When I tell people I work in a high school, they usually say, "I'm sorry for you," and I say, "I feel sorry for you*, because you aren't exposed to the goodness of what is coming down." The kids are doing a better job at civil discourse than most grownups.*

—English teacher in a suburb of Buffalo, New York

Exploring the Teaching of Civil Discourse Skills in Western New York State

Peter Horn

I'm composing this document to share informally what I've done and learned so far as a member of the inaugural slate of Penn Netter Center | GSE Fellows in Democratic and Civic Engagement (2022-23). The intended readership includes Fellows who will undertake similar journeys in the seasons to come, as well as the team of Penn professors, administrators, and current DCE Fellows who have provided guidance and inspiration over the past year. The following pages present: elements of my background that led me to focus on civil discourse, my initial proposal, how it changed as I attempted to engage local teachers, what I learned, and possible future directions. This is just a preliminary account, but I'm looking forward to what comes next!

PERSONAL BACKGROUND. As a classroom teacher for 18 years, I was deeply concerned with designing school experiences such that students could see themselves as citizens possessed of the power to change the world. Their role as citizen, of course, is only one of the ways I would like for students to see themselves, but it is a public identity that should be available to everyone. Part of why I left the classroom on a full-time basis is that I would like to help as many schools and colleges as possible address the relationship between student voice, school-based opportunities to engage citizenship, and a more democratic society. Since 2015 I have presented and led workshops at conferences and in schools on leading civil discussion and engaging students as citizens throughout the northeast.

Not all citizens run for office, or engage frequently in political discussions; but neither can a citizen view themself as only a *consumer*. A citizen possessed of the power to change the world knows how to read advertising (whether underwritten by Nike or the U.S. government), understands how to spot fallacies and how to construct a strong argument. They know how to ask questions, how to demonstrate respect for other parties in a conversation, how to collaborate. A citizen understands the value of history, including its misuse as propaganda. They appreciate research as a way to understand a situation or culture or problem more fully. The citizen recognizes that everyone's perspective will be slightly different, so they need to get better at listening. When the time comes for action, action can take many forms.

In my view, schools must provide rich possibilities for students to engage in civil, reason-based discussion. Moving beyond debates with "winners" and "losers" (points scored, face lost), we must teach students that they are fully capable of participating in meaningful conversations in which we can help each other think through matters of genuine and mutual interest. If we do not model for students how to have reasonable, non-threatening, respectful conversations about topics that are difficult to talk about, how can we expect them to become thoughtful, engaged citizens? They probably won't learn these skills from YouTube or TikTok. So, for example, from the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 through my departure from Westfield [NJ] High School

in 2015, I co-moderated a forum for political discussion open to the entire school community. In addition to military interventions, we took up topics such as same-sex marriage, the U.N. oil-for-food scandal, and the observation of Columbus Day.

Since 2018 I have lived in Buffalo, New York, where I grew up and where my wife Robyn is now writing her dissertation in Theatre and Performance as a Ph.D. candidate at UB. Still one of the most segregated cities in the U.S., Buffalo is now infamous as the site of the May 14, 2022 massacre at the Tops supermarket (located one mile from Robyn's and my home), perpetrated by a young man infected with white supremacist ideology. Although the shooter traveled from another part of the state to carry out this attack, I have serious concerns about the quality of political discourse available to young people—and adults—in this city.

ORIGINAL PROPOSAL. Here's what I pitched in late summer 2022 when I applied for a spot in the first slate of the Netter Center | Penn GSE Fellowship for Democratic and Civic Engagement:

Understanding civil discourse as *respectful conversations related to areas of shared concern about which reasonable people are apt to disagree*, I propose to:

- Research what opportunities for civil discourse currently exist in local secondary schools and/or colleges and universities and/or community organizations, including challenges that these forums face (September-October 2022);
- Develop a presentation and/or other materials combining field research and published literature that I would either present personally or make available to faculty, staff, and/or student participants in forums for civil discourse, or those interested in starting such forums (December 2022)
- Visit new and established forums (January-March 2023);
- Conduct surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups about the experience of civil discourse (April-May 2023); and
- Draft the required essay and supplementary materials (e.g., videos, podcasts, data displays, concise handouts) sharing findings from the study (June-July 2023).

INITIAL CHALLENGES. After meeting with co-directors of the Penn Democratic and Civic Engagement Fellowship Ira Harkavy (Netter Center) and Michael Johanek (GSE), as well as the two other DCE Fellows, their respective mentor professors, and their respective GSE program directors in the fall of 2022, I was fired up to get to work researching opportunities for civil discourse in Western New York schools. However, even when you grew up in a given region, as I did in Buffalo, it can be difficult to gain access as an education researcher who is perceived as an outsider. (I had been based in New Jersey for 25 years before returning to Buffalo just before the COVID-19 pandemic.) The Penn affiliation helped to lend credibility to my project, so I learned to use it strategically. I requested a Penn email address and designed my email signature to look formidable:

> Peter Horn, Ed.D.
> Democratic & Civic Engagement Fellow
> University of Pennsylvania
> GSE | Netter Center for Community Partnerships

Despite that hot bit of graphic design, I still somehow encountered problems! Without a budget to compensate participants or a potential grant opportunity for schools, my study offered little incentive to busy administrators and teachers to follow up on my requests for interviews. In some places, I felt like a new variant of COVID-19, passed from district officer to district officer; in one case, I was directed by the third person I contacted back to the first. From a dozen people in as many schools or districts, I got no response whatsoever to repeated requests. At least one of the districts I was soliciting was undergoing contract negotiations, so its teachers union may have advised members not to accept any additional work-related engagements (e.g., interviews with me about civil discourse practices).

REVISING MY PROPOSAL. Having made little progress by the start of spring, I returned to Penn for another meeting with the DCE Fellowship participants and advisers in April 2023. We spitballed about the obstacles I was encountering and arrived at the strategy of "snowball" sampling (described in the next section), beginning with people in the community I knew directly. I would gain access to teachers' networks based on personal recommendations from people who knew and trusted me already. My DCE mentor professor, Jonathan Zimmerman, suggested that I focus on a more manageable goal for the time I had left: identify effective classroom practices for developing civil discourse skills in students. He noted that the American Historical Association has had difficulty finding out what history teachers actually do on a daily basis. It's a lot easier to study the curriculum than it is to study what happens in the classroom. As Zimmerman put it, "The first is the recipe, but the second is the meal."

