The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact Bob Blaskiewicz .

During my first year at Georgia Tech, I taught three sections of a conspiracy theory-themed research and writing class. I use conspiracy theories in my composition classes because every single claim made by a conspiracy theorist needs to be fact checked. Any bit of information they offer as evidence can be faked, taken out of context, or misinterpreted, and bad information often cozies up next to good information. Conspiracy theories are factual and logical minefields and are generally difficult to evaluate. I teach students to identify the relevant claims, how to evaluate them, and how to find better, more reliable information. Conspiracy theories are a sort of critical thinking and research bootcamp.

Tech's First-Year Writing Program is pretty innovative and stresses communication in a variety of media, including online media. As a new postdoc, I felt inspired to experiment with assignments that made use of new media. So, in lieu of a traditional final paper, I designed a final project where students in my three sections would collaborate with one another on a massive wiki about conspiracy theories.

For the Georgia Tech Conspiracy Wiki, I used MediaWiki, the open source software behind Wikipedia. My college's IT staff installed and configured the software. I designed a logo and outlined the project, including what I think is perhaps the best grading scale I have ever devised. As the backbone of the project, I used the conspiracy classification system that Michael Barkun's lays out in his *A Culture of Conspiracy*. The three principle types of conspiracy theory he outlines are *event conspiracies*, supposed conspiracies with limited goals (like the assassination of a president or bringing down an airplane), *systemic conspiracies*, which are more extensive and have more ambitious goals (like the Jesuits taking over the world or secret Islamists trying to impose Sharia on America), and *superconspiracies*, which involve nested hierarchies of conspirators and draw on any number of eclectic "alternative knowledge" traditions (like David Icke's interdimensional, shape-shifting,

mind-controlling, reptilian alien overlords). Each section of the class would be responsible for building up a portion of the website under one of those headings.

Students selected individual topics that they wanted to work on, and I gave them a template for a wiki entry that would help them sort and and evaluate their sources. Students were free to pick and choose which elements to retain in their final write-ups:

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History/Event (what conspiracy theorists would call “the mainstream account”)

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The Conspiracy Theories

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Conspiracy Theory Proponents

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Analysis (breakdown of the conspiracy theory and relevant debunkery)

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Cited References (the footnotes)

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External Links

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Additional References (relevant sources that did not make it into the wiki)

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Related Topics (links to elsewhere in the wiki)

It turns out that a wiki was an especially appropriate medium for writing about the convoluted webs of interconnected plots and agents found in conspiracy theories--the “links” that conspiracy theorists make became literal links to other pages in the wiki. Students were graded weekly on the quality and frequency of their weekly contributions. The only downside to this approach was that it was an utter monster to grade. I still wake up in a cold sweat just thinking about it, but it was a worthwhile experiment, I think.

The final product was not perfect--I wouldn’t expect them to be since these were motivated but novice researchers and writers. Also, because ability varies between new college writers, the projects have some fairly rough bits, including f ormatting inconsistencie s, u nfinished entrie s
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orphaned links
, and the occasional willingness to give conspiracy theorists more credit than they have perhaps earned. More frequently, however, I found that students put were able to collaborate on interesting and
us
eful summaries and explorations of com
plex topics
raised by conspiracy theorists. I was very pleased on the whole with the quality of the website and the range of topics that 75 students discussed together. You can visit the now closed Georgia Tech Conspiracy Wiki
here
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