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Bringing *The Conversation* into the Geography Classroom: Public Storytelling as Authentic Learning

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Public storytelling is increasingly important for geographers as higher education faces increased scrutiny, politicized attacks on truth-telling, and pressure to show broader relevance. This article argues for integrating more public-facing science communication into geographic education and introduces *The Conversation* as a classroom tool. A vehicle for university scholar-driven explanatory journalism, *The Conversation* publishes short, open-access articles that demonstrate the value of academic insights to real-world issues. Based on our experiences teaching with and contributing to the platform, we created two classroom exercises aligned with an authentic learning framework. First, curated articles from *The Conversation* serve as authentic class content, enabling students to evaluate how university scholars apply disciplinary ideas to contemporary problems; how knowledge is produced, translated, and evidenced for broader audiences; and whose perspectives are included (or missing) within stories. Second, the media outlet serves as an authentic practice space where students simulate writing in *The Conversation* style, from pitching and drafting to receiving feedback and revising an explainer article for general audiences. These classroom activities invite educators and students to address the rewards, challenges, and ethics of science communication, as well as the practical skills, cognitive and emotional labor, and power relations embedded in *The Conversation's* expert-centered storytelling. **Key Words:** authentic learning, civic engagement, *The Conversation*, geography education, public storytelling.

The American Association of Geographers' (AAG) Elevate the Discipline training initiative aims to boost the field's public profile and increase geography's involvement in broader social and policy discussions on the world's most urgent issues (Schamess et al. 2026). Key to this effort is understanding that the health and sustainability of the discipline of geography depend on demonstrating to broader, nonacademic audiences why geography matters, especially through storytelling as a credible way to socially leverage scholarly ideas and advocate for science during a time of declining public trust and investment in higher education (Baerwald 2010; Wethington and Dunifon 2012; Murphy 2018; Alderman 2024; Frazier 2025).

Stories play a crucial role in shaping how space and society are perceived, experienced, and ultimately organized. They also carry significant ethical and political implications for supporting or challenging social power structures (McKittrick 2020). Strategic public storytelling that moves beyond the jargon and paywalls of academic journals is not simply about making scholarly work more accessible or popular. It is also a political necessity amid widespread misinformation and disinformation campaigns that deny lived realities, from climate change to structural racism (Alderman and Inwood 2019; Inwood and Alderman 2025).

Geographers increasingly argue for pursuing conventional and creative forms of public-facing communication and media engagement (e.g., Moseley and Teske 2011; de Jong 2015; Burlingame 2019; Nelson 2024). Although the AAG, along with organizations such as the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science, COMPASS, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have expanded training resources and support, the field still lacks systematic education in translating geographic ideas to broader audiences, and public storytelling remains a minor component of geography curricula (but see Wilson 2022). Undergraduate and graduate programs remain focused largely on writing for scholarly and professional exchange (i.e., scientific communication), with limited structured opportunities for students to learn how disciplinary experts engage in the politics and practicalities of crafting narratives that resonate with nonspecialist communities, journalists, planners, and policymakers (i.e., science communication).

This gap poses a clear pedagogical challenge. How can geography classrooms incorporate public science communication into the core education and professional development of future geographers? What innovations can help produce a generation for whom public engagement and storytelling are foundational to their scholarly and civic identity, rather than deferred to optional or remedial training later in their careers?

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A Pedagogical Intervention Using
The Conversation

We suggest that *The Conversation* is a valuable resource for enhancing public storytelling in geography education and propose a classroom framework. *The Conversation* is an independent, nonprofit news organization where scholars in higher education write concise, accessible articles (600–800 words) under the guidance of professional editors, offering evidence-based, explanatory journalism amid the decline and polarization of traditional newsrooms (Savage 2025). Its articles are open-access, Creative Commons–licensed, and widely distributed by news and education outlets (B. Wilson, personal communication, June 4, 2025). Since its founding in 2014, the U.S. edition of *The Conversation* has published 23,862 articles by more than 16,700 scholars (The Conversation 2025).

Geographers at universities regularly publish articles in *The Conversation* (e.g., Brasher 2020; Ellis and Haas 2020; Nzeadibe and Ejike-Alieji 2020; Colten 2021; Shabazz 2023; Wu 2023; Inwood

and Alderman 2024; Short 2024; Trudeau 2024; McKinnon 2025). Additionally, for a brief period, the AAG formally partnered with the media outlet to encourage more faculty and graduate students to engage in public storytelling. Table 1 presents a selection of articles by geographers on various pedagogical themes that address many pressing issues, including lead contamination in cities, tornado risk, drought and famine, wildfires, immigrant housing insecurity, music and urban identity, racialized infrastructure, and the use of satellite data to track natural disasters.