After learning that Buffalo Public Schools was a pilot district for the newly developed Seal of Civic Readiness (New York State Education Department, n.d.), I drew on the state education department's own language when I gave examples of civil discourse skills in the bullets of this excerpt from a typical solicitation email to educators:

> I'm exploring the teaching of skills related to **civil discourse**, which I'm defining as respectful conversations related to areas of shared concern about which reasonable people are apt to disagree. Having said that, the term "civil discourse" is just a handle. Really what I'm looking for is any WNY educators who do a good job helping students develop skills such as:
>
> - demonstrating empathy for people with different views;
> - disagreeing respectfully;
> - providing evidence for arguments;
> - engaging in respectful discussion of controversial issues;
> - participating in school governance (e.g., serving alongside teachers on committees); and/or
> - participating in civic-centered extracurricular activities such as Model UN, Student Government, Debate Club, Moot Court, or Mock Trial.

SAMPLE. After dozens of fruitless attempts to connect with independent schools and districts outside of Buffalo Public Schools (BPS), some seeds began to sprout in early spring in one suburban district where I had made connections through other projects. I decided to focus my research on BPS personnel and that one suburban district (about 15 miles away from downtown

Buffalo) to provide some contrast. After initial screening, I interviewed eight secondary teachers in each public district, as well as one facilitator from the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition. Our conversations averaged 41 minutes, yielding some 110 pages of AI-generated transcript.

DISCLAIMER: As a former English teacher who has been discussing the pros and cons of chatbots since ChatGPT became publicly available last fall, I decided to deploy ChatGPT 3.5 to generate first drafts of some of the descriptions included in the findings presented below. They all required editing and revision, but I must concur with those who aver that this technology is a game changer. Able to condense 5 pages of transcription into several paragraphs in the space of 2 seconds, ChatGPT is the research assistant I never had!

Back to human intelligence: After initial resistance, the way that I found success in persuading teachers to talk with me was to ask each participant at the end of our conversation (after they had a good sense of what I was up to) to recommend a colleague who also valued civil discourse. In other words, I pursued "snowball sampling," in which initial participants are chosen deliberately, and then they refer other potential participants from their social network to the researcher. This process creates a "snowball" effect as the sample size expands through successive referrals (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141).

FINDINGS

I've included a version of my semi-structured interview protocol in the Appendix to provide a sense of the scope and sequence of my conversations, which dealt explicitly with topics related to the teaching of skills related to civil discourse. The following sections address each of those items by topic. Additionally, I developed a section on Teaching Post-COVID-Shutdown because it emerged as a strong theme in the interviews.

1619 | SEAL OF CIVIC READINESS. There were several topics about which teachers didn't have much to say. For instance, I asked about the 1619 Project and the New York State Seal of Civic Readiness, initiatives for which BPS has attracted some notoriety in the first case and pilot approval status in the second. The BPS teachers I spoke with were generally supportive of the aim of the 1619 Project (essentially, to complicate the narrative of American history by tracing the profound and enduring impact of the institution of slavery), but they had received little explicit guidance on how to integrate the new material into established curriculum. In order to learn more about the Seal of Civic Readiness than state websites provided, I had to speak with the district official in charge of implementing it; again, it's still in a pilot phase, so my non-scientific sample reflects little of what may happen going forward.

POPULAR POLITICAL TOPICS. Every teacher had thoughts about political topics that have engaged students in recent years. For most, the environment and climate change were at the top of the list, with Supreme Court cases (especially Dobbs) a close second. January 6 and Ukraine both had a moment when they were new, but interest has tended to subside. (One BPS social studies teacher lamented that whereas most students were indignant and concerned about January 6 in 2021, by this year, a few students openly espoused support of the Capitol breach.) Current events tend to generate classroom interest and engaged discussion, which was certainly the case with the May 14, 2022 mass shooting at Tops, an impetus for my exploration.

MAY 14 TOPS MASSACRE

> *Why do we have to keep talking about this? This has nothing to do with us. It's just people from the East Side. That's what happens every day on the East Side.*
>
> *—High school student from the suburbs of Buffalo*

The Tops supermarket selected by the shooter as the site of his May 14, 2022 killing spree is located in a predominantly Black area of Buffalo, known to residents of Western New York as "the East Side." (Although outside reporters covering the mass shooting sometimes referred to the area as "East Buffalo," I've never heard a Buffalonian use that designation.) For the last fifty years, with this area having changed demographically from predominantly Polish American to predominantly African American, "the East Side" has served as a code that allowed speakers, such as the White suburban student quoted above, to refer to an African American community without mentioning race. There was much to unpack last spring for a social worker in a school-based treatment program that served urban as well as suburban kids in the same group sessions. The social worker, a White woman who happened to live, as she still does, with her family on the East Side in a neighborhood not far from the Jefferson Avenue Tops supermarket, struggled to address the situation therapeutically when she was still dealing with her own emotions after the recent event. She looked at her colleague, a White therapist raising a Black daughter in Buffalo, and they decided to invite the city kids to respond to the question. Everyone took a deep breath, and the teens from Buffalo began by sharing their experiences of living in or near the neighborhoods most affected by the murders, or knowing other kids who were affected. The social worker described the ensuing exchange as "beautiful." She was relieved it turned out so well, which was on the one hand fortunate—it could just as easily have degraded into epithets and yelling—but on the other hand, probably a sign of the respect that had built up over a year of groupwork talking about other difficult topics.

