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# Addressing Post-Truth in the Classroom: Towards a Critical Pedagogy

## ABSTRACT

Post-truth strategies are characterized by the manipulation of facts and personal assertions of the truth for political gain. By seeding polarization, skepticism, and mistrust, post-truth presents challenges to teaching and learning within academic settings. In this paper, we explore how post-truth is articulated in higher education literature using a critical pedagogical lens. We suggest that pedagogical scholarship needs to expand its scope beyond a focus on the media antics of individual politicians in order to interrogate the reliance on dominant framings that simply define “post-truth” as circumstances where personal beliefs take precedence over established facts. We argue that the current framing of post-truth shapes the educational response to this issue, which focuses on helping students discern correct from incorrect information, as opposed to teaching students how power and knowledge are intertwined in post-truth and ways to understand and address the subsequent and potentially harmful power relations. Since post-truth strategies are enacted to restrict thoughtful reflection on dominant relations of power, we propose a critical pedagogical framework to problematize the notion of objective truth, account for the politics of exclusion, examine power relations, and contest post-truth strategies.

## KEYWORDS

post-truth, higher education, critical pedagogy, power relationships, knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

Educators in higher education across multiple disciplines increasingly contend with post-truth as part of their everyday practice. Yet, educational leaders and faculty are compelled to address post-truth with little understanding of its origins, implications, and how to best respond. The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines 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” (para. 2). Although the Oxford definition is commonly cited, particularly after being labelled “word of the year” in 2016, the term post-truth was originally coined by scholars to describe how mass media’s constructions of images have manipulated the public’s uptake of the truth (Hartley 2017). Under the conditions of post-truth, scientific data, established sources of information, and the notion of expertise are destabilized in favor of alternative facts and misinformation that are often strategically employed for political gains (Samayo and Nicolazzo 2017). The connection between emotionality and the truth is embedded in post-truth, where people internalize, act on, and enforce knowledge that is felt to be trustworthy, even though it might not be factually true (Boler and Davis 2018). Post-truth is described in multiple ways, including as a discourse, body of knowledge practices, threat to democracy, populist strategy, and propaganda tool.

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Post-truth has encroached into higher education and the academic sector, and thereby has become a “burning issue for education at all levels” (Peters 2017, 565). Universities and colleges must increasingly contend with teaching and learning in the post-truth climate of polarization, political division, challenges to truth, and claims that faculty are elitist (Gibbs 2019; Hopkin and Rosamond 2018). The replacement of traditional repositories of trusted, scholarly knowledge with alternative sources, such as social and other new media forms, further undermine the knowledge authority of academics as trusted experts (Gibbs 2019). The core mission of higher education, which is to enable students and educators to make judgments and rely on certain truths (and to examine deliberate falsehoods), may be at stake in a post-truth world (Farrow and Moe 2019; Strom et al. 2018).

Post-truth sentiments towards higher education and other broader social, political, and cultural forces, such as the concern about political correctness gone awry, have led to a mistrust of the academy. For example, in the 2019 national election in Canada, a major conservative political party distributed a poster with the catchphrase, “because you can only hear the same left-wing talking points from your professor so many times” (Rabson 2019, para. 3) on campuses across the country. Other Canadian politicians have threatened to cut governmental funding to universities and colleges that threaten to cancel speaking engagements of controversial public figures, who often are from the new far right, in the interest of upholding free speech (Karimi 2021). Addressing the incursion of post-truth rhetoric in higher education while supporting responsible academic freedom in colleges and universities remains an ongoing challenge.

As teaching faculty in a nursing program that promotes social justice and equity-oriented healthcare, we support students as they acquire the knowledge base and develop the intellectual skills to critically examine health policies, clinical practices, and potentially harmful social discourses. Our aims as educators are often challenged by students who sometimes source “viral” information and opinions from YouTube or social media as authoritative and contradictory evidence to the theoretical or empirical material presented in class. In addition, our students are grasping with how to address post-truth as nurses themselves in clinical practice, especially when supporting client medical decision making or health teaching. The World Health Organization coined the term infodemic to describe the rapid amplification of valid and invalid medical information and its effect on public health, including the mistrust of healthcare systems and professional expertise (Chowdhury, Khalid, and Chowdhury Turin 2021). Our experiences with this topic stem from a curiosity about how post-truth impacts the classroom and our imperative to teach about the implications of post-truth to future health professionals.