The pedagogical implications of *The Conversation* rarely appear in the academic literature, if at all. Authentic learning provides a useful approach for assessing and framing the platform’s educational use. It emphasizes engaging students with tasks, materials, and practices that reflect how expert or scholarly knowledge is created, used, and communicated in civic settings. Although geographers value applied, experiential, and field-based education, explicit use of authentic learning as a framework for integrating science communication into the classroom remains

Table 1 Samples of *The Conversation* articles and authors aligned with selected geography themes and topics

Selected geography theme or topic	<i>The Conversation</i> article (year)	Author/geographer
Location	How ZIP codes nearly masked the lead problem in Flint (2016)	Richard Casey Sadler
	Why the southern US is prone to December tornadoes (2021)	Alisa Hass and Kelsey Ellis
Place	How Minneapolis made Prince (2020)	Rashad Shabazz
	Successful city parks make diverse communities feel safe and welcome—This Minnesota park is an example (2024)	Dan Trudeau
Human–environment interaction	The trouble with drought as an explanation for famine in the Horn and Sahel of Africa (2022)	William Moseley
	Returning a 170-year-old preserved lizard to Jamaica is a step toward redressing colonial harms (2024)	Alex Moulton and Thera Edwards
Movement	Excessively high rents are a major burden for immigrants in US cities (2024)	Madhuri Sharma and Mikhail Samarin
	How a small Brazilian town became an unlikely battleground over Confederate memory (2024)	Jordan Brasher
Region	Settler colonialism helps explain current events in Xinjiang and Ukraine—and the history of Australia and US, too (2022)	John Rennie Short
	South America’s second-largest forest is also burning—and “environmentally friendly” charcoal is subsidizing its destruction (2019)	Joel E. Correia
Race and ethnicity	Slave-built infrastructure still creates wealth in US, suggesting reparations should cover past harms and current value of slavery (2021)	Joshua Inwood and Anna Brand
	From Chinatowns to ethnoburbs and beyond, where Chinese people settle reflects changing wealth levels and political climates (2023)	Wei Li and Yining Tan
Mapping	Satellite data provides fresh insights into the amount of water in the Nile basin (2020)	Emad Hasan and Aondover Tarhule
	Map wars in the Middle East: How cartographers charted and helped shape a regional conflict (2025)	Christine Leuenberger
Place naming	What happens when a big business tries to take over and rename a neighborhood (2019)	Raechel A. Portelli
	Can Trump just order new names for Denali and the Gulf of Mexico? A geographer explains who decides what goes on the map (2025)	Innisfree McKinnon
Geography in action	How to use free satellite data to monitor natural disasters and environmental changes (2023)	Qiusheng Wu
	How Nigerian students became “change agents” in solid waste management (2022)	Chidi Nzeadibe

limited in the discipline (but see Cross and Congreve 2021).

Building on our experiences using *The Conversation* in undergraduate geography courses and our roles as contributors to the platform, we explore the opportunities and challenges of integrating this media resource into postsecondary education. This article highlights two primary ways the outlet can be used in geography classrooms to promote authentic learning practices.

First, incorporating articles from *The Conversation* into the geography classroom offers educators timely, accessible explanations of current issues by scholarly experts. This helps students see how the ideas of geography and other disciplines apply to real-world problems. These articles, covering core themes such as the economy, culture, health, politics, environment, ethics, and technology, can serve as engaging readings and discussion starters. Using *The Conversation* as an authentic content source, students assess academic interpretations of contemporary problems, evaluate how that knowledge is created, whose views are included or absent, and how to communicate relevance to wider audiences.

Second, integrating *The Conversation* into the geography classroom transforms it into an authentic practice space. Students shift from passive observers of expert communication to creating their own skills in public storytelling. The writing style used by *The Conversation* authors demonstrates strategies that students can adopt and scrutinize in communicating geography's insights to wider audiences. These strategies include practical tasks such as succinctly pitching ideas, organizing narratives for clarity, and supporting arguments with hyperlinked evidence, as well as deeper reflections on the emotional and cognitive labor of storytelling and the ethical politics of knowledge production.

We write this piece to support educators transforming geography classrooms into hubs for preparing students, future geographers, to value storytelling as part of their role as public intellectuals (Alderman and Inwood 2019). This public intellectualism is urgently needed as academic freedom and free speech face threats, and geography programs face an uncertain future (Moseley 2025a, 2025b). Moreover, when a promotion of storytelling is approached with care, dialogue, and reflexivity, it can amplify underrepresented voices, challenge dominant narratives, and foster collaboration with diverse groups to cocreate knowledge for collective action and responsible future making (Basile 2025).

