President’s Message
Like most teachers, on the first day of school each year, I spend some time reviewing my classroom expectations. For years, I have maintained a fairly simple, straightforward set of principles: Be Respectful, Be Engaged, Be Diligent. I use about one minute of class time on opening day to present these, and thereafter endeavor to model, reinforce, and uphold these norms throughout the course of the school year. This year, I added one more: Be Kind.

Although they are relatively basic, these expectations nonetheless reflect a core philosophy that guides me each day in this profession. As an educator, I deeply believe that I have a moral obligation to fulfill the ideals so often enshrined in schools’ mission statements: critical thinking, active and knowledgeable civic engagement, open-mindedness, a global orientation, and lifelong learning. As a social studies teacher, I know that I, along with so many others, play a fundamental role in nurturing these values in our students. Educators stand at the forefront of enacting meaningful change - indeed, if not us, then who?

In today’s tense political climate, educators - particularly social studies teachers - may find themselves in the midst of controversies over curricular decisions, source selection, topics related to human rights and social justice, school and district policies about inclusion, and other issues. Nevertheless, according to the National Council for the Social Studies, we “have an obligation to provide instruction which instills commitment to democratic values and faith in the dignity and worth of every human being.”

In our last issue we cited the oft-quoted expression “may you live in interesting times”. We then noted some developments that would meet the test of “interesting times”. Sadly we appear to have moved from interesting to bizarre if not dangerous times. We could site any number of events, issues, actions, and/or tweets that meet these new standards, but two issues appear particularly relevant to the social studies classroom.

The second event has just broken, and for many towns and schools, it will quickly become personal. The President’s decision to abolish DACA in six months if Congress doesn’t act is astounding and, in our view, appalling. While it is difficult to predict how this might be resolved, the use of innocents, some of them children, in a political power play seems perverse.

The times should inspire all of us to make every effort to gather next April 12-14 for NERC – coming back to Hartford, Connecticut, after

(continued on page 2)
President's Message - continued

of the individual. Social studies professionals should respect the dignity and integrity of every student regardless of color, race, creed, sex, sexual orientation, ethnic background, disability, or socioeconomic level, and should aspire to help each student to achieve effective citizenship.”

Feeling safe, welcome, and supported should not be the exclusive advantage of a select few. We are not allowed to believe in the promise and potential of only some of our students. Personal or institutional preference should not determine opportunity. Being respected is not the sole preserve of those of certain circumstances. Kindness is not a political stance. If embracing, teaching, modeling, and cultivating such beliefs and dispositions are considered radical acts and an affront to certain sensitivities, then we are condoning a significant step backward.

A short while ago, I came across a quote that epitomizes this new era in which we found ourselves and reflects what those of us who desire a better tomorrow must do. It reads: “The person who is just and resolute will not be moved from his settled purpose, either by the misdirected rage of his fellow citizens or by the threats of an imperious tyrant.” Through our unwavering and indefatigable efforts and everyday actions, we remain resolute. I wish you all the best as you embark on a new academic year, and I have the utmost confidence that social studies educators will lead the way forward in our schools and communities at a time when we are most needed.

Join CCSS: See Membership Form on page 15

Editor’s Note - continued

many years using facilities at Sturbridge, Mass. You will find a presentation of plans for the conference including web-address for submitting a workshop proposal. The deadline has been extended until October 15 so there is no excuse for not giving this your best shot. We all gain when we share our ideas, particularly in the tough times. And if you prefer not to present a workshop, please mark the dates now and be present. It’s current. It’s close. It’s Connecticut. See pages 3 for information and stay in touch with the CCSS website for announcements: etsocialstudies.org

You will find other information in this issue. Despite all the talk of cutbacks and layoffs, State Social Studies Consultant Steve Armstrong has been busy. His report is on page 4. In addition we have articles on Civic Participation, Curriculum Standards, and a challenging piece that suggests that recent cuts to social studies programs may have contributed to national discord. Wishful thinking? Preaching to the choir? You decide.

Tim   thomas.weinland@uconn.edu
Dan   danielcoughlin@charter.net
NERC 48: A Call for Workshops

Where were you on September 11, 2001? I remember where I was like it was yesterday. I remember who I was with and the collective feeling of that space. Depending on your tenure on this earth, some will remember where they were when Kennedy was assassinated or when they first learned of the Moon Landing, the fall of Saigon, the Moonwalk, or the fall of the Berlin Wall. We remember where we were for births, birthdays, weddings, and funerals. Descriptions of memories often include, “I remember it was raining...” or “We were all huddled around a 19” black and white...” or “There were thousand of us in that park, all cheering and singing, holding up signs.” Our memories and our experiences are shaped by place. Where we are shapes who we are and what we experience. Places shape history, bring people together in politics, are defined by geography, and dictate the economy. We are enveloped by the omnipresence place. Places have power.

Join the Connecticut Council for the Social Studies as we host the 48th annual Northeast Regional Conference (NERC 48) on the Social Studies, where we will explore the “Power of Place” from April 12th to the 14th, 2018. With the city of Hartford, Connecticut as its backdrop, educators will examine social studies topics relevant to their practice, explore the role of place and the application of both to the classroom. This provides an excellent opportunity for elementary and secondary teachers, museum educators, and organizations to come together to engage in a deep inquiry about the unique and transcendent qualities of place.