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND THE AIMS OF OUR ANALYSIS

Critical pedagogy, which is grounded in critical theory (e.g., feminist theory, poststructuralism), works to illuminate the relationships among power, knowledge, and authority and encourages learners to think critically and reflectively about dominant and oppressive forms of discourse such as racism, sexism, and class oppression (Giroux 2019). Rather than a set of discrete educational techniques, critical pedagogy is a broader intellectual and political exercise that promotes democracy, develops a socially aware citizenry, and addresses sociopolitical contexts in the classroom (Freire and Macedo 1998; Giroux 2010). Educators who engage in the practice and scholarship of critical pedagogy may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of post-truth (Giroux 2020).

Concerned with disrupting hegemonic forms of power and knowledge, critical pedagogy is concerned with reforming educational and other social institutions to be more inclusive of people and ideas that have traditionally been marginalized and subjugated (Cho 2010). There is a populist

backlash against critical pedagogy as a valid educational practice because it is viewed by some as subjective, radical, leftist, and politically biased (Park, Bhuyan, and Wahab 2019). The recent attempt by the conservative and right-wing media in the United States (US) to discredit and devalue critical race theory suggests post-truth tactics are often enacted to restrict critical thinking and learning (Filimon and Ivănescu 2023; Kaerwer and Pritchett 2023). The close connection between emotionality and information in the post-truth era also establishes a classroom environment where students are hesitant to decenter their personal and political opinions through the learning process (Peters 2017). Critical pedagogy aims to generate compassion, common understanding, and allyship, though this becomes increasingly difficult in the post-truth classroom.

Few pedagogical studies have examined the conceptual patterns, evaluations of educational interventions, and areas for further inquiry in this growing body of scholarship. To address this knowledge gap, we sought to critically examine the literature on post-truth in higher education through the lens of critical pedagogy and were guided by a main question: What is the phenomenon of post-truth within pedagogy in higher education? We also sought to understand: How is post-truth articulated within the higher education context? What are the manifestations and impacts of post-truth within pedagogy? What pedagogical practices address the effects of the post-truth era in higher education?

We identify three themes that illuminate our analysis: 1. great conceptual diversity in understandings of post-truth as an educational issue; 2. post-truth as eroding the exchange of ideas in higher education spaces; 3. the divergence of educational approaches to address post-truth. We conclude our analysis by outlining a critical pedagogical framework that overviews praxis and practice to address post-truth within higher education.

## PROCESS OF INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

To inform our analysis, we developed a flexible search strategy of the literature that was focused on our questions, yet encapsulated a broad range of empirical, theoretical, and persuasive papers. Search terms were developed from a preliminary literature search on post-truth as a socio-political concept, and from our understandings of the term as experts in critical and pedagogical theory. Using a combination of search terms, such as fake news, alternative facts, disinformation, misinformation, post-fact, and populism, we searched ERIC, MEDLINE, CINAHL Plus, EMBASE, APA PsycINFO, and Scopus between January 2024 and March 2024. Articles were limited to English language published between January 2000 and March 2024. We screened search results' titles and abstracts for relevance and then, the full texts of relevant articles. We included publications that were: (a) focused on post-truth and pedagogy, (b) reported on the impact of post-truth on higher education, (c) peer reviewed, and (d) published in scholarly journals and books. We excluded publications that were (a) conference proceedings or papers, (b) exclusively focused on general, primary, or secondary education (i.e., not post-secondary), and (c) focused on education of the public broadly.

We employed a flexible and iterative process to extract knowledge from the relevant literature. Our theoretical analysis was informed by a critical pedagogical framework (Giroux 2019). We considered the theoretical assumptions used to describe post-truth in the literature and looked for patterns in how authors described post-truth as a social, cultural, political, historical, and educational phenomenon. We also examined the educational impacts of post-truth and considered the pedagogical suggestions to address this issue offered by authors. Thematic analysis, which provided a flexible framework to assemble, collapse, and refine analytical ideas, loosely informed our analytical approach (Braun and Clarke 2012).

## RESULTS OF OUR ANALYSIS

### **The conceptual diversity of post-truth as an educational issue**

There is great diversity in the definition and parameters of post-truth in higher education, suggesting this issue is difficult to conceptually pin down. Some discussions lack a clear conceptual definition of post-truth or solely characterize this phenomenon using associated terms and phrases. These terms, which are often replicated buzz words or media sound bites, include alternative facts, anti-intellectualism, digital/virtual post-truth, distrust, propaganda, political bias, counter-discourses, lies, and “bullshit.”