I asked every classroom teacher I spoke with about what it was like in their class and school in the days following the shooting. Buffalo Public School teachers generally reported that district officials, building principals, and other school leaders provided guidance immediately, encouraging teachers to take time to check in with students in age-appropriate ways. Administrators asked teachers for help in identifying students who might need extra support. However, several teachers also noted that guidance counselors, social workers, and school psychologists are stretched thin. Teachers told me that students had a range of reactions. Observing that the killing took place at a grocery store, some students wondered whether anywhere was safe. Some kids lived in the neighborhood and wanted to talk about it, while others absolutely did not. Some students whose families had fled war, strife, or food insecurity in Yemen, Myanmar, and Tanzania were still struggling to understand U.S. racism. On Monday, May 16, 2022, students in one 10th-grade science class said they felt like they had been re-living the attack all day. They just needed a break. The following day, their teacher opted to ask for forgiveness rather than permission and smuggled in a litter of six puppies for kids to play with. "I did something unconventional," she laughed when she told me the story. "It disrupted the entire day of learning, and six puppies ran all over the entire building. But we can all forget sometimes how healing play can be—even for high-schoolers. It was a big morale boost for everybody."

BPS teachers who established routines for sharing in the classroom were grateful for the sense of community that had developed by mid-May. One teacher who used an exercise she called "Village Circle" (described below) said that her juniors and seniors seemed fairly comfortable sharing what they were thinking and feeling. She also related a poignant anecdote about the moment when one senior asked her if she had seen the video shared on social media from the shooter's point of view. The teacher replied that she hadn't and had no desire to. A number of students agreed with the teacher, but just as many said they had watched it and wanted to watch it together as a class. "Why are adults censoring us from having this experience?" they asked her. Sensing an opportunity to explore her students' reasoning, she let them make their case and learn why it was important to those who wanted to engage with material she found so distressing. She knew there was no way she would permit the video to be shown in class, but she also wanted to hear everybody out. "I wanted to model reasoning, rather than being dogmatic," she said.

In the predominantly White and affluent suburban district only 15 miles away from Buffalo, teachers tended to report inconsistent attention to the event. For instance, most teachers were not aware of any official statement by the district. Although one middle school teacher mentioned a colleague who had installed a display of the victims and their names at the front of his classroom to use in discussion on the Monday morning following the Saturday shooting, he noted that school was the first place some students were hearing about the tragedy. "What was stunning to me," he said, "was that there were some kids who just didn't know about it."

> As a dad, I sat down with my [teenage] kids that night, and we had a tearful conversation about it. The fact that there would be parents of middle schoolers who would send their kids to school without knowing that that happened in their community was really mind-blowing to me. But it was also instructive, because it helped me realize that there are people who parent really differently than I do, who feel like kids need to be protected from that kind of stuff, but are totally fine with those kids playing Call of Duty, like first-person shooter video games. […] I really strongly believe I'm a teacher, not a preacher, but […] how the hell can you not tell your kids about this?

One history teacher in the middle of a Civil Rights Movement unit used a documentary about Emmett Till with her 14-year-old students to anchor a discussion about the tradition of racial violence in the U.S. An English teacher told me a story about one of her few African American students, whom I'll call Michael. Michael happened to be working in the Tops supermarket in their town when an elderly White woman came up to him and said, "I feel so bad about what happened for your people." Michael told the teacher, "I don't even know what to do with this. My people are [suburb] people. I don't even have any Black friends. The closest thing I've come to a Black friend is talking to the other Black kids who come into your room." She offered the anecdote as an example of the difficulty of trying to meet all her students where they are.

TEACHING POST-COVID-SHUTDOWN

> *Pre-COVID and post-COVID are whole different worlds for educators. We actually used to go into much more depth before COVID and really get into mental health issues and coping skills and dealing with really significant family issues. Post-COVID, I don't know what else to say, except that even the best-adapted students have some degree of social anxiety.*
>
> *—High school science teacher in BPS*

Nearly every educator I have spoken to since 2021—including before and beyond the scope of this project—has observed the impact of the pandemic shutdown on students' development, especially with respect to social and emotional learning (SEL). Isolation and greater reliance on instruction mediated by screens means that the students of 2023 tend to have much less practice engaging in face-to-face interactions than pre-pandemic kids at the same developmental stage. If we add to that our phones' constantly improving powers to seize and retain our attention, then the negative impact on students' capacity to develop the kinds of skills essential for civil discourse—such as listening carefully and considering points of view that we don't hold already—should come as no surprise.

"It's gotten much more difficult since COVID, I'm not gonna lie to you," a high school social studies teacher in the suburban district began. "When we're doing essential questions and enduring issues, now they're much more reticent. Civil discourse gets very difficult when students are not comfortable having conversations."

A BPS high school teacher said of her students, "They really have had a hard time transitioning back into an in-person world, where they actually talk to people that they don't know. So even even with their best friends, they're more more likely to text them or even FaceTime them than they are to actually have a face-to-face conversation." Noting that she currently teaches exclusively 10th-graders, the COVID shutdown "really hit them at a developmental stage where people are socially awkward anyway. They didn't develop these skills, where they really can deal with frustration, or with actual face-to-face contact." Because she is also involved with addressing discipline referral cases school-wide, she shared her belief that kids respond to feelings of frustration in two major ways: increased incidents of violence, and withdrawing from lessons—"they recede into their phones, scroll mindlessly through TikTok and kind of regulate their emotions that way"—or from school altogether, which is reflected in decreased attendance rates. In order to counteract these trends in her own classroom, she devotes as much as one full class period per week to community-building exercises, with some explicit attention to SEL skills each day: "And as a result, I have almost no conflict between myself and students or between students in the classroom. I've been doing this for quite a few years, and it really does work. Even if students in my class fight, they don't fight in my room—because that would be disrespectful to me."

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

> *What is said in the circle stays in the circle. What is learned leaves with us.*
>
> *—Restorative Practices facilitator*

After a number of teachers referred to Restorative Practices training offered by the district and a county-wide organization called the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition (ECRJC), I reached out for an interview with an ECRJC facilitator. She's a former classroom teacher who now leads workshops in Restorative Practices (RP) in a mix of BPS, suburban, and rural schools throughout Western New York. For schools, the RP program comprises three tiers: 1. Community-Building, 2. Addressing Disruption/Minor Conflict, and 3. Alternative Discipline/School-Crime Diversion. The theory of action is that a more positive school climate is reached by continuous work to promote open communication, empathy, respect, and trust among students and staff.

