



Jonathan Gold, Contributor

I am a teacher who loves thinking about thinking.

## Teaching In The Post-Truth Era

*Defending truth — and teaching students to seek it — will not be easy, but it's a worthy fight.*

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*Critical literacy is essential, but not if it leads to a kind of moral relativism that tolerates all views and dismisses none in fits of false equivalence and both-siderism.*

In the David Foster Wallace joke about awareness, an old fish, swimming past two younger fish, asks, “how’s the water today, boys?” and the young fish, upon swimming away, wonder to themselves “what the hell is water?”

In choosing “post-truth” as its word of the year, Oxford Dictionaries was not likely thinking about teachers and students, but the declarative dawning of a post-truth era clarifies a major challenge for progressive-minded teachers trying to help young fish figure out what the hell water is. Oxford describes post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” While the neologism “post-truth” is relatively new, the term fits into a broader context of unease about the ways the modern world, especially its attendant over-reliance on social media, affects one’s ability to acquire knowledge and share concepts of truth and values.

### **Today’s Knowledge Landscape**

One concern is that the process of acquiring knowledge has become faster, more superficial and more social. Indeed, an increasing percentage of Americans get their news through social media. Middle and high school students, so-called digital natives, are even more likely to consume media and integrate new information they find on social media. This becomes quite troubling when you consider research on the effects of social media use on teens and the generally understood neuroscience of the teenage brain. Most teachers remember card catalogues and reference books, but for our students, this is the only form of knowledge acquisition they know. Although they aren’t naïve enough to believe that if it’s online, it must be true, they most certainly believe that if it’s true, it must be online, and it’s probably been liked by lots of their friends already. Knowledge has become populist. Additionally, there is just so much content available that it can be paralyzing for young citizens to even consider trying to be informed. Media, libraries, and databases used to serve as gatekeeping filters for students, but the internet and social media perpetually aggregate more content without much regard for truth and value. Young knowledge seekers are propelled forward and onward, compelled to keep clicking, to watch the next video, to like and share.

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A second concern is supported by two new unsurprising but arresting studies, one from Sam Wineburg at Stanford and another from Joseph Kahne of UC Riverside and Benjamin Bowyer of Santa Clara University. Wineburg’s research shows that today’s students are dismayingly unskilled at detecting bias, identifying fake news, and evaluating truth claims. Similarly, Kahne and Bowyer show that high school students are especially susceptible to “directional motivated reasoning,” which means they prefer “to seek out evidence that aligns with their preexisting views, to work to dismiss or find counter-arguments for perspectives that contradict their beliefs, and to evaluate arguments that align with their views as stronger and more accurate than

opposing arguments.” Notably, the authors saw these patterns of thought in students from across the political spectrum; they seem to be exacerbated by social media news consumption.

Millennials are coming of age in a time of deepening polarization, poisonous rhetoric, and increasing partisan rigidity. Democratic norms are being degraded before our eyes and bigotry has gone mainstream. Conor Williams, writing at The 74 Million, worries that students will struggle to develop the “habits of heart” necessary for democracy to function and may even come “to fear democratic elections.” Moreover, the constant, unyielding interrogation of the media and other societal institutions, especially online, has caused them to become even more unsure about whom or what to believe.

A teenage psyche is ill-equipped to deal with such instability, which helps explain why this is one kind of response teens have as they wade into serious issues. It’s disappointing yet unsurprising that only about half of voters under 30 actually voted. Such observations portend a dismal future for civil engagement, public debate, and civic virtue.

The post-truth era demands that teachers reevaluate how we teach media literacy, but it also clarifies the work we must do to reinvigorate our approaches to inspiring students to become patient, active, moral thinkers. John Dewey reminds us that democracy is always in the process of emerging, that “it has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.” So, how shall we teach now?

### **Critical Literacy and Objectivity**

A renewed focus on media literacy is essential to addressing post-truth ennui. A matrix of approaches, often grouped under the heading critical literacy, has been used by many progressive educators to teach students how to think. Descended from Marxist critical pedagogy, a critical literacy approach encourages students to interrogate texts for bias, uncover connections to systems of power and privilege, and identify and question missing voices and narratives. It means resisting passive acceptance of facts and authority as a source of truth. And yet, given the picture I’ve painted of our students’ knowledge landscape, I think the current moment calls for a more mature form of critical thinking. Indeed, skepticism about the sources of knowledge does not mean there is no knowledge, no commonly held set of facts or assumptions; rather, it means we have to be rigorous and objective in our scrutiny of that knowledge. We have to model for students that facts exist and help them develop their own thinking based on facts, evidence, and logic.

I have argued that neutrality in the classroom is both impossible and undesirable. Objectivity, though, is not the idea that we can assess truth claims from some misbegotten “view from nowhere” but the idea that we can assess them from a “common view,” a shared epistemic grounding that cuts across ideology and politics where reasons can be exchanged and debated. In other words, critical literacy is essential, but not if it leads to a kind of moral relativism that tolerates all views and dismisses none in fits of false equivalence and both-siderism. Moreover, if a critical literacy approach encourages students to see all media as inherently biased (mostly true) and therefore unreliable (false), we will have robbed students of the ability to pursue an understanding of truth. More essential is the development of a mature critical literacy that allows students to understand and interrogate both their own views and those held by people they disagree with and decide what to think for themselves. Again, critical skepticism doesn’t mean operating as if there’s no truth.