The Conversation as an Authentic Content Source

Authentic learning involves using professional resources and activities, including public

storytelling, to actively engage students in practical situations that demonstrate how scholarly knowledge is applied, communicated, and made relevant in real-life contexts (Fletcher, Kickbusch, and Huijser 2022). Incorporating news and other popular sources has long been a way to introduce current events into geography classes (Rugg 1991). This approach, however, has become more complicated in today's media environment marked by echo-chamber reporting and the increasing influence of nonspecialist content creators who shape public discourse through social media, podcasts, and videos (Callahan 2018).

Articles published in *The Conversation* can provide geography classrooms with useful reading and discussion resources to encourage authentic learning. Authored by active college and university researchers and educators, these articles deliver timely, evidence-based interpretations of events, places, and issues students already see in the news or in their communities. *The Conversation's* format makes scholarly perspectives accessible and readable without usually sacrificing rigor or critical insights. The timeliness, conciseness, and clarity of these articles might be especially valuable at a time when students appear increasingly reluctant to read longer texts (Hollander et al. 2022; McMurtrie 2024).

Authentic learning emphasizes not only incorporating realism and relevance into classroom reading and discussions but also providing students with access to "expert performances." These are opportunities for learners to observe specialists reasoning, analyzing data, and communicating in practice (Herrington, Parker, and Boase-Jelinek 2014). *The Conversation* offers exactly this kind of access, allowing students to hear directly from scholars who are actively translating disciplinary knowledge into narratives for nonspecialist audiences.

The Conversation's articles intentionally differ from advocacy or op-ed pieces. The platform's editors encourage contributing authors to use their academic expertise to explain why specific events, patterns, and problems occur in the world; why these issues have consequences for public audiences; and why the perspectives of university scholars matter to today's issues. Without relying too heavily on jargon, authors must support their claims with solid evidence and scholarship, and they should actively use hyperlinks to research publications, data, or other credible sources. This transparency helps students understand that knowledge is not just something that appears but is actively produced, supported, and open to scrutiny. Evaluating these hyperlinks can serve as an authentic learning activity, allowing students to practice assessing evidence, tracing claims, and judging credibility. These performances by experts align with authentic learning's focus on situated, practical understanding rather than abstract instruction (Rule 2006).

The core of authentic learning emphasizes students' opportunities to observe and interact with specialists in the field. When writing for *The Conversation*, scholars often make themselves accessible for contact, making it easy to connect beyond the published article. Educators planning to include an article from *The Conversation* in their courses, especially on a regular basis, might contact the author and invite them to participate in a virtual discussion with students as a guest speaker. This method would clearly benefit students by enabling them to ask more questions in an authentic learning setting, engage more directly with expert practice, and deepen their understanding of how scholarly knowledge is translated to address real-world issues.

The efficacy of *The Conversation* articles lies in their frequent aim of directly engaging, informing, and, at times, reframing public perceptions and discussions of issues, people, and places. Many authors conclude articles with civic recommendations such as policy reform, awareness raising, dialogue, and community action. These strategies help students see how public-facing disciplinary knowledge can influence debates, guide interventions, and foster participation. Writing for *The Conversation* is not just about publicity but about inviting public engagement, with many articles leading to online comments, media interviews, and collaborations with educators, officials, and nonprofits, which can also be highlighted in the classroom.

Another potential advantage of *The Conversation* as an authentic content source for geography classrooms is its global reach. The media outlet publishes multiple international editions, thereby giving students access to scholars from various regions of the world who share their work and ideas widely. Carefully curated stories from *The Conversation* can supplement textbook case studies or other standard educational resources by providing timely, scholar-driven interpretations of global conflicts, environmental crises, cultural shifts, and political struggles as they happen. Published articles also reflect the authentic interdisciplinary scope of analysis that pressing issues and problems require. Contributors come from a variety of fields in the environmental sciences, social sciences, law, humanities, and arts, and thus work toward challenging disciplinary silos and model the interdisciplinary thinking often required to engage complex real-world issues.

From an authentic learning perspective, *The Conversation's* wide distribution helps students understand how academic knowledge can move into the public sphere, the broader cultural and political reactions it elicits, who engages with it, and how it is adopted, challenged, or repurposed in societal debates. Students can be encouraged to search for the title of an article from *The Conversation* in a search engine, revealing where and how the content circulates, which publications have republished it,

and how it is discussed on platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), or BlueSky. Exploring where and how an article is reshared can lead to discussions about audience, power, and the risks and rewards of scholars sharing their research and themselves in public scholarship. This allows students to grasp the larger politics of science communication they might encounter beyond the classroom. Storytelling increases scholars' visibility but also heightens their vulnerability to greater scrutiny and potential harassment, especially for early-career scholars and those from historically marginalized groups (Worth 2020).