Tier 1 Community-Building exercises include activities like check-in circles using a feelings wheel to gauge students' emotions and establish deeper connections in the group. Once trust is beginning to be established, basic check-in questions can lead to deeper questions that address difficult experiences or more personal thoughts. These exercises may be led at the classroom level by trained early adopters, but in order for RP to gain efficacy schoolwide, teachers and staff should also engage in circles and check-ins among themselves to establish a strong foundation of trust. The counselor notes that schools often want to rush into Tier 3 Alternative Discipline strategies and School-Crime Diversion before there has been adequate practice addressing minor conflicts through open dialogue and trust. RP requires a good deal of patience and a willingness to get it wrong sometimes. The counselor quipped, "As our director likes to say, this is Restorative Practice, not Restorative Perfect!"

A foundation of basic respect and relational trust is also required for engaging in difficult conversations, so the first group of activities and students I'll share have community-building as their goal. Some are explicitly related to RP practices and adapted from RP training. Some are of the practitioner's own design.

ACTIVITY: MOVING TEXTS. This activity was developed by an English teacher for her juniors and seniors at a BPS high school with a population that immigrated to the U.S. from all over the world. Students are virtually all English language learners. This activity aims to help students explore literature as well as their own personal growth through movement. Using Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework, students invent movements that represent various concepts from the literature they study. The activity fosters higher-order thinking, negotiation, and respect among students while building a sense of community in the classroom.

1. INTRODUCE CONCEPTS. During the study of literature (e.g., *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*), the teacher introduces different concepts, like "supernatural aides and mentors," using the Hero's Journey framework.
2. MOVEMENT CREATION. Students are asked to create movements that embody the essence of a given concept as it relates to the common literary text. The teacher encourages them to experiment and express ideas through their bodies.
3. COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATION. Students present their movements, and the class collectively negotiates the accuracy and representation of each movement as it relates to the common literary text. Symbolism, language nuances, emotions, and character elements are discussed during this process.

4. PERSONAL MOVEMENT STORY. After applying movement to the literary text, students apply the process to their own lives. They create a movement story representing, for example, a challenging time they experienced.
5. PERFORMANCE AND DISCUSSION. Students perform their movement stories in front of the class. The audience shows respect and attentiveness, engaging in a Q&A session afterward. Observations are framed in a non-evaluative manner, respecting the performer's choice to share as much or as little as they want.
6. VILLAGE CIRCLES. On contentious days or when students express interest, the class engages in "Village Circles." Open-ended discussions about current events or student-selected topics occur, fostering trust and deepening the sense of community.

ACTIVITY: PERSPECTIVIZING IMAGES. Several weeks before our interview in April, a BPS social worker conducted this perspective-taking activity with ninth-grade students on the autism spectrum.

1. INTRODUCE CONCEPTS. The facilitator introduces the concept of perspective- taking by showing students various images that people may interpret differently. Helpful for this stage is a deck of visual optical illusions, such as a vase that can also be perceived as two faces depending on how it is viewed. As they examine these images, encourage students to recognize different interpretations and the importance of considering others' viewpoints. Emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer when viewing these images.
2. FOSTER PERSPECTIVE-TAKING. Engage students in a discussion about the importance of thinking from others' points of view and developing empathy.
3. APPLY SKILLS. Solicit or suggest a social scenario and encourage students to consider how they can respond empathetically. Ask students to identify the possible feelings of the other person involved in the scenario.
4. IMAGINE EMPATHY. After recognizing the emotions of others, prompt students to come up with one way to demonstrate empathy in that particular situation. If the situation involves a conflict, ask students to imagine how it might be resolved peacefully.

ACTIVITY: FIVE NOTES, ONE NICE THING. This activity was adapted by a BPS high school science teacher to foster new connections among her students. She found the original on the internet while she was searching for relationship-building activities for teens.

1. INTRODUCE GOAL. Remind students of shared value of building community.
2. ADD MILD SOCIAL DISCOMFORT. Ask students to select five classmates that they don't normally hang out with and think of one true, kind thing about them.
3. ADD MILD SOCIAL RISK. Direct students to address the notes, write the messages, sign their name, and distribute the notes. (The teacher should do light monitoring to ensure that every student has received at least one note.)
4. READ AND ENJOY. The teacher reported about the most recent time her students did this activity, "You should have seen the low-key smiles!"

ACTIVITY: BUILD TRUST THROUGH STORIES ABOUT BEING MISUNDERSTOOD. Another activity from the school counselor who works primarily with students on the autism spectrum involves a moderate level of risk because students are encouraged to share and learn from personal stories. As part of her project to promote understanding of diverse perspective and promote a culture of compassion and support, she used it last fall as a tie-in with Bullying Prevention Month (October).

1. INTRODUCE CONCEPTS. Ensure that students understand the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice, and more generally making assumptions about others without the benefit of the doubt.
2. OFFER TESTIMONY. After ensuring that the discussion space is safe for vulnerability and open communication, encourage students to share experiences from their own lives of being misunderstood.
3. DEBRIEF. Without judging any individual story, discuss the role of empathy in overcoming misunderstandings and promoting positive relationships.

DEVELOPING DISCUSSION SKILLS

> *I want students to become critical thinkers who can create their own ideas, find their voice, and use it appropriately. It just applies to every level, every kid, every situation. It's a joy to be on that journey with them. It's really such a great part of my job.*
>
> *—English teacher in a suburban high school*

Most of the teachers who explicitly addressed developing students' ability to participate in discussion about current events or an established controversial topic also mentioned the difficulty of contending with misinformation, sometimes from cable news, but most often from social media and other internet sources. A social studies teacher in the suburban district shared how she frames the task for students, "We start with this. I say, 'You're going to make an argument, not give an opinion. The full political spectrum is respected in the classroom as long as you are supporting your argument with facts from reliable sources to back it up.'"