Fake news is often defined as incorrect media stories, factually wrong content, and the perpetuation of false information that can encroach into the classroom (Bhaskaran and Mishra 2019; Bonnet and Rosenbaum 2020; Diaz and Hall 2020; Manfra and Holmes 2020). The term misinformation, incorrect or misleading information, was distinguished from disinformation, false information that was deliberately and covertly disseminated to obscure verifiable information or to influence public opinion toward a political aim (Diaz and Hall 2020; Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Leeder 2019). The term post-fact is sometimes used synonymously with post-truth but additionally emphasizes the contestable nature of truth and the dispute over the universal knowledge authority of mainstream science (Bluemle 2018; Melro and Pereira 2019).

Since post-truth originates from the crystallization of multiple social, scientific, historical, political, and cultural discourses (Gibbs 2019; Keyes 2004) and disrupts educational work in both tangible and hidden ways, the concept can be difficult to grasp. One risk that stems from post-truth’s complexity and multiplicity is to narrowly frame the concept as exclusively a matter of information that is categorically “true” or “not true.” The binary positioning of knowledge in post-truth discourse is often manifested in the rise of studies that examine students’ abilities to discern correct from incorrect information (Höttecke and Allchin 2020; Hughes 2019; Leeder 2019; Manfra and Holmes 2020; McGivney et al. 2017). The media is positioned as the main gatekeeper for fake news in these analyses, where higher education is tasked with mitigating the effects of these external threats to knowledge integrity through teaching how to appraise and consume information. Höttecke and Allchin (2020), for example, noted that the “central problem is distinctly epistemic: what knowledge claims (or sources of expertise) can be considered credible?” (642).

Much of the literature on post-truth in higher education seems to have emerged from the US in reaction to the 2016 Trump presidency. Educational scholars immediately became concerned with the spillover effects of Trump’s post-truth strategies circulated through social media, such as his Twitter rants, into the classroom (Burke and Carolissen 2018; Rohrer 2018; Yassi et al. 2019). In addition, scholars were concerned that students would mimic Trump’s tendencies to adopt his own personal assertions as the truth, resist fact-checking, and claim that personal authority is sufficient to establish information as correct (Mollan and Geesin 2019). The normalization of lying and inventing information without substantiation in US politics, which Woolard (2018) described as to “the point that people can compartmentalize deception as separate from their own ethos (character)” (307), may encroach into the classroom. Some scholars have branded these strategies as post-truth populism (Burke and Carolissen 2018; Yassi et al. 2019), a form of authoritarian politics where “folksy or fiery leaders” (Rohrer 2018, 577) make appeals to emotion and personal belief, eschewing objective fact, all in the name of swaying the public including students. Rather than take a narrow “Trumpian” approach toward information, students need to be able to critically appraise knowledge and consider broader and multiple perspectives that move them beyond personal assertions.

Other analyses ground false knowledge narratives in the broader socio-political conceptualization of post-truth and problematize the intentionality of actors that seed and amplify

fake news (Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Gray and Nicholas 2019; Misiaszek 2019; Suspitsyna 2019; Weiss et al. 2020; Zembylas 2020a; Zembylas 2020b). This perspective contrasts with analyses that posit post-truth as an issue of information/misinformation. Some scholars move beyond post-truth as merely shaping public opinion, noted in the Oxford (2021) definition, to describe the role of fake news in eroding civil dialogue and debate, in manipulating of public opinion, and sidetracking education's pursuit of truth (Bacon 2018; Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Misiaszek 2019; Rohrer 2018; Warner 2018). Weiss et al. (2020) employ the term propaganda to describe the role of fake news in willfully distorting factual information to "promote a specific end result or to sow confusion about a perceived counter-viewpoint" (5). Other scholars explored the economic implications of post-truth approaches. Ehrenfeld and Barton (2019) argue that higher education students are vulnerable to the mass persuasion of the "data-driven economy of the modern social web" (5) that operates through algorithmic targeting of audiences and revenue generating viewer hits.

