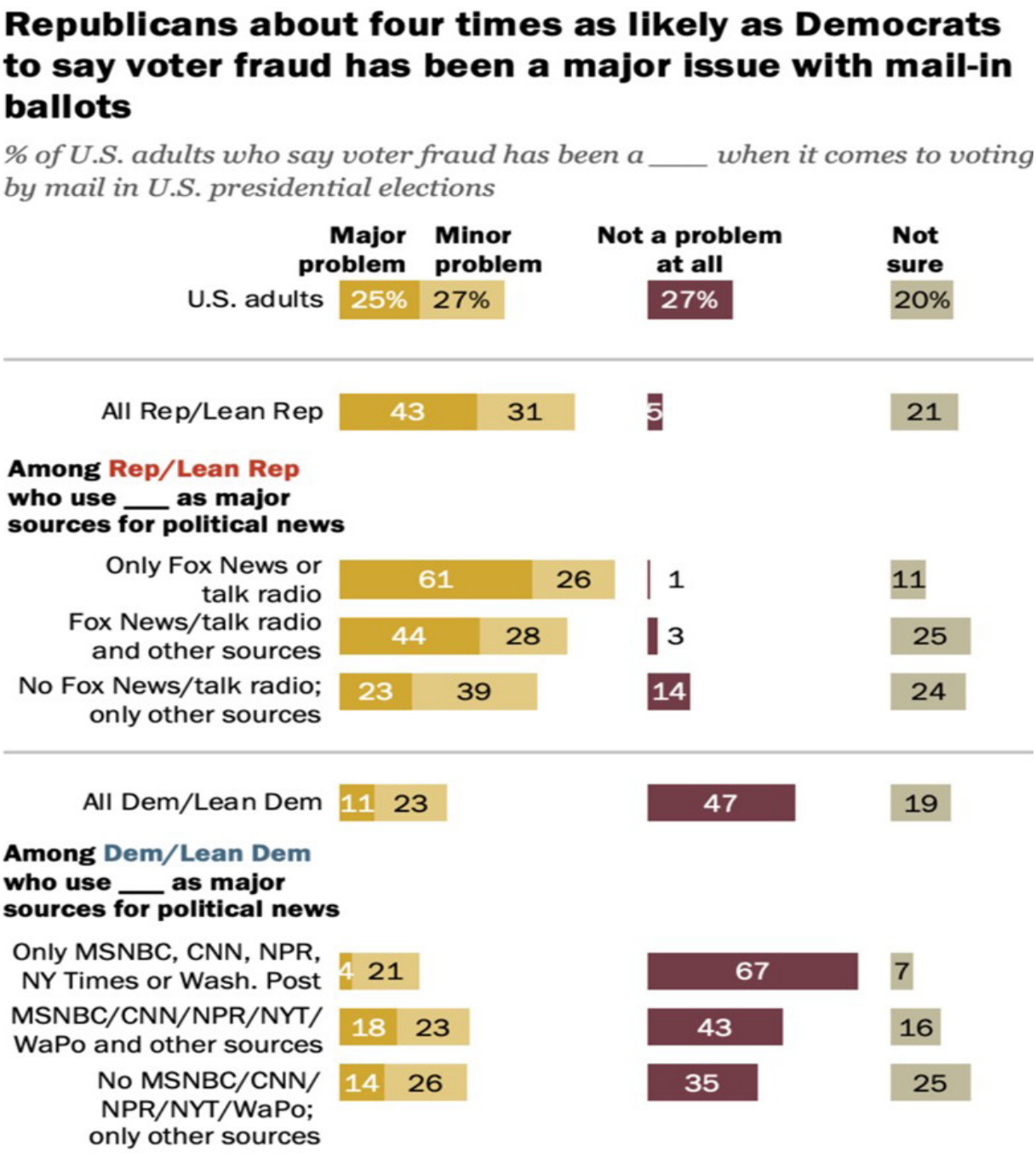

Figure 1: Survey on voter fraud, Pew Research Center (from Mitchell et al., 2020).

ories are not new, but are more a thing of the present and the past. They are – to some extent – natural, as everyone is a conpiracist to some degree since humans are not very trusting by nature. Douglas is also hesitant to confirm that conspiracies thrive more today than they have in the past, even against the backdrop of COVID-19 and the recent presidential election. What she does clearly say, though, is that people believe conspiracy theories because of psychological reasons. At first, people have a need for knowledge, certainty and explanation. The more uncertain people are, the likelier they are to lean toward conspiracy theories. It is essential to be aware that this is not because these people lack intelligence but rather the right skills and tools to find reliable sources of information (Douglas, 2021). It will be of utmost importance for every teacher to point out here that this is what it is all about: students need to develop skills to manouver the plethora of sources especially the internet and social media offer. They will not be taught opinion but skills in order not to be vulnerable to conspiracy theories. Douglas (2021) expands that it is important for people to remain in the driver's seat, especially in times of instability. Once they feel a loss of control, they will be open to conspiracy theories. Finally, people want to feel worthy, and one way of doing so is having information others do not have, as this seems to improve a person's status. It makes people think they know the thruth while everybody else is a gullible person. According to René Girard (1989) historical accounts of conspiracy theories go back as far as the fourteenth century when France was afflicted by the so-called Black Death, a plague pandemic. Conspiracists simply claimed that the people had died because the Jews had poisoned wells and rivers (pp. 2-3).

With this information at their disposal, students will now be able to fully understand the history and reasons for conspiracy theories together with the terminology. They will, hopefully, also critically examine theories and assess them accordingly. On top of that, students will not look down on people who fall for conspiracy theories but understand the psychological and deeply human reasons that make people victims of conspiracies.

Deductions

To have students immerse themselves in the matter even more and help them hone their analytical skills, they will now try to read and understand graphs linked to conspiracy theories and the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The Pew Research Center has published a series about said topic (see Figure 1). Students will get together in groups and look at a graph illustrating various tendencies among American people (party affiliation, news sources, tendency to believe in voter fraud as claimed by Donald Trump). Their task will be to discuss the graph and link it to conspiracy theories and also speculate about reasons for the results, before moving on to a plenary discussion that will then also conclude the lesson plan. Figure 1 is an example of a graph that they should discuss.

Bright Future

This exemplary lesson plan, and with it a critical examination of civil disobedience and conspiracy theories, had the aim of showcasing a different approach to teaching, namely teaching students competences useful for life outside the classroom. School should primarily be seen as a place where independence and competence are fostered, and students are empowered to think critically and develop into mature personalities. They may be taught content but never opinions. Only by forming their own opinions, based on an open-minded and reflected approach, will they be able to navigate along the fine line between bravery and conspiracy.

Literature

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