The activities (and one longer-term strategy: Connecting to Common Texts) in this section seek to break classroom discussion out of what could be called "the Q&A rut." Most of what passes for "class discussion" at the secondary level is really just a series of teachers asking questions and students answering, without much cross-talk among participants. This impoverished classroom discourse is usually conducted in rows, as opposed to desks or chairs arranged in a circle, the configuration favored by most of the teachers who accepted requests to talk with me about how they develop skills related to civil discourse.

ACTIVITY: ANCHOR DISCUSSION WITH A HIGH-INTEREST VIDEO. To keep discussion from going sideways in his Participation in Government course when students may introduce information from unvetted sources, a BPS high school social studies teacher selects well-produced, fast-paced, and relatively short (usually less than 8 minutes) videos from generally reliable sources such as Vox or 538. He shows a video at the start of class, and asks students to confine their

discussion to the information presented there, although he and the students sometimes challenge it in this discussion-based class.

1. ENCOURAGE ACTIVE WATCHING. During video viewings, the teacher asks thought-provoking questions and keeps a list of discussion points in mind. This encourages students to actively engage with the content and think critically about the topics.
2. FACILITATE INCLUSIVE DISCUSSION. After watching the video, the teacher initiates class discussions. To ensure diverse participation, the teacher strategically invites input from different students, encouraging them to share their thoughts and opinions.
3. PROMOTE REFLECTION AND ENGAGEMENT. At the end of class, students are asked to respond to the day's topic through discussion posts or written responses on the online platform Schoology. This helps students demonstrate their understanding, reflection, and engagement with the subject matter.
4. CONNECT WITH AMERICAN GOVERNMENT PRINCIPLES. Throughout the discussions, the teacher guides students to relate current issues with the principles of American government, such as the Constitution and the structure of the government.

STRATEGY: CONNECTING TO COMMON TEXTS. As opposed to a discrete activity that can be conducted in a single class period, this is more of an approach adopted by an English teacher of seniors at the BPS international high school where nearly all students have immigrated to the U.S. from a wide range of countries. The teacher aims to foster a deeper understanding of literature, cultural differences, and social issues through a shared text. Using Leslie Marmon Silko's essay collection *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, the teacher guides students in exploring complex concepts such as racism, gender fluidity, and cultural diversity. Again, in this description, any given step may span multiple class periods.

1. INTRODUCE VOCABULARY. The teacher begins by introducing key terms related to social issues, which she terms "-isms," such as racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. This ensures students develop common definitions to explore these concepts in their writing and discussions.
2. READ AND RESEARCH. Students engage in reading articles and conducting research about their native cultures to gain insights into their unique perspectives and experiences.
3. EXPLORE GENDER FLUIDITY. Here's a sign you're not in Florida! The class delves into Silko's descriptions of gender fluidity and its respect in Laguna Pueblo culture. Students are invited to share their preferred pronouns (or not, as they prefer). The idea is to open up a safe environment for diverse gender identities rooted in a text-based discussion but with ramifications for the texts of students' lived experience.
4. RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE. During circle discussions, students are encouraged to share their thoughts, beliefs, and questions about the topics. The teacher facilitates open and respectful dialogue, allowing students from diverse backgrounds to express their perspectives without judgment.
5. MAKING CONNECTIONS. The teacher facilitates connections between the literature, students' personal lives, and cultural experiences. This allows students to relate to the text and develop empathy for characters' experiences.

6. INVITE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES. When conservative religious beliefs, for example, arise in discussions, the teacher acknowledges these viewpoints. Students are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings, and the teacher guides the class toward finding common ground and understanding diverse perspectives.
7. EMPHASIZE EMPATHY. Through discussions and personal connections, students develop empathy for others' experiences, regardless of cultural or religious backgrounds. The teacher's goal is to create a supportive and accepting classroom environment where students respect each other's identities and perspectives.

ACTIVITY: DISCUSSIONBALL. If you're looking to gamify civil discourse for students just finding their way, this activity has been successful in 9th- and 12th-grade classes alike for the suburban high school English teacher who developed this approach.

1. COACH THE ART OF THE QUESTION. The teacher assigns each student a discussion question to write about the current text. The teacher coaches them on crafting good and engaging questions to promote fruitful conversations.
2. COLLECT QUESTIONS ANONYMOUSLY. Students write their questions anonymously on a half sheet of paper. This allows for unbiased participation and promotes a safer environment for sharing ideas.
3. SELECTING ENGAGING QUESTIONS. The teacher previews the questions and marks the most engaging ones with stars. Students do not know whose questions have been selected.
4. CIRCLE UP! The next day, the desks are arranged in a circle. Each student has an anonymous question they have not authored in front of them.
5. START WITH A STARRED QUESTION. The teacher hands a small ball to the first student, who reads their starred question aloud. The student has the option to answer their question or pass the ball to someone else who has raised their hand to respond.
6. BALANCE PARTICIPATION. The teacher encourages balanced participation by implementing the 10-second rule (i.e., delaying for 10 seconds before raising their hand) for those who tend to answer frequently. Students are also prompted to consider the involvement of less vocal peers when passing the ball.
7. HANG BACK. The conversation flows organically as students respond to the questions, exploring themes, and making connections to literature and the world. The teacher refrains from dominating the discussion, allowing students to lead.

ACTIVITY: CASE STUDY. One BPS high school social studies teacher was deeply influenced by summer training with the Case Method Project at the Harvard Business School. He uses case study-based debates and discussions to promote critical thinking, historical understanding, and active engagement in U.S. history. By immersing students in real-world scenarios and challenging them to take on the roles of historical figures, the activity aims to deepen their comprehension of complex historical events, sharpening the edges that standard textbooks often smooth over. As he noted, "It's one thing to regard forced removal of Native Americans as cruel—and I'm not saying it wasn't—but it's much easier to judge from 2023 than to be living in the American South in 1836 thinking, 'What are we going to do?'"

