Lesson Plan: How Many of These Do You Know?

**Topic/Question:** Critical Thinking/What counts as knowledge?

**Age Group:** 7th grade and up

**Time:** about 30 minutes

**Materials:** The list of “urban legends” (see below)

**Description:**

This exercise is designed to get students thinking about what they think they know, and, more importantly, how they think they know it. Deceptively simple, yet strangely effective, it involves nothing more than handing out to students a list of claims that “everyone knows are true.” Many of these are “urban legends” of a sort; others are what we sometimes called “received knowledge”—claims that we unreflectively accept as true without really thinking about it. As it turns out, only of them—“Pittsburgh Pirates’ pitcher Dock Ellis once threw a no-hitter while under the influence of LSD” is true¹—but what’s interesting to explore is how many of them students will assert and what sort of evidence or testimony they will offer in support of these assertions.

To begin the exercise, simply pass out the sheet of claims (included below), and ask students to go through the list by themselves, noting which ones they know to be true. (It’s okay if students want to talk to each other some about the claims as they’re doing so, but encourage them to decide for themselves which ones they know. There will be ample time to come for discussing them together as a group.)

Once students have made their selections, then, as a class, go through the list. Take the claims, one by one, asking for instance, “Who knows the first claim to be true?” As students raise their hands someone to explain how he or she knows it to be the case.

¹ Although it should be noted that he reported this in his autobiography, so perhaps its veracity is open for investigation as well.
Typically, students will respond that “somebody told me,” or “I read it somewhere,” or “It’s just something everybody knows,” or “I saw it on the History Channel,” or even, “My teacher told me.”

List these reasons on the board and continue to probe for other reasons as we go through the list (or some part of it, depending on time limitations). Routinely, students will clamor to know which ones are, in fact, true, but it’s important to set this aside until the entire list (or that part of the list that’s being taken on) is complete. What we are wanting to emphasize at this point is not whether the claims are true, but how students know them to be.

In any case, once the list has been gone through, the “spoiler” can be revealed. Only #10 is true. (Naturally, at this point, students will want to know how I supposedly know this. I offer the information about Dock Ellis’ autobiography and also admit that I have used the urban legend debunking site, Snopes.com as my research source. So, it’s possible that I am mistaken about the falsity of some of the claims, but we can talk about that. Usually, we do, and usually, students offer additional support for their beliefs. For example, I’ve had a student say that her uncle is an insurance salesman and that he told her that insurance premiums are higher on red cars because they get more tickets. Or, another assured me that hair does grow back more “whiskery” after shaving because he saw it happen on his own body.) The point is not to become dogmatic in asserting the falsity of any of the claims, but rather, to keep wondering together about the sources of our so-called knowledge. This can help provide a natural lead-in to the group of exercises in the next section, “What is truth?”
How many of these do you know to be true?²

1. The Chevy Nova sold poorly in South America when it was first introduced because in Spanish, “No va” means “no go.”

2. New U.S. Dollar coins were designed with the motto “In God We Trust” omitted.

3. NASA spent millions of dollars developing an astronaut pen which would work in outer space, while the Soviets solved the same problem by simply using pencils.

4. Slightly overpaying a traffic ticket will keep points off your driving record.

5. Hair and fingernails continue to grow after you die.

6. You can pop popcorn by placing it between certain brands of activated cellphones.

7. The number of people alive today is greater than the number of people who have ever died.

8. Hair grows back thicker or darker or “more whiskery” after it is shaved.

9. Red cars get more speeding tickets than non-red cars.

10. Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher Dock Ellis once threw a no-hitter while under the influence of LSD.

11. We only use 10 percent of our brains.

12. Drinking coffee dehydrates you.

13. A natural sedative in turkey--tryptophan--is what makes you so sleepy after Thanksgiving dinner.

14. Casinos pump extra oxygen into the air systems in the early morning hours so gamblers will not feel tired and want to go to bed.

15. The bulk of donations to Barak Obama's presidential campaign came from wealthy foreign investors.

16. Water in a pan, sink, or toilet rotates counter clockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern hemisphere. This is due to the

² Source is www.snopes.com
Coriolis Effect, which is caused by the rotation of the Earth.

17. Making yourself cough during a heart attack can help you survive it.

18. In some states, someone caught killing a praying mantis can be punished with a $50-$250 fine.

19. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center were an “inside” job by the US Government.