Other scholars use a critical perspective to consider how post-truth has shaped power relations or systems of power in order to preserve dominant ideologies in higher education (Bacon 2018; Horsthemke 2017; Suspitsyna 2019). This area of thought explores the disruptive socio-political effects of post-truth, which were described as maintaining oppressive power structures within the contexts of teaching social justice and equity. For example, Gray and Nicholas (2019) generate a conceptual link between post-truth and the rise of "neoconservatism" (269) and "populist authoritarianism" (269), which has led to resistance against Indigenous and feminist pedagogies. The post-truth backlash was described as extending from "normative White hegemony" (Gray and Nicholas 2019, 272). These sentiments often manifest in students: complaints about the lack of representation, often of the dominant group in power, claims of political bias, and resentment of being "forced" to learn anti-oppression content that are not viewed as directly relevant to their education. Misiaszek (2019) noted that post-truth strategies often play off students' unwarranted fears and capitalizes on the "us-versus-them" (755) ideology to vilify diversity, devalue collective social development, and decenter legitimate societal issues.

Dominant forms of power are often connected to post-truth through the rise of populist intrusions in higher education that seek to place racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other marginalizing ideologies in university and college classrooms to counterpoint identity politics and other critically informed content (Gray and Nicholas 2018; Misiaszek 2019; Zakharov, Li, and Fosmire 2019; Zembylas 2019a; Zembylas 2019b). These pervasive structures of power may impact the abilities of students to process and consume information presented in the media, particularly from far right or ultra-conservative outlets (Lacković 2020; Williams and Woods 2018). Populists complain that conservative viewpoints have now become the minority or unpopular position in higher education settings. In response, there may be a dilution of critical approaches in higher education. Bacon (2018), for instance, argued that the backlash against critical approaches in the neoliberal university, which prioritizes the demands of students as consumers, has led to the rise of the "mantle of 'oppression' being appropriated by privileged groups to validate perceived grievances, and even to justify acts of violence" (6). The introduction of post-truth tactics, instituted under the guise of free-speech rhetoric, may be a counter to critical approaches. Rohrer (2018) suggested that the post-truth is based on "populism's singularly aggrieved (mostly White) victimhood" (585) and is largely unscholarly because it "uses felt experience as authoritative evidence, regardless of larger structural context" (585).

### **Post-truth as eroding the exchange of ideas in higher education spaces**

Post-truth often disrupts, challenges, and complicates the exchange of ideas in higher education settings. The post-truth classroom may be characterized by the decline in the quality of

knowledge exchanges and the shifting student perceptions of higher education as legitimate spaces for debate and discussion. Post-truth fueled social media is often described as playing a key role in eroding academic quality and rigor, overloading students with information, obscuring verifiable facts, and undermining the substantive expertise of course instructors (Arth, Griffin, and Earnest 2019; Bonnet and Rosenbaum 2020; Diaz and Hall 2020; Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Zakharov, Li, and Fosmire 2019). Lacković (2020)'s argued that students' uncritical consumption of pictures, manipulated digital images, and other visual symbols can lead to "hyper-visibility" (443) and the dazzling of learners' discernment of verifiable information. Other analyses point to the growing trend of students referencing non-scholarly information that they sourced from social media in assignments and class discussions. Diaz and Hall (2020) argued that post-truth via social media, where "anyone with a cellphone can create news" (1), destabilizes the position of facts in education since "nothing is knowable because there is always evidence on both sides of an argument" (1). False narratives and misinformation disseminated via social media are often framed as an external force that could infiltrate higher education and positioned as difficult to manage once introduced. Ehrenfeld and Barton (2019) suggest that higher education must contend with social media as a "viral ecosystem" (8) that weaponizes and monetizes sensationalistic misinformation. The concern with students' usage of social media to develop intellectual arguments, inform positions on academic subject matter, and participate in responsible scholarly debate is ongoing.

Several scholars examined students' perceptions, consumption, information-seeking behaviors, and evaluation of misinformation from social media (Arth, Griffin, and Earnest 2019; Bhaskaran and Mishra 2019; Leeder 2019; Mutsvairo and Bebawi 2019). Although students are employing social media as a major information source in their personal and scholarly lives, evidence suggests they may lack critically appraisal abilities to responsibly use this knowledge. In a survey of incoming first-year college students, Evanson and Sponsel (2019) found that a high percentage accessed news information primarily through social media, yet had challenges evaluating the trustworthiness of fake web addresses. Other studies suggest students have challenges critically evaluating information disseminated on popular social media platforms (Arth, Griffin and Earnest 2019). The rise of critical appraisal tools, such as checklists and algorithms, to discern the credibility of sources has emerged in response to this literature (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020).