1. SELECT A CASE. The teacher chooses selects some of the cases, but offers students choice on others. Cases include primary documents and a major policy decision to explore and decide, related to topics from the Constitutional Convention (1787) to the Australian ballot in California (1891) to the Citizens United Supreme Court controversy (2010).
2. ASSIGN CASES AND ROLES. The students are divided into groups, and each group is assigned a specific case study. Within each group, students take on the roles of historical figures involved in the scenario, such as governors, senators, or activists.
3. GUIDE ANALYSIS. Students thoroughly study their case and multiple primary sources that provide historical context, perspectives of different stakeholders, and the new texture for the decision-making dilemmas faced by their assigned roles.
4. SET DEBATE PROTOCOL. The class participates in debates based on the case studies. Each group presents its findings and arguments, defending the positions and decisions of their historical figures. The debates showcase critical thinking as students analyze the implications and consequences of historical actions. They must consider alternative perspectives and justify their proposed solutions.
5. REFLECT TOGETHER. After each debate, the class engages in reflective discussions. Students share insights, discuss the complexities of challenges faced by historical figures, and explore how historical events can be viewed differently based on context, societal norms, and individual perspectives. This comparison enhances their appreciation for the dynamic nature of history.

Done well, the case study-based debates offer students an immersive and active learning experience in American history. By embodying historical figures and engaging in authentic decision-making scenarios, students can develop a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of historical events. The debates encourage critical thinking, empathy, and open-mindedness as students explore diverse perspectives and grapple with ethical dilemmas.

ENGAGING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

> *We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.*
>
> *—James Baldwin*

The budget and scope of this study regrettably did not include time travel and the opportunity to interview James Baldwin; however, a veteran BPS social studies teacher told me he deploys this famous quotation whenever his students engage in contentious conversations. He says its tone continues to resonate with his students, helping to guide respectful consideration of diverse perspectives.

When addressing charged political topics in class discussion, the BPS teachers (whose students skew more progressive than students in the suburban district) tended to mention that they take special care to draw out the perspectives of more conservative students. As in many schools I've consulted with, there's reasonable concern among these teachers that students with minority viewpoints might prefer to keep their heads down rather than get ostracized for an unpopular opinion. One BPS social studies teacher said he frequently plays devil's advocate in his

Participation in Government class. “The point of this course is to be able to understand the other point of view, right?”

A high school social studies teacher in the suburban district observed that often her students don’t seem to have been exposed to opposing viewpoints, so she makes explicit her belief that a worthy aim of education is to unsettle us to some degree. “In social science or literature classes, the humanities especially, it should make you sweat a little bit because you’re uncomfortable.” An English teacher in the same school advocated a “posture of humility” for everyone in her classroom, which she as the instructor strives to model. “All people involved need to be teachable. When you walk into any classroom or participate in any activity, that idea of humility and an idea of being teachable are essential elements.”

The activities presented in this third group (beginning with an important approach to clarify terms) deal most directly with what many people think of when they think about civil discourse, i.e., respectful engagement with current controversies. It’s worth noting that two of the items address forms of discourse other than discussion—in one case, media such as TV, radio, and podcasts; in another, speeches—which is the best reason I have for persisting in using the term “discourse,” which many people outside the academy find borderline pretentious.

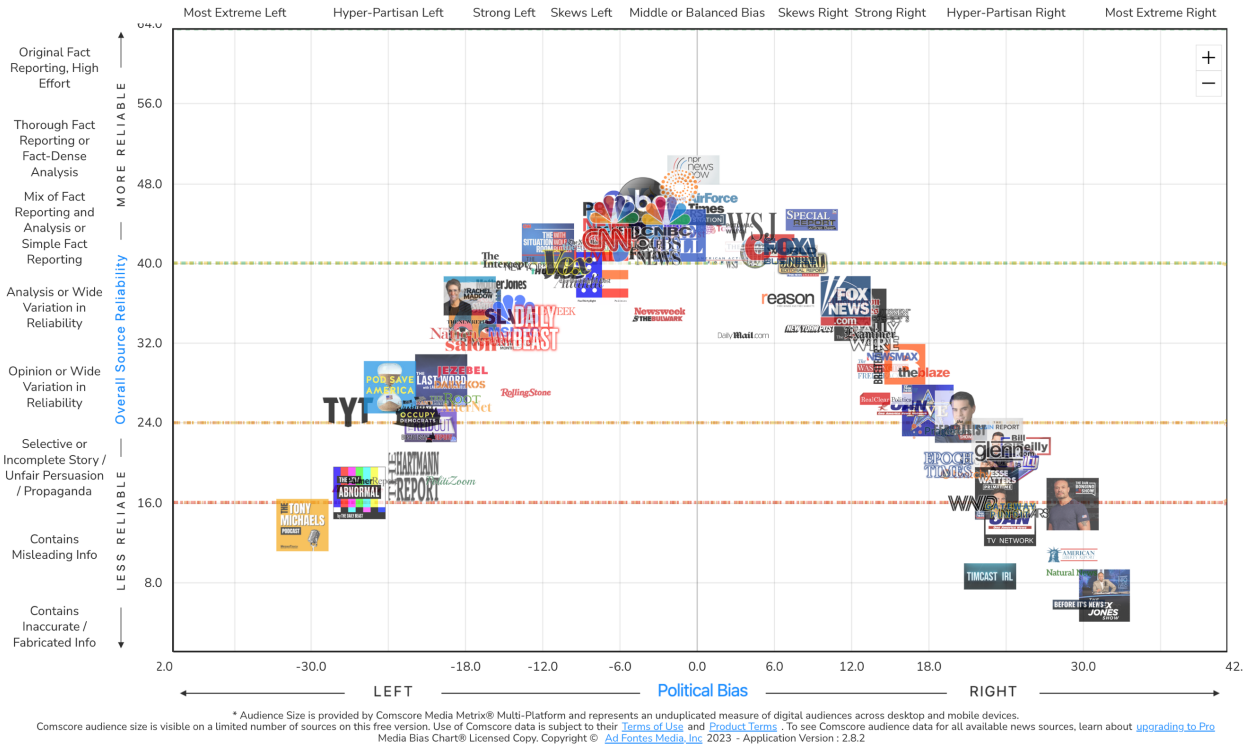
ACTIVITY: DIAGRAM THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. Assuming that juniors and seniors would know what other students meant when they used terms like “liberal” and “conservative” was a blind spot for me as a teacher. (I had been a politics nerd from a young age, trying to decipher the arguments my dad and grandmother were having about Ronald Reagan so I could get into the conversation.) I was therefore glad when an experienced BPS social studies teacher told me that the first thing he did when politics came up was to map the U.S. political spectrum.