The Start the Conversation Classroom Activity: Opportunities and Considerations

We stress that educators select pieces from *The Conversation* that suit their teaching goals, curriculum constraints, and students' needs. These articles should complement, not replace, textbooks or standard resources. A piece in *The Conversation* cannot fully explain a geographic concept or case because authors work within strict word limits, focusing on essential points to enhance public understanding. The platform's search feature helps teachers find articles by keywords for student assignments, lectures, or activities. Many pieces have maps, graphics, and videos to aid understanding and show how the disciplinary knowledge of contributing authors is produced, communicated, and evaluated publicly.

In two courses at the University of Tennessee, entitled Environmental Issues in National Parks and People and Environment, we developed an activity called Start the Conversation. Students use *The Conversation* to find and review an article on national parks and then answer evaluative questions about the chosen article (see assignment in this article's [Supplemental Material](#)). This promotes authentic learning by encouraging students to critically interpret real-world science communication aimed at the public. They reflect not only on what they have learned factually but also on how research methods, evidence, and expertise are communicated to the public about park-related issues. Students also critically analyze the hyperlinks and perspectives highlighted in their article, the author's broader work, the advantages and disadvantages of *The Conversation* relative to textbooks, and whether they would revisit the media outlet in the future. We asked students to consider how the content connects to their own experiences and understanding, and whether the article challenged any of their preconceptions. In the context of authentic learning, these questions position students to evaluate the practices of science communicators, how they signal expertise, the strengths and limitations of their claims, and how scholars move academic research into broader public, journalistic, and policy discussions.

Based on our impressions as instructors, students generally appeared to respond positively to *The Conversation* articles they examined. The articles' clarity, accessible language, logical organization, and use of visuals resonated within our courses, helping to make complex topics more understandable while preserving academic rigor rather than diluting ideas. These features supported authentic learning by engaging students in communication forms that mirror how knowledge and expert practices of university scholars operate beyond the traditional classroom, reinforcing a sense of broader context, significance, and public relevance. Our pedagogical observations further suggest that *The Conversation* is largely perceived by students in our classrooms as more credible and less sensational than much online media, while remaining more accessible than textbooks or peer-reviewed journals.

We noted that *The Conversation* articles grounded in real-world experiences and contemporary issues connected well with students, especially when contributing authors incorporated contemporary examples and data specific to parks or environmental topics. Also well received, from our perspective, were articles that acknowledged the complexities and tensions at work in government institutions and policy, and when authors captured the multiple sides of a conservation debate rather than pushing a single conclusion.

Exploration and evaluation of hyperlinks featured prominently in student explorations of *The Conversation* articles, providing opportunities for deeper understanding, connections to related publications, and more independent examination of knowledge claims. Engaging with hyperlinks supported authentic learning by illustrating how public-facing scientific knowledge is produced, sourced, and verified. Although many students appeared willing to return to *The Conversation* in the future, their reviews of articles highlighted the importance of examining author credentials, watching for potential bias, and consulting additional sources when engaging with the platform.

The Start the Conversation class activity highlights considerations educators might wish to address when using the media outlet as a teaching resource, including the possibility that some students might prefer public storytelling that offers longer and deeper engagement with complex issues. In those cases, *The Conversation* will likely feel more like an introduction than a comprehensive discussion, suggesting that teachers should discuss how the media outlet serves as a starting point rather than a substitute for longer, more thorough texts. The concise layout of *The Conversation* articles and the way authors, working in a journalistic format, moved quickly between topics or points presented a challenge for some readers in our classrooms.

We observed different interpretations of the authorial voice in students' evaluations of their articles. Whereas some noted a balanced tone among contributing academicians, others characterized articles as opinion-driven or as shaped by scholars advancing interpretations that influence how evidence is framed. These contrasts give educators a chance to hold class discussions, as we did in our courses, about the contextual nature of all knowledge production, helping students understand that scholarship, whether public-facing or not, is influenced by authors' positionalities, disciplinary affiliations, and broader scholarly agendas and analytical choices.

Finally, our instructional reflections on the Start the Conversation activity underscore the need for educators to engage students in critical discussions about the centering of academic expertise in public-facing scholarship and how this emphasis might narrow the range of perspectives represented in such work. In some cases, the classroom activity revealed limited inclusion of Indigenous voices, local community viewpoints, and firsthand accounts in examined articles that addressed historical injustice, conservation, or environmental policy. This recognition of a possible representational imbalance in *The Conversation* warrants educators' attention when using articles as authentic content sources. How truly authentic is this storytelling when real-life communities are not given a more prominent voice and presence? This is an issue we return to in the article's conclusion.