The shifting perceptions of higher education as legitimate places where the truth, expertise, knowledge, and scientific facts are debated, exchanged, and disseminated are another manifestation of post-truth. Post-truth may create the conditions for the generalized scepticism of established facts, the increased scrutinization of experts, and the growing lack of public trust in academia and mainstream science (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020; Bhaskaran and Mishra 2019; Gibbs 2019; Zembylas 2020). Social media spaces may be supplanting the academy as primary sites of knowledge exchange (Bonnet and Rosenbaum 2020; Diaz and Hall 2020; Höttecke and Allchin 2020; Leeder 2019; Mackey 2019; Zakharov, Li, and Fosmire 2019). Some scholars have conceptually linked this trend to the growing neoliberalism, marketization, and corporatization of colleges and universities (Höttecke and Allchin 2020; Farrow and Moe 2019; Ford 2018; Giroux 2019; Suspitsyna 2019). Gibbs (2019) suggested that higher education often prioritizes rights-based approaches to learning, enacted through "customer contracts where students are treated manifestly as consumers" (505), that often leads to the flattening of novice and expert positions.

### **The divergence of educational approaches to address post-truth**

There are several educational approaches to address post-truth, which may exist along a continuum situating information consumption and literacy skills on one end and critically informed

practices on the other. Information consumption and literacy focused on the usage of information without necessarily questioning the basis of what constitutes legitimate or credible knowledge in higher education spaces (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020; Cooper 2019; Evanson and Sponsel 2019; Luetkenhaus, Colquhoun, and Upson 2019; Mackey 2019; Weiss et al. 2020), differs from critical approaches contending with post-truth as a strategy of power and as a political device to enforce dominant ways of thinking and acting. The diversity of practices illuminates the lack of a unified approach to conceptualizing post-truth in the higher education context, which varies based on conceptual background, academic discipline, and theoretical approach.

Information consumption and literacy is one branch of interventions to support learners who participate in self-reflection on their information-accessing behaviors, acquire research acquisition abilities, develop critical evaluation skills, and engage in constructive scholarly dialogue about data sources. Specific educational practices include small group case analysis (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020; Cooper 2019), research skill applications (Hughes 2019), and critical thinking exercises to promote judgement (Ridgway, Nicholson, and Stern 2017; Weiss et al. 2020). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) framework for information literacy is routinely highlighted in the literature (Albert, Emery and Hyde 2020; Evanson and Sponsel 2019; Mackey 2019; McGivney et al. 2017; Rose-Wiles 2018). The ACRL suggestion to contextualize and deconstruct the authority of information sources is often positioned as a helpful framework to extend students' understanding beyond the true/not true duality and attain a "fully actualized, critical, relativistic approach" (Zakharov, Li, and Fosmire 2019, 663).

Another major area of educational intervention related to post-truth is critical pedagogy and other teaching and learning practices that use learning approaches informed by critical theory (Baer 2018; Cragin 2018; Jandrić 2018; Misiaszek 2019; Suspitsyna 2019; Woolard 2018; Zembylas 2019; Zembylas 2020a). A critical approach is characterized by supporting students as they examine relationships of power in post-truth, understand the socio-political actors in the production of knowledge, and question the authoritative structures that use post-truth as a tactic. Critically informed papers often position teaching and learning about post-truth as a political act in itself, critique the "politically neutrality" expected by the neoliberal university (Gray and Nicholas 2019), and cultivate civic engagement and "political cognition" (Woolard 2018, 305). Luetkenhaus, Colquhoun and Upson (2019) advocated for teaching practices that move away from an "all sides are valid" (344) approach toward a critical understanding of marginalization and the ability to "grapple with social and political contradictions" (344).

Additionally, critical media literacy offers teaching and learning strategies that integrate the skills of media literacy with an analysis of the construction and dissemination of media information (Lacković 2020). Williams and Woods (2018) described critical literacy as an "emancipatory practice" (70) that interrogates multiple viewpoints on controversial subjects, focuses on sociopolitical issues, fosters social action, and promotes social justice. To facilitate students' critically informed consumption of media images, Lacković (2020) advocated for classroom exercises that help students reflect on how photos and other visual data are produced, consumed, and distributed, the sociocultural meanings of the images, and the intended and unintended effects of the images.