1. ASSESS PRIOR KNOWLEDGE. Ask students what labels they know that refer to U.S. political parties, or to political perspectives more generally (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Democratic Socialist, Green, Conservative, Working Families Party, Liberal, Progressive, National Socialist)
2. DRAW A HORIZONTAL LINE. If no one has mentioned “left” and “right,” ask about these terms. Share an anecdote about the historical origins of these designations in the French Revolution.
3. MAP THE LIST OF LABELS ON THE LINE. As you work with students to uncover some understandings about how these labels function today, plot each party or designation.
4. COMPLICATE APPROPRIATELY. Depending on the scope of your course and the readiness of your students, you may wish to observe concrete examples of changes over time, e.g., the resonance of “Republican” in the time of Lincoln vs. the time of Eisenhower. You may want to add the variation of a “horseshoe” shape to explore the apparent convergence of extreme attitudes on the left and right. With any group of students, the limitations of labels and their potential to shift in meaning should be appropriately underscored.
5. EXPLORE POLITICAL TYPOLOGY. As an extension of this exercise, offer students the option to explore how they compare to others in the U.S. by taking an online quiz from a reputable source such as the Pew Research Center. The PRC quiz asks 16 questions (some with follow-ups) and then assesses the quiz-taker’s best fit in one of these

categories. Note: the teacher who described this activity says that he makes a point of raising questions about the quiz's methodology, and invites students to do so as well. Furthermore, he cautions students to be skeptical of any such online tools, including the metadata they may capture about respondents.

% of the general public who are ...

6. APPLY KNOWLEDGE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. Once students have a basic understanding of the political spectrum, one of the ways they can apply this knowledge is in considering the bias and reliability of various sources of news. One relatively new organization with a mission to pierce information siloes is called Ad Fontes Media, which offers this interactive chart (not included in this screenshot are several thousand more sources not displayed by default).



ACTIVITY: MODERATING POLARIZATION. An English teacher in the suburban district has routinely used this activity at the beginning of the year in his American literature course to encourage students to explore different perspectives and understand opposing viewpoints.

1. CREATE SLIDE DECK. The teacher prepares a slide deck with 12-15 slides of controversial images and labels related to current events. Each slide includes an image and a polarizing word or phrase, such as a picture of Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem with the label "UN-AMERICAN" or a picture of President Trump on the phone in the Oval Office and the caption "DANGEROUS." (Obviously the teacher has creative discretion to modify for relevance, the developmental stage of students, and community norms.)
2. ASK STUDENTS TO TAKE A STAND. The teacher presents the first slide and instructs students to silently position themselves in the classroom based on their agreement or disagreement with the statement. Students choose the side that aligns with their opinion.
3. EXPLORE OPPOSITION. The teacher then selects one student from each side to participate in a role reversal: each student attempts to explain the reasoning behind their peer's opposing position. The student (e.g., Fatima) who disagrees with the slide's message must articulate why they think the student (e.g., Carson) who agrees. This step widens the pathway for more empathetic understanding.
4. CLARIFY AND DISCUSS. Next, Carson has the opportunity to confirm or modify Fatima's interpretation of his perspective. The discussion highlights areas of understanding and clarifies any misconceptions.
5. PROCEED. Repeat steps 2 through 4 for the remainder of the slides, selecting a different pair of students each time.
6. INTRODUCE A THIRD SIDE. For the second time through the same slide deck, the teacher introduces a third option, allowing students to position themselves in the middle. The teacher talks through why someone might do this. Using the first slide as an example, the teacher says, "Maybe I agree with Fatima's point *x*, but Carson's point *y* also makes sense to me. If this mix is closer to what I really think, I should stand here."
7. COMPLETE THE SECOND ROUND SILENTLY. The second pass through the slide deck (beginning with slide 2 if slide 1 has been used as the explanatory example) is much faster, because there's no conjecture about or clarification of opposing viewpoints. However, students are encouraged to pay attention to anything that changes. Again, everyone should still choose their stance with integrity; it's just that now there's a third option.
8. DISCUSS. After the activity, everyone circles up, and the teacher initiates a group discussion. Students share their observations and experiences from the exercise, reflecting on the process and insights gained.

The goal is to disrupt typical patterns of polarization and explore the possibility that many people are more moderate on many issues than popular narratives would suggest. The teacher values this exercise as a relatively safe opportunity for students to clarify, and then modify their stances based on new information. He said that this activity helped establish the dominant mode of classroom conversations as exploration rather than attack.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT: THE ART OF RHETORIC. One of the English Language Arts teachers in the suburban district teaches a senior elective in public speaking. I wanted to share somewhere in this document a sample of what an interviewee sounded like for more than a carefully selected quotation, so here's an excerpt from an interview conducted in late spring, lightly edited for clarity and length:

> I will say, when I teach public speaking—you know, we use Stephen Lucas's *The Art of Public Speaking*—and there's a full chapter on what it means to analyze the audience. And so half of my public speaking class is helping kids think about their audience, and what's appropriate and how to establish credibility, common ground, and goodwill. We do spend a lot of time engaging in that conversation at that level with my seniors. And those are hard conversations to have. They're very good, but it's still conceptually really hard for kids to understand the importance of that in public speaking. […]
>
> There's no topic too small, and there's no topic too political. A lot of kids come in a little trepidatious, saying, "I don't want to offend anyone." And I say, "If you do it right, you won't."
>
> So just in this past week, a girl talked about transgender athletes, and whether or not biological males should, after transition, be able to compete in female sports. Today, there was a speech on our involvement in Ukraine, and then a student was persuading us that there's goodness in the two-party political system—that we should *learn* from the third offshoot parties to shape those two political parties, but we shouldn't really be pursuing more than a two-party system. […] Later, we were in small groups, and I said, "Why do you think there are not more White people in [name of suburb]? It's a hard question. Have you ever thought of it?" And they, on their own, came up with ideas of systemic racism and what it means for cultural groups to want to stay within more comfortable groupings with people they feel more comfortable with. I mean, it was so—I guess in my classroom, everything's on the table.