The Conversation as an Authentic Practice Space

The Conversation's pedagogical value extends beyond providing content that helps students understand the relevance of academic geography and other disciplines to current events. It also offers classroom opportunities to develop authentic practice spaces, where students move from simply observing and evaluating translational science communication to actively simulating the storytelling process and modeling how to translate ideas to broader audiences (Rink 2020).

Authentic learning frameworks stress students engaging in professional-like environments to create real-world products such as reports, presentations, data, and, in this case, public communication (Herrington, Parker, and Boase-Jelinek 2014). Simulation-based learning aids professional development by building skills and confidence in communicating science in response to broader civic needs (McEwen et al. 2014). Using *The Conversation* as a practice environment allows educators to showcase how geographers construct, justify, and communicate knowledge publicly. Authentic learning's focus

on students mimicking professional decisions and problem-solving “taps into societal debates about the value of university education and aligns with the emphasis in higher education on embedding employability into degree programs” (Cross and Congreve 2021, 492). Employer surveys show career readiness depends on students’ ability to craft understandable narratives for lay audiences (Finley 2021; National Association of Colleges and Employers 2023).

The “geocapabilities” movement advocates for developing students as ethical citizen-professionals who apply “the deeper benefits of geographical knowledge, thinking and practice” to addressing global issues (Walkington et al. 2018, 11; see also Mitchell 2022). Developing skills in communicating with broader audiences is critical to geocapabilities, which emphasize students’ ability to gather, analyze, and present geographic information to inform and influence not just scientific and professional discourse but also public debate, policy, and community planning. Scholars in other fields find that when public storytelling is explicitly taught and scaffolded, it can have positive educational impacts in advancing students’ disciplinary learning, civic and professional identity, and their strategic abilities in audience awareness and dialoging across different groups, evidence selection, argument formation, and practical applications of academic knowledge (Alexander, Fandetti, and Peters 2025).

The Join the Conversation Simulation Exercise

To help students model public storytelling, we developed Join the Conversation, an activity in which students write a public-facing essay modeled on the style and conventions of an article from *The Conversation*. In the University of Tennessee course Science Communication for Geography and Sustainability Professionals, students completed a scaffolded simulation that guided them through pitching, drafting, revising, and reflecting on an explainer article written for a general audience. Each essay addressed a geography or sustainability concept, issue, or problem of wide relevance, drawing either on a recent news event or an evergreen topic.

The activity asked students to plan the narrative structure of their public-facing essay, including clear evidence and hyperlinks to sources and additional context. Feedback played an important role in the simulation process, as students received input on the first draft of their essays from nonspecialist reviewers and artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Students were asked to acknowledge their positionality and the limits of scientific knowledge in their stories, and to revise for clarity and accessibility. Importantly, students concluded *The Conversation*-like essays with a “What this means for the public” section that offers practical implications or

recommendations for addressing the highlighted concept, issue, or problem. The [Supplemental Material](#) for this article provides a more detailed breakdown of the steps and tasks involved in guiding students through various stages to emulate the communication style and output of academic contributors to *The Conversation*.

We designed the Join the Conversation exercise as both a guide and a springboard to help students rehearse their roles as future public storytellers who construct and communicate disciplinary knowledge across wider audiences. Our students opted to write public-facing essays on critical issues affecting their communities and the world, including urban heat islands, plastic pollution, energy poverty, wetland loss, global ocean warming, and food insecurity.

Authentic learning emphasizes the importance of teachers providing scaffolding and coaching to students (Herrington, Parker, and Boase-Jelinek 2014; Rink 2020). Before students completed the Join the Conversation simulation exercise, they learned about and discussed seven key skills in public storytelling. The list of skills is based on common principles of science communication taught in our classes and informed by our professional experiences, including regular contributions to *The Conversation* (Stack and Sheehan 2023; Kannarr and Alderman 2024). We present these skills next to support further growth of storytelling in geographic education.

Seven Public Storytelling Skills

First, every article in *The Conversation* starts with a potential author pitching story ideas to editors, explaining how their proposed article advances understanding of a pressing issue or debate. A pitch is a brief, clear, and compelling summary, usually about 100 to 150 words, outlining the work’s direction and significance. It cannot include everything, but it opens the door for detailed discussions (Table 2). Pitching is a transferable skill important for grant writing, job interviews, policy briefs, media, networking, and establishing community partnerships. *The Conversation* editors might ask for a quick turnaround to clarify and revise pitch ideas. Meeting deadlines and adapting to critique are valuable habits taught through this part of storytelling. In our courses, we had students work in groups to practice crafting pitches in the lead-up to doing the Join the Conversation activity on their own.

