RFCDC – LEARNING ACTIVITIES BASED ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Deconstructing conspiracy theories related to Covid-19

Target group:
Learners in upper primary and secondary schools

DEALING WITH **PROPAGANDA** **MISINFORMATION** AND **FAKE NEWS**

FREE TO **SPEAK** **SAFE** TO **LEARN** TO

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Dealing with Propaganda, Misinformation and Fake News

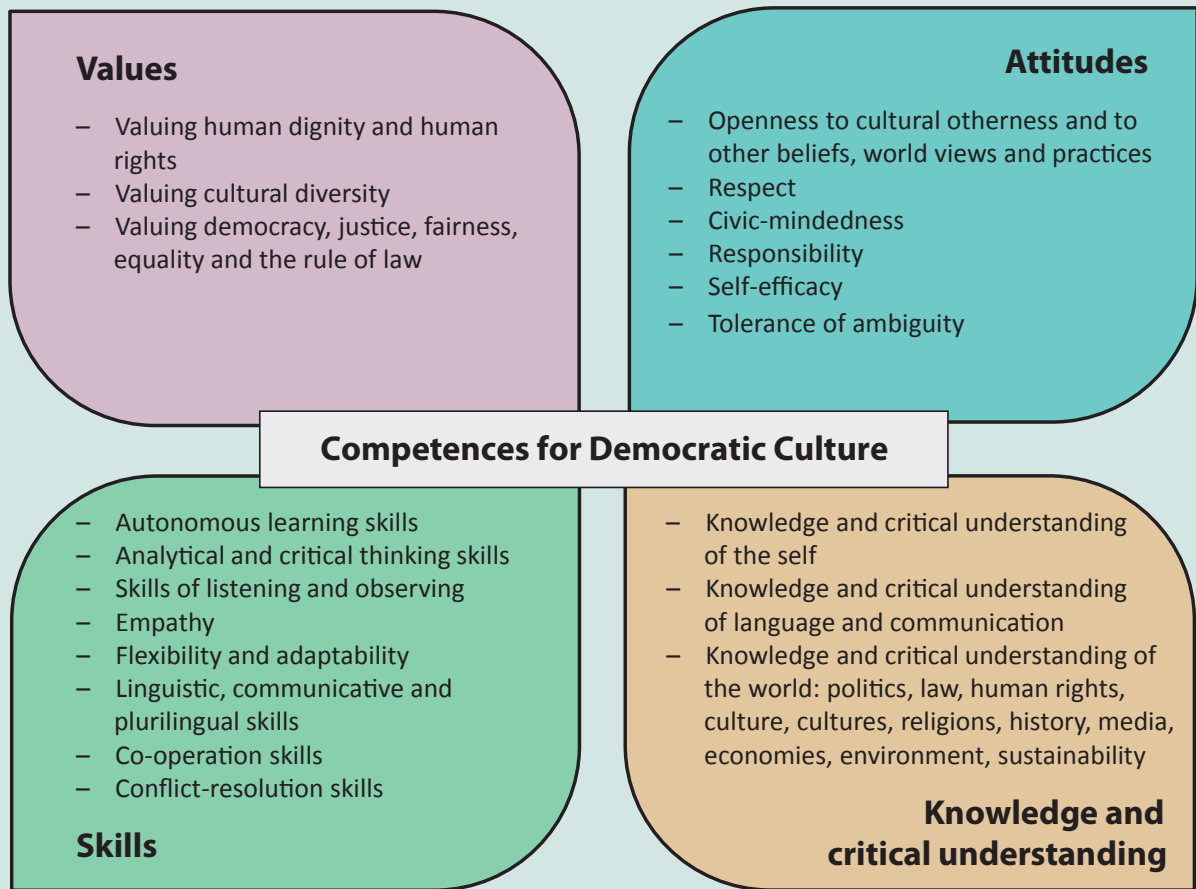## Deconstructing conspiracy theories related to Covid-19

RATIONALE

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of conspiracy theories have emerged, some of them building on long-lasting historical prejudice (antisemitism), others focusing on contemporary phenomena (5G). Like conspiracy theories (CTs) in general, Covid-19-related CTs create a general climate of mistrust and are a threat to democratic debate and decision-making. This learning activity supports learners in understanding general traits of conspiracy thinking and CTs, and in critically reflecting on and deconstructing CTs related to Covid-19.