VIGNETTE: DEBATING RELEVANT POLICY AND ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE. Here's where I hope we're headed, but it's going to require some organizing (see below).

Back in 2019, just as they were studying plastics as part of the standard NYS curriculum, students in one BPS Environmental Science class stumbled upon the proposed Styrofoam ban for local restaurants. Recognizing the significance of this real-world environmental policy, some students expressed a desire to voice their opinions before the Buffalo Common Council. Their teacher was impressed, but she wanted all students to actively engage with the topic, regardless of their stance.

The teacher assigned each student to write a one-page statement indicating whether they supported or opposed the Styrofoam ban. She wanted everyone to explore the pros and cons of the ban and make informed arguments.

Amid lively discussions in the classroom, students discovered a shared concern for litter and other garbage in their communities. While some found it challenging to fully comprehend the

impact of polluted waterways, for instance, they were determined to address the visible environmental issues they encountered daily.

Three students volunteered to testify at the Common Council, advocating for the ban using research as well as details from lived experience. They stayed to hear other testimonies, including one from a representative of the plastic industry, who argued against the ban, citing potential adverse effects on businesses.

The kids were shocked to witness the political realities of lobbying efforts and misinformation. They turned to their teacher and said, "Miss, she's lying! A lobbyist can't just lie in testimony, can she?" Obviously, this foray into local politics required a different investment of time and energy than many science teachers expect to expend, but the teacher summed it up this way: "How can we tell the kids that better is possible if we're not willing to do it?"

NEXT STEPS

> *I will say this, I feel like it's sad that I've been an educator here for 23 years, and I don't have names rolling off my tongue. I think that's problematic. And I think that people are probably doing it. We're just not talking about it.*
>
> *—English teacher in a suburban high school, when asked whom I should speak to next*

It was an honor to have the opportunity to converse with people who share a sense of the importance of developing skills for civil discourse in the next generation. Some were more hopeful and some more circumspect, but each educator took the work seriously. The occasions I felt most conflicted had to do with questions that I had no ready answers for. I'm thinking of the BPS social studies teacher who had worked at multiple schools in his decades-long career and now teaches kids from mostly low-income households:

> One of my favorite lessons is we look at election results. And I have my kids make predictions, right? Who voted more, you know, men or women, Whites, Blacks, Asian American ... And whether you're a high-level learner or you're a low-level learner, kids will commonly guess, low income votes more. "Well, they have more problems, and they have more of this, more that …" and then you reveal it and you realize, *No, oh my God no. It's the wealthy, by far.* And you start thinking like, *Okay, well, if you're a politician, who are you going to listen to? Who you have? Can I call up Senator Schumer and have lunch? No, I can't, can this rich guy do that? Yes, he can.* And so how do I do that without making them feel denigrated? Right? Like, I don't want to be like, "You guys are the lowest of the social class. The chips are totally stacked against you, you're more likely to be incarcerated ... I'm not trying to insult you …" How do you? How do you rile that up? How do you tap into that? To get them to be like, *Yeah, we need to make a change.*

Beyond my immediate plan to cull the best civil discourse activities, strategies, and approaches from teachers I've interviewed and share them more formally (and with more appealing design) with a much larger audience, I'd like to organize an opportunity for my interviewees to meet each other in person—first in the city, then in the suburb I've been careful not to name—so that they can share ideas, talk about their kids, and dream about new possible solutions for the challenges they're facing today.

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APPENDIX

DCE Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Teachers

SETUP
Thank you for your time today.
Recap of my project: I'm interested in CD because I see it as an essential element of civic participation that, like critical thinking, requires explicit instruction and practice to develop. If I were to put a very fine point on it, I'm concerned that in our political conversations a prevalent attitude is I'm right and you're evil, which makes it very difficult to understand each other, let alone to take action and solve social problems collaboratively. We're talking because you've indicated that in your teaching you value one or more of the skills related to CD, like:

- demonstrating empathy for people with different views;
- disagreeing respectfully;
- providing evidence for arguments;
- engaging in respectful discussion of controversial issues;
- participating in school governance (e.g., serving alongside teachers on committees); and/or
- participating in civic-centered extracurricular activities such as Model UN, Student Government, Debate Club, Moot Court, or Mock Trial.

Any questions so far?
So that I can really focus on what you say, I'd like to record audio of our conversation for my note-taking purposes only. I will never quote you or paraphrase anything you say in a way where you might be identified without your express permission. Is capturing audio okay with you, or would you prefer that I just take notes while we talk?

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC INFO
Where do you teach?
What grade levels / subjects?
How long have you taught there?
Did you teach anywhere before that? (Where? How long?)

CD
What kinds of activities do you do that develop the kinds of CD skills I ticked off earlier? (Happy to repeat the list!)

- Appropriate probes to elicit rich descriptions of 2-3 activities.

How did you come to value developing these skills in students?
Do you have any experience with BPS implementation of the 1619 Project? (Probe.)
Do you have any experience with BPS pilot implementation of the NYS Seal of Civic Readiness? (Probe.)
We're approaching the anniversary of the mass shooting at Tops. May I ask what it was like in your school, for you, your students and other staff, in the days after May 14th last year?

- What supports were available?

- Was there explicit guidance given by your school or the district?
- Were there spaces that students could talk about their reactions?

What contemporary political topics have you discussed with students?

- Which ones seem to interest students the most?

CLOSING

Is there anyone else you would recommend that I talk to?
Is there anything else you think I should be asking about or thinking about along these lines?
Would you be willing to participate in a small group discussion with other teachers about CD?
Is there anything else about CD that comes to mind for you now?