Scholars described a range of critically informed teaching strategies to mitigate post-truth: encouraging student sharing of lived experiences, particularly around personal identity (Rohrer 2018), intersectionality (Burke and Carolissen 2018), introducing diverse epistemological viewpoints (Misiaszek 2019), exploring controversial social issues in the classroom (Woolard 2018), and grounded aesthetics to promote the link between social inequalities and post-truth rhetoric (Cragin 2018). Certain scholars focused their educational recommendations on countering post-truth critiques of

criticality, such as addressing claims of its negativity, overemphasis on marginalization, and the elicitation of students' affective responses, particularly using narratives of oppressed groups (Zembylas 2019; Zembylas 2020a; Zembylas 2020b). Zembylas (2020a), for example, suggested the educational value of affirmative critique includes "strategic empathy" (11) or feeling uncomfortable to facilitate compassion for the suffering of others "regardless of whether they agree politically with them or not" (10). Affirmative critique attempts to move beyond the mere critique of post-truth discourse to endorse hope, forward-looking endeavours, and "affective practices such as equality, love, and solidarity" (Zembylas 2020c, 151).

## TOWARDS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS POST-TRUTH

In this theoretical exploration, we examined how post-truth is articulated in higher education using a critical pedagogical lens. We suggest that the scholarship in this area could engage in a more complex epistemological analyses around how the current framing of the origins of post-truth shapes the response to this issue within the higher education sector. The origins of post-truth pre-date Trump's knowledge strategies and persisted after the end of his presidency (Hartley 2017; Keyes 2004). The expansion of post-truth scholarship in the educational literature may reflect the evolving conceptual thinking about this topic and the need to theorize this phenomenon more broadly.

Drawing on the findings of our review, we propose a critical pedagogical framework to address the implications of post-truth as a phenomenon within higher education. As critical scholars, we work from the perspective that knowledge and discourse are rarely universal or static, but rather in flux and arise at different historical moments to supplant the existing and dominant narratives (Hall 2001). The diversity of approaches and terms used to convey the educational impact of post-truth is ultimately a productive trend in the scholarship since it acknowledges and disseminates the range of academic disciplines, approaches, perspectives, and assumptions about this complex and potentially divisive phenomenon. The prevalence of scholarship in this area without a clear definition of post-truth may also illuminate how nebulous this concept is and the diversity of approaches that can frame and examine this issue within the higher education sector.

Thus, we advocate for an emphasis on supporting critical reflection of the multiple ways higher education's structures and processes might replicate some of the similar oppressive and marginalizing discourses perpetuated by the architects of post-truth. Since post-truth strategies are enacted to restrict the informed discussion of prevailing and harmful relations of power, higher education must teach students to verify and responsibly consume information but also to have the intellectual abilities to interrogate the notion of "truth" and how such knowledge strategies are shaped by economic, social, cultural, and historical forces. We propose that critical pedagogy attends to four key aspects in studying and developing praxis and practices to address post-truth within higher education. These include: 1. the need to interrogate and problematize the notion of objective truth; 2. to account for the politics of exclusion that determine the nature of "truth"; 3. to explicitly name and critically examine the prevailing and oppressive power relations perpetrated by post-truth tactics; and 4. to foster the knowledge and skill to understand and contest the broader political, economic, and cultural forces that sustain and extend post-truth strategies.

We first argue for the need to interrogate or problematize the notion of "truth," which we argue is important in many higher education settings. We suggest that the Oxford English Dictionary (2021) definition may be a conceptual starting point for scholars to build a more complex analysis of the origins, manifestations, and ongoing effects of post-truth strategies in higher education. The tendency of the post-truth in higher education to be concerned with the verification of the truth or untruth may risk sidelining broader classroom discussions about the politics of "truth/untruth."

Moreover, the concern with exclusively enforcing established and dominant forms of knowledge (for example, biomedicine, empirical facts generated by the scientific method, etc.) because they are being threatened by post-truth strategies risks shutting down the possibilities of writing, speaking, and thinking in ways that challenge these approaches (Hook 2001). Flatscher and Seitz (2019) caution that resistance against post-truth reduce the intellectual exercise of critique to the “reductionist notion of objectivity” (113), thereby fetishizing scientific objectivity as the end point to knowledge production, utilization, and dissemination. Rather than moving exclusively toward the objectivity of knowledge and debunking facts, Flatscher and Seitz (2019) instead recommend that contemporary forms of critique need to gather a complex understanding of how truth, power, and subjectivity are interconnected through knowledge. Similarly, Schindler (2020) suggest that rather than force a preoccupation on the objectivity of the truth and the unquestionable authority of mainstream science, which may be enforced through “knee jerk” reactions to post-truth, scholars and educators instead need to a focus on the similarities and patterns among post-truth politics, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism. Critique, which should be cultivated in higher education, must be refocused on providing direction and orientation in the struggle for emancipation and resistance in the contexts of post-truth knowledge and power tactics (Schindler 2020).