Second, in modeling *The Conversation*, students can learn to write in ways that create a vivid mental picture of the geographic phenomena or social and environmental issues they want to communicate. This often means highlighting a compelling example or case study and anchoring the story in a specific place, event, or issue that is currently fresh in the public mind. This method helps students connect abstract disciplinary ideas with real experiences,

Table 2 Required pitch elements for *The Conversation*, including word limits and editorial review criteria

Pitch component	Core question(s) to be answered	Maximum word limit	Purpose in editorial review
Edition selection	Which national or regional edition of <i>The Conversation</i> is being pitched?	Selection-based	Directs the pitch to the appropriate editorial team based on geography.
Brief headline	What do you wish to convey about your article idea in a nutshell or a single sentence? What new findings, interpretations, or implications on an issue do you wish to share? How would you summarize it for a nonexpert family member?	50 words	Functions as a news-style hook that should signal clarity, the story's importance, and broader relevance or appeal.
Main point(s)	What are the main points or insights you wish to convey in clear, nonjargon language? What specific examples do you have to help the pitch stand out? Why should a general reader outside your field find your story idea interesting, care about it, and read on?	100 words	Allows editors to assess coherence, explanatory value, and fit with <i>The Conversation's</i> evidence-based public scholarship mission. Editors confirm that you are pitching a specific story, not just a broad topic.
Author expertise and evidence base	Why are you the right person to write the proposed article, based on your specific research background? What research, scholarship, data, or other evidence will be used? If relevant, how will you incorporate your own scholarship?	150 words	Establishes author credibility, disciplinary authority, and scholarly grounding.
Conflicts of interest disclosure	Do you have financial interests, advocacy positions, or affiliations that could affect perceived objectivity?	200 words	Promotes transparency and ethical accountability in public-facing scholarship.
Timeliness	Why is this article relevant now (news, new publication, anniversary of a major event, or broad public interest)?	Selection-based	Signals topical relevance and newsworthiness to editors, while also helping them identify a potential deadline for submission and publication.
Thematic section selection	Which editorial section best fits the article's theme (e.g., Politics, Society, Environment, Education, Health, Technology)?	Selection-based	Guides editorial routing, framing, and audience targeting.

Sources: Author experiences, Parker (2023), University of Technology Sydney Research Excellence and Support Hub (2025), and <https://theconversation.com/us/pitches/authors/new>.

allowing readers to engage with the topic both intellectually and personally. Effective public communication is not about producing a cold and detached analysis of the world. The power of storytelling lies in its ability to grab readers' interest and involve audiences by helping them see how the story relates to their lives and perspectives.

Third, a key feature of *The Conversation's* storytelling method is that authors are encouraged to identify themselves, often in the first person, and to describe their field of expertise and how they approach the subject. Responsible public storytelling avoids anonymity, encouraging scholars to share the personal story behind their research, explaining how they started their work, why the topic is important to them, and how their identity and field influence their perspective. Bringing a human element into storytelling is an important lesson students learn from *The Conversation* articles, serving as a reminder that knowledge is always socially embedded and directly connected to people's experiences, needs, and positionalities.

Fourth, one of the most difficult parts of public-facing scholarship is the shift from the style of academic articles, scientific reports, and textbooks to a

more accessible, engaging language. *The Conversation* demonstrates the importance of public storytelling being free of excessive jargon. Discussing complex ideas in approachable yet rigorous terms can be tough, but vital for connecting with broader audiences unfamiliar with geography. When scientific terms are used, they should be clearly defined. The goal is not oversimplification, but transparency. Increasing access and understanding is a sign of respect to one's reader. Before the Join the Conversation exercise, we led students through a hands-on activity to explore the differences between a scientific abstract and a plain-language research summary.

Fifth, rethinking narrative structure is a key lesson from *The Conversation*. Shepherd (2016) emphasized that researchers should "get to the point" when writing for a general, nonspecialist audience, reversing the tendency of scholars to include extensive background before presenting main ideas. *The Conversation* authors introduce their main ideas at the start of articles. Presenting the main point early helps busy readers quickly grasp the purpose, follow details later in the article, and boost their engagement. A clear focus sparks curiosity and encourages continued attention and understanding.

Sixth, for public storytellers, “getting to the point” is also greatly supported by two other techniques used by *The Conversation* authors, which can help students improve their public storytelling skills. These authors intentionally use (1) short, focused paragraphs instead of dense blocks of text often seen in traditional academic writing, and (2) subheadings that effectively guide readers through the narrative’s flow. These storytelling skills enhance readability, keep the discussion accessible and engaging, and can be applied across various types of public-facing writing.