THE RFCDC COMPETENCES

Values

- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law

Attitudes

- Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices
- Respect
- Civic-mindedness
- Responsibility
- Self-efficacy
- Tolerance of ambiguity

Competences for Democratic Culture

Skills

- Autonomous learning skills
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
- Skills of listening and observing
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
- Co-operation skills
- Conflict-resolution skills

Knowledge and critical understanding

- Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
- Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

COMPETENCES PROMOTED BY THE ACTIVITY

Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law; Civic mindedness; Tolerance of ambiguity; Critical and analytical thinking; Knowledge and critical understanding of the world.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Completing this activity will help learners to:

► Understand the general traits and functions of conspiracy theories

► Understand the problematic consequences of conspiracy theories/mentality

► Understand and critically evaluate Covid-19-related conspiracy theories

► Deconstruct and debunk conspiracy theories

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

1. Explain to learners, using age-appropriate language, that scepticism against political conspiracies is a legitimate part of political discourse and even necessary in order to prevent the abuse of power. All-embracing CTs and a general conspiracy mentality are potentially dangerous, especially in times of crisis. Then show the introductory video available here:

   ► **https://www.dw.com/en/understanding-conspiracy-theories/av-53618241**

2. Ask learners to work individually and go through a list of traits of CTs derived from:

   ► https://www.climatechangecommunication. org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/How-to-Spot-COVID-19-Conspiracy-Theories.pdf

   These traits include:

   ► General suspicion (something is hidden from us)
   ► Powerful agents controlling behind the scenes
   ► Rejection of "official" interpretations (also scientific explanations)
   ► Connecting the unconnected (everything is part of the hidden master plan)
   ► Coincidence as causality (things happening at the same time are interpreted as cause and effect)

3. Ask learners to work in pairs, sharing examples of CTs related to Covid-19 that they are aware of and exploring the examples. They should use the following questions to guide their discussion:

   ► In which ways do these examples qualify as conspiracy theories, based on the criteria from the list?
   ► Who is the assumed powerful agent and what are the assumed intentions?
   ► Why are these conspiracy theories attractive to people?
   ► What are the potentially dangerous consequences of these conspiracy theories?

   In a plenary session, collect the examples of CTs in a padlet or online whiteboard, and discuss their function and potential consequences.

4. Introduce the CT about Covid-19 and 5G which emerged immediately after the outbreak of Covid-19, which was related to existing conspiracy theories claiming 5G is part of a plan to gain full control over populations. Variants include: 5G causes Covid-19, 5G is used to spread Covid-19, enforcing mass vaccination.

MATERIALS OR RESOURCES REQUIRED

Sources and videos presented in the hyperlinks in the DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

5. Ask learners to analyse the following two tweets that have proposed a connection between Covid-19 and 5G, identifying what these tweets are claiming, and identifying the traits of CTs that the tweets display:

(Source of the tweets: **https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/04/09/5g-networks-and-covid-19-coronavirus-here-are-the-latest-conspiracy-theories/**)

Tiffani Cyr
@TiffaniCyr

1916 - emergence of Radio Waves
1918 - Spanish Flu outbreak

2003 - 3G introduced to the world
2003 - SARS outbreak

2009 - 4G introduced to the world
2009 - Swine flu outbreak

2019/20 - 5G introduced to the world
2019/20 - Coronavirus outbreak #WWG1WGA #COVID−19 #5G #5GRollout

♡ 110   12:36 PM - Apr 2, 2020

Keri Hilson
@KeriHilson

People have been trying to warn us about 5G for YEARS. Petitions, organizations, studies...what we're going thru is the affects of radiation.

5G launched in CHINA. Nov 1, 2019. People dropped dead. See attached & go to my IG stories for more. TURN OFF 5G by disabling LTE!!!

6. In order to debunk the CT, learners watch/read and discuss the following video/document:

▶ **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f279f-Y-O-w**

▶ **https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/5g-whats-behind-the-latest-covid-conspiracy-theory/**

On the basis of the video/document, ask learners to identify the most important actions that can be used to identify harmful conspiracy theories and to prevent them from spreading.

REFLECTION ON THE ACTIVITY AND THE LEARNING OUTCOMES THAT HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED

▬ Questions for reflection may include:

▶ What have you learned about conspiracy theories?

▶ Why are conspiracy theories attractive for people in a crisis, and what makes them dangerous?

▶ Are the principles of debunking conspiracy theories a useful tool in everyday life?

▬ A potential follow-up activity can involve learners being asked to find another Covid-19 related CT and analyse it using the same criteria. A list of these CTs is available here: **https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/**

www.coe.int/education

www.coe.int/en/web/education/covid-19

www.coe.int/free-to-speak-safe-to-learn

www.coe.int/rfcdc

ENG

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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