Future educational analyses must challenge the core conceptual features of the Oxford definition, thereby engaging in a broader consideration of epistemology and other theories of knowledge (Ford 2018; Warner 2018). One of the few authors to diverge from this definition, Ford (2018) suggested that post-truth should not be characterized as a preventable state of “without-truth” (133) but rather as an inevitable condition of liberal democracy that requires a messy exchange of ideas and the production of subjects that “babble endlessly, express ourselves constantly” (135). Ford (2018) positioned post-truth as a call for pedagogical change in order to teach that the responsible and accountable exchange of ideas is political praxis and an enactment of social responsibility. Warner (2018) also examined the rise of the “war on science” movement as a counter to the misinformation of post-truth and its claims of the political neutrality and objectivity of science. Without challenging the naive portrayal of science as objective, educators risk perpetuating science’s history of sexism, imperialism, and racism that can be reinforced in teaching practices (Warner 2018).

Second, we argue that a framework for addressing post-truth within higher education must attend to the politics and practices of exclusion that distinguish what some consider to be true and false knowledge (Foucault 1980). Scholars have argued that the public and scholarly reliance on post-truth discourse as misleading or incorrect information may sidetrack wider reflection about the racist, sexist, and colonialist foundations of Western society, including the power structures of higher education itself (Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan 2018; Rosa and Bonilla 2017). Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan (2018) argue that a focus on mis- and dis-information often privileges “media literacy over questions of ideology and power” (110) and risks “reproducing the myth that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth” (111), a myth where the racism of the past becomes ignored or concealed. Constructing post-truth as an incursion into the classroom risks sidelining a critical discussion about how the higher education sector, particularly in the Global North, may be complicit in perpetuating harmful and oppressive dominant discourses similar to those perpetuated by the populist architects of post-truth tactics. Despite their claims of being progressive and liberal, many universities in the Global North still enact White supremacy through their lack of racial equity in their composition and “methodological practices and epistemic foundations” (Rosa and Bonilla 2017, 203). Thus, a pedagogical framework addressing the notion of truth and untruth in the classroom may allow educators to problematize the very foundations of how knowledge is created and how authority over knowledge is established.

To fully attend to the politics and practices of exclusion, the complexities of post-truth as a global phenomenon must be further theorized, particularly by scholars from the Global South. Our search of the literature returned few publications from non-US regions. Post-truth phenomenon may in part originate from the “broader state of crisis of the Western liberal democratic model and of neoliberal market capitalism” (Cosentino 2020, 1), where Trump has become the most emblematic manifestation. We suggest that higher education institutions across the globe contend with the effects of post-truth within their particular social, political, economic, and cultural climates. Moreover, political movements that are driven by the election of populist governments in the Global South and the incursion of viral social media into rapidly technologizing rural markets (Bhaskaran and Mishra 2019), may expand the global impact of post-truth. For instance, De Andrade Biar, Orton, and Cabral Bastos (2020) outlined the consequences of conducting critically informed research in the post-truth and far right Bolsonaro government following the restructuring of Brazil’s model for funding national higher education. Our assertions parallel those in a scoping review of decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy by Shahjahan et al. (2021) that suggests the Global South often is burdened by its lack of access to and reliance on the global knowledge economy of the Global North, including the dominance of Western academic knowledge, standards, and structures. Portraying post-truth from a predominantly Western perspective risks a similar conceptual short-sightedness.

Third, we propose that a framework for addressing post-truth must analyze the dynamics of power to articulate both the origins of post-truth discourse and the ongoing legacy of its negative impact on higher education practices (Bacon 2018; Jurecic 2020; Zembylas 2020a; Zembylas 2020b). Post-truth may play a key role in the preservation of existing power structures in higher education, such as patriarchy, neoliberalism, free market capitalism, and White supremacy, thereby preserving a “nostalgic, imagined and inherently conservative past” (Mollan and Geesin 2019, 406). Post-truth is also conceived of undermining higher education as a critical endeavour: that is, a means to move beyond the intellectual confines of one’s direct experience and imagine “a future that would not merely reproduce the present” (Giroux 2010).