Seventh, we learn from *The Conversation* the importance of linking public science stories to supporting scholarly evidence or interpretations by including hyperlinks in articles. Even if not clicked, these hyperlinks add context and connect ideas to broader knowledge, adding detail and depth not possible in a short article. In our classes, students are asked to embed hyperlinked evidence and context within their public storytelling, and locating relevant hyperlinks is presented as an important part of the article planning process. This practice highlights the importance of being intentional and selective in argumentation and communication, boosting the credibility of geographic knowledge and building trust with nonspecialist audiences.

Becoming Public Storytellers: The Rewards and Tensions

The Join the Conversation simulation demonstrates the pedagogical value of mimicking professional public scholarship in the classroom, while also revealing challenges that require additional instructional coaching. Based on our observations and impressions, the classroom activity supported students’ creative agency and the development of science communication skills and was associated with high levels of classroom engagement. Compared with traditional academic writing, public storytelling offered a different mode of engagement by requiring students to translate disciplinary concepts for nonspecialist audiences in purposeful and ethically grounded ways, often connected to real places, issues, and communities they care about. Writing for public audiences, such as residents, entrepreneurs, teachers, policymakers, or community groups, appeared to sharpen students’ attention to clarity, tone, and relevance, and, from our vantage point, was accompanied by signs of increased motivation and growing confidence in explaining complex ideas. Taken together, these observations suggest that the simulation activity aligns with core principles of authentic learning by emphasizing audience awareness, contextualized knowledge application, and the public relevance of geographic expertise.

For educators interested in implementing a similar Join the Conversation simulation exercise, the

activity exposes challenges and tensions that naturally arise when trying to replicate the storytelling style of *The Conversation* authors. Specifically, from our perspective as instructors, students often struggle to decide which concepts and issues to omit or generalize in their storytelling, recognizing that not all the important points can be discussed. The emphasis on brevity and plain language in the simulation exercise raised concerns about being overly reductive, which can oversimplify and misrepresent complex issues and ideas. As our teaching experience suggests, bringing *The Conversation* into the geography classroom as an authentic learning activity requires engaging students in discussions about the ethics of balancing accuracy and accessibility in public narratives and confronting the trade-offs that invariably accompany science communication. The final polished appearance of *Conversation* articles belies the significant cognitive and decision-making labor involved in communication. Foregrounding this effort is crucial to preparing the next generation of geography communicators.

Public storytelling can be unfamiliar, humbling, and demanding for authors trained primarily in conventional academic writing. Students in our classrooms appear to have benefited from iterative drafting and revision. We observed that feedback from nonspecialist readers, and to a much lesser extent AI tools, helped students clarify their storytelling for broader audiences, bringing to light moments of dissonance between expert intent and public understanding. Engagement with critique and revision in the simulated storytelling activity, which can easily provoke discomfort and discouragement in students, prompted us, as educators, to reflect on the affective demands that often accompany public-facing writing.

Using *The Conversation* as an authentic practice space is more than just following a list of tasks or suggested communication strategies. Rather, it also requires managing students’ expectations and anxieties about the time and intensity of the experience that comes with repeated revision and refinement of narrative, handling audience response and scrutiny, and adopting the role of “expert” as one comes to terms with imposter syndrome feelings. Authentic learning is strengthened when these often-unacknowledged processes underlying public storytelling are made more explicit within the classroom.

Frazier (2025) highlighted the vital role of mentorship in managing the vulnerability that accompanies public engagement. Like us, she stressed the importance of including public-facing writing exercises in courses and suggested helping students recognize and confront the tensions inherent in storytelling work. In bringing this simulation exercise from *The Conversation* into the classroom, we moved beyond discussing just technical writing skills to support deeper student reflection on a range of

ethical and positional challenges. These included (1) how author identities, social positionalities, and political-emotional attachments to issues and places shape storytelling choices; (2) how to communicate expertise ethically and transparently, acknowledging the provisional, partial, and context-dependent nature of scientific knowledge; (3) how to communicate publicly in ways that acknowledge marginalized experiences without claiming to speak on behalf of those communities or reducing their experiences to stereotypes; (4) how to explain issues and advance ideas and recommendations for public audiences without sliding into unsupported advocacy; and (5) how to understand and navigate the collaborative role of professional editors in shaping and mediating public storytelling, an aspect not directly addressed in the Join the Conversation simulation activity.

Authentic Learning Beyond Expert Storytelling: The Limits of *The Conversation*

Greater incorporation of science communication into geographic education has always been a key disciplinary need, but especially so now amid ongoing environmental and human rights crises and politicized public debates over science (Facer 2019; Frazier 2025). Encouraging students to analyze and engage in public storytelling can enhance their writing and civic skills, as well as geocapabilities, which are vital for their intellectual growth, career readiness, and the sustainability of academic geography.

