



Sophomores Morgan Martin, Paola Loera, Audrey O'Neill, Mia Ochalek share their views on the efficacy of the electoral college.

CIVIL DISCOURSE MODELED HERE

Heated political environment and lack of bipartisanship bring exercises in finding solutions to DSHA classrooms

“Civil discourse” – the kind of give-and-take interchange that helps this country progress – is a simple concept.

It’s done through respectful discussion of facts, in which opinions are heard and considered, discussion is allowed, and all are committed to building consensus.

If it’s so simple, why aren’t more adults doing it? And can we teach a better way?

Those are the questions being asked in social studies classrooms this year, as a very heated 2016 political election cycle left Americans wondering whether “leaders” could get along with the other side long enough to actually lead.



The basis for our entire country is and always has been compromise.



– EMMA MAGER, DSHA '18

President Ellen Bartel challenged DSHA faculty to address the issue in the classroom – in a way that would carry more meaning than a standard lecture.

“I knew it couldn’t just be something we preached,” says Social Studies Chair Chris Weiss. “We need to really impress on students the tenets and value of civil discourse.”

Weiss found a website called “deliberating.org” through Stanford University’s education department. It offered 12 lesson plans on the subject.

Social Studies faculty Patrick Dawson, Sue Goulee, Chriss Laemmar and Tom Montgomery chose their topics – among them, undocumented minors receiving in-state college tuition, Americans’ right to protest, and the value of the Electoral College.

Doing their homework

Laemmar says her classes started with students feeling confident in their opinions.

“They were saying, in effect, ‘Well, I believe this because of this, but that’s all I know.’ But spending time in the library, then doing independent research, they learned a lot.”

Students were instructed to study both sides of their topic and to be prepared to argue both. In class, the room was divided into two “camps,” with students in small groups presenting each side, one at a time. Once debate had taken place, students switched sides.

“The process showed students the importance of ‘doing your homework’ and knowing what you’re talking about,” says Dawson. “When you yourself have to be able to present reasons for each side, you start to see each has valid points. And that the other side is not evil.”

Dawson even asked students what the other side’s best point was, which he says really makes them think outside their personal perspective.

At the end of each class, students were asked to vote based on their real opinions.

“Some opinions actually changed as a result of the exercise,” says Dawson.

Gaining perspective

Tom Montgomery began his lessons with examples of well-known leaders whose civil discourse practices – or lack thereof – were fairly obvious. For example, Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. valued civil discourse; Hitler did not allow it.

He says that, overall, students learn through this exercise much more effectively than if they were just listening to a lecture.

“Discussing relatively neutral subjects like these allows us to engage in civil discourse without emotion,” Montgomery says. “That might not be as easy if we were to tackle controversial topics.

“When they are given a topic and have to prepare, present facts, listen, discuss, they learn the process of civil discourse and can see where it’s needed in the world around them. It is by doing this, by being involved in it, that they gain perspective.

“Having to then take the other side and make arguments for that makes them see there are two sides, both with valid points. They come to value the process of actual discourse that takes place.”

Country based on compromise

Junior Emma Mager, one of Montgomery’s students, has high hopes for the positive effects of the Civil Discourse focus.

“I hope young people will be educated on how to speak to each other without bitterness and anger,” says Mager, who says she’s eager to tackle weightier topics. “Because that’s just so prevalent now.

“But the basis for our entire country is and always has been compromise.”

Dawson says he likes to imagine these exercises could be part of a future change to “business as usual” in American political life.

“There have to be people who step forward willing to work with folks on the other side of the aisle.

“Maybe some of them will be our students.”