Post-truth may exist as a knowledge strategy used by those determined to maintain the racial status quo in order to perpetuate and extend racism, colonialism, and White supremacy in the classroom (Bacon 2018; Gray and Nicholas 2019; Horsthemke 2017; Suspitsyna 2020). The connections between post-truth, racist and nationalistic ideologies, and the pursuit of political power circulated throughout our analysis. Tebaldi (2020) examined the connection between post-truth and the rise of the alt-right media, other online racist groups, and the “intellectual dark web” (205) that includes White supremacists, Christian nationalists, and far-right separatists. Such groups often resist the moralism of traditional conservatism, and replace them with populist, transgressive, and ironic speech that uses videos, memes, and viral postings to persuade followers (Tebaldi 2020). More recently, the concern with the use of generative artificial intelligence in student’s assignments, which can replicate and reinforce racist and other discriminatory social forces, may lead to new concerns with how knowledge is used (Rudolph, Tan, and Tan 2023). The expanding role of post-truth in furthering dominant structures and discourses of power and race in higher educational settings remains an area for future inquiry.

Fourth, a critical pedagogical approach to post-truth should advocate for teaching and learning approaches that foster the knowledge and skill to understand and contest the broader political, economic, and cultural forces that sustain and extend post-truth strategies. By creating the conditions for skepticism and mistrust, post-truth was also characterized as a knowledge approach that erodes the quality, rigor, and nature of exchanging ideas in higher education spaces. Consequently, scholars have sought to combat the effects of post-truth through developing strategies

to teach information literacy and fostering students' evaluative skills of information sources (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020; Evanson and Sponsel 2019; Mackey 2019; Rose-Wiles 2018). Although educational approaches sought to limit the downstream effects of post-truth, less emphasis was placed on addressing the upstream causes of this phenomenon such as teaching and learning practices to problematize and disrupt these prevailing and harmful ideologies.

Although fake news is framed a matter of information versus misinformation (Diaz and Hall 2020; Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Leeder 2019) and truth versus untruth (Albert, Emery, and Hyde 2020; Evanson and Sponsel 2019), this approach often fails to recognize that post-truth is part of more expansive strategy of dictating which “valid” knowledge gets translated to policy. In the second category, critically informed scholarship explored the value of teaching students to recognize and reflect on the relationships of power, authority, normalization, and marginalization in post-truth—relationships that students themselves might be complicit or embedded in as contemporary knowledge users. For example, the monetization of viral fake news, a hidden practice of contemporary market capitalism, may unwittingly influence students' knowledge practices (Bhaskaran and Mishra 2019; Ehrenfeld and Barton 2019; Luetkenhaus, Colquhoun, and Upson 2019).

We argue that higher education students need knowledge and skill in both areas—to be able to critically evaluate the trustworthiness and quality of information and to also understand the potentially harmful power relations of post-truth. Although this approach is a helpful starting point, more emphasis, needs to be placed on engaging higher education learners in a deeper reflection on the political, social, and cultural implications of post-truth ideology and consideration of the intent of post-truth strategists to advance harmful knowledge practices and ways of thinking. A “heads on” approach to post-truth in the classroom that directly explicates the political forces at play may be necessary (Mejia, Beckermann, and Sullivan 2018), while failing to support both students' and educators' capacities in this area may undermine universities and colleges as sites of responsible knowledge production and dissemination.

## CONCLUSION

In this theoretical analysis, we drew on a critical pedagogical perspective to explore how post-truth is articulated in higher education literature and to make suggestions to praxis and educational practice based on the results of our study. We therefore developed a critical pedagogical framework that may lead to a meaningful and long-term educational response to the harmful effects of post-truth in higher education. We suggest that students need to interrogate and problematize the notion of objective truth, account for the politics of exclusion, and be encouraged to explicitly name and critically examine the power relations perpetrated by post-truth tactics and contest the broader political, economic, and cultural forces that sustain post-truth strategies. As an approach, focusing on the collaboration of diverse learners and instructors in the higher educational spaces moves “beyond binaries of true/fake, us/them that perpetuate oppositions and animosities” (Zembylas 2020a, 12) and may offer a viable and forward-thinking antidote to the cynicism, polarization, and blame culture of post-truth.

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## DISCLOSURE

The authors have nothing to disclose related to the writing and preparation of the manuscript.

## ETHICS

This study did not require ethics review board approval.

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