This article argues that *The Conversation*, a popular outlet for public-facing science communication by geographers and other specialists, can be an effective pedagogical tool for demonstrating how ideas developed in higher education connect to news headlines and are made relevant to broader audiences. It is just one of many resources, including op-eds, zines, films, photography, and podcasts, to be pursued in enhancing geographic storytelling. Yet, the media platform's wide circulation, diverse university authorship, and emphasis on producing approachable evidence-based analysis make it especially appealing to educators.

Building on an authentic learning approach that exposes students to materials that show how academic knowledge is translated and applied in real-life contexts, we created and reflected on two classroom activities using *The Conversation*. The first activity involves integrating articles into classroom reading and discussion, helping students see how the theories and findings of geography and other disciplines can advance public understanding of current events and debates. Students analyze how knowledge is narrated, evidenced, and ethically positioned for broader audiences, embracing active interpretation

to scrutinize how scholarly authority is constructed and how expertise circulates beyond academia.

The second activity encourages students to simulate the creative writing process of *The Conversation*-style pieces, aligning with authentic learning by fostering situated knowledge creation and mimicking professional practices. *The Conversation* platform helps students develop transferable skills such as pitching ideas, distilling complex concepts, understanding public perspectives, and managing challenges related to responding to feedback, repeated revision, oversimplification, and author positionality. For educators, engaging students in these classroom activities, especially coaching them through a hands-on storytelling simulation, offered a more impactful and satisfying alternative to delivering a standard lecture about public storytelling.

We conclude by suggesting that efforts to expand public communication pedagogies should go beyond simply developing storytelling skills and techniques. They should also use the classroom to promote an “ethic of public storytelling,” a shared understanding of the values, responsibilities, and social practices that should guide geographers in turning specialized, disciplinary knowledge into accessible, actionable narratives. A key part of this ethic is recognizing that *The Conversation*, despite its inclusive goals and results, can reinforce traditional hierarchies of knowledge by favoring academic expertise, most notably through the requirement that contributors have a university e-mail address. This shapes who is authorized to frame issues for public and news discourse. *The Conversation* authors do, at times, elevate nonuniversity, community-based voices or knowledge and sometimes, community members directly support or assist with the writing of articles (e.g., Tomaszewski 2018; Nicholas 2019; Agyeman and Boone 2020; Inwood and Alderman 2024). Yet, these contributions remain mediated through academic authorship and institutional affiliation.

Similarly, we must recognize the biases embedded in authentic learning frameworks, which encourage students to imitate the communication styles and analytical methods of “experts.” It is also crucial for students to explore creative storytelling traditions outside the conventional professionalization of knowledge, such as those within ordinary communities, which are also worth emulating (Alderman and Inwood 2024). Engaging students in critical discussions of these epistemological politics can foster intellectual humility among emerging public storytellers and encourage responsible engagement with diverse audiences who exercise public intellectualism in their own right (Wright 2019). Storytelling should not be a monopolizing or extractive form of communication, but a relational practice developed through networks of people,

ideas, institutions, and discussions beyond one's immediate academic circles (Kurtz 2019).

A critical analysis of the power relations embedded in *The Conversation* and other forms of public scholarly communication, combined with an understanding of authentic education as extending beyond expert-centered practices to engage with and colearn alongside broader communities (Huang 2011), can help cultivate a new generation of geographic storytellers. Following Winter et al. (2024), this generation should be encouraged to approach geographic knowledge expansively rather than reductively, challenging false divides between specialized expert knowledge and everyday ways of knowing. Significant geographic insight is not the exclusive domain of credentialed experts; it can also emerge through dialogue among disciplinary scholars, community members, and other everyday knowledge creators.

Such dialogue could take multiple forms as students explore and develop skills in public storytelling. Even when simulating an article in *The Conversation*-style, students can experiment with blending or juxtaposing academic research with the voices, lived experiences, and insights of ordinary communities and historically marginalized groups. With sufficient time and ethical preparation, students could also seek opportunities to collaborate directly with community members to coproduce public stories.

At present, *The Conversation* does not yet offer formal mechanisms for community knowledge producers who are not employed by or affiliated with universities to serve as fully acknowledged coauthors alongside higher education scholars. This limitation underscores the importance of encouraging students to imagine the possibilities of public storytelling beyond *The Conversation*'s institutional practices and politics, even as they critically engage with, and learn from, the pedagogical value of modeling many of the platform's methods, norms, and commitments. ■

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