As the academic year is settling in, we ask that you take a moment to consider what you and your organization might share at NERC 48. So far, we’ve secured fabulous pre-conference institutes, conference sessions, and keynote speakers and, now, we are looking to add more voices and perspectives to our conference offerings. In addition to exploring “place,” we are building a robust program offering educators a chance to engage with best practices and sound pedagogy. If you have a practice to share or a place to highlight, consider submitting a workshop proposal by October 15, 2018. For more information in terms of specific strands and audience targets, please visit www.ctsocialstudies.org/NERC48.

In April 2018, we will gather at the Hartford Marriott Downtown. The hotel is minutes from the banks of the Connecticut River and is walking distance from Front Street, the Science Center, the Old State House, the Wadsworth Atheneum, City Hall, and the historic Hartford Times Building, the new downtown home of UConn. This location alone illustrates the power of place in history, civics, economics, and geography. In addition to the conference sessions and speakers, we are planning several networking events and social outings. These three days will surely improve your practice and expand your network among educators from throughout the Northeast. We look forward to seeing you.
State Department Activities

Steve Armstrong

There are a number of programs that the State Department of Education is involved in that should interest you in the following year. This will be the second year of the Red, White, and Blue Schools program, which is co-sponsored by the Secretary of State’s Office and the State Department of Education. This program recognizes schools and districts for outstanding teaching in the field of civics. Last year’s theme was “Teaching the 2016 Elections”; this year’s theme will be “Student Engagement at the Local Level”. On Thursday, October 5 there will be a kickoff event for the Red, White and Blue Schools program at Amity High School in the late afternoon. More details will be forthcoming.

There is another new recognition program this year that is co-sponsored by the State Department of Education and by the Office of Veterans Affairs. This program will honor schools that do an exceptional job of teaching about the history of veterans and the role that veterans play in American society. This program will recognize schools that do more than teach about veterans just on Veterans Day. Materials will be available shortly on the CSDE website.

There will also be four webinar series that the CSDE will be sponsoring or co-sponsoring this year. These include:

- A series providing background on American protest movements in the past and in the present that have impacted history
- A series on Teaching the Holocaust (first webinar date: November 14)
- A series on International Problems (co-sponsored by the PIER program at Yale University)
- A series on the African American experience in Connecticut

Dates and times of the webinars will be announced shortly. For information on any of the above programs, contact CSDE social studies consultant Stephen Armstrong at Stephen.Armstrong@ct.gov or at (860) 713-6706.

CFOG First Amendment Project

Educators looking for imaginative approaches to enhance their mandated Civics First requirements might consider a program launched last year by the Connecticut Foundation for Open Government (CFOG). Under the free CFOG First Amendment Project, teams of lawyers and journalists visit participating high school classes to discuss the history and practical applications of First Amendment, Freedom of Information and Open Government policies. These lively, knowledgeable and interactive sessions drew very positive results and CFOG plans to expand the program to even more high schools this academic year. Since participation will be assigned on a first-come, first-served basis, contact Mitchell Pearlman at MPearlman@Cox.net or see www.ctfog.org.

For more information see: http://tinyurl.com/y8pu6h7z and http://tinyurl.com/y7sjdfp4
Editors’ Note

We are mindful of David Bosso’s quotation from the NCSS: that we have “an obligation to provide instruction which instills commitment to democratic values.” Beginning with this page and running through page 10 we have brought together several articles on approaches to the events of, and issues raised by, Charlottesville and how they might be handled in class. Some advocate neutrality; others, including the following, are somewhat more contentious. There may be school policies that forbid any discussion of difficult issues particularly for younger grades. We hope you will find some of these ideas useful. We would be grateful to receive any additional suggestions to be presented in subsequent issues of Yankee Post. Thank you for your attention. Tim and Dan

Charlottesville – Values in Conflict?

Whatever one may say about Charlottesville, a “good Nazi” would appear to be something of an oxymoron. Pretty blunt, huh? Make no mistake: it is very difficult for many of us to treat the events of Charlottesville and the responses of our national leaders in a dispassionate manner. But we will “give it a go.” We believe that while most Americans prize history, free speech, respect for others and non-violence, Charlottesville found these values in conflict. Beyond the absolutist claim above, we suggest that just about everything else in the sad events of Charlottesville and the subsequent reactions of our nation’s leadership is up for discussion.

Start with the Historical Memory/Historical Oppression – in Robert E. Lee’s case, his monument represents a symbol of regional history, recognizing leadership, bravery, and regional pride. For some it also represents white supremacy, slavery, rebellion and racism. Should the statue be destroyed or moved from a public location to a museum or private property where Lee’s story can be told without symbolizing public support for the oppression some feel? Consider all such public monuments. Many of our revered forefathers owned slaves – like Lee. A statue of Christopher Columbus can hardly be a source of pride for Native Americans. Indeed if we search hard enough, we can find warts on just about all of the men and women for whom a statue, building, college or town has been named.

And lest we think we are unique in our disquiet over this issue, many former colonies of Western Europe are struggling with if and how their histories should be taught and how the colonial remnants in their political and educational systems should be preserved. There is no absolute answer here but a thoughtful discussion must consider where the line should be drawn on what is a reasonable presentation and preservation of our historical memory.

Now consider Free Speech/Hate Speech. Do we deny the so-called white supremacist his/her right to present an opinion? Do we shut down Neo-Nazi publications? Do we deny the right to peacefully assemble to those whose ideas most of us abhor? Should we deny that right to those who openly display weapons as they assemble and march, in effect adding intimidation to their speech? Do we deny that right of free speech and assembly to those who utter clearly racist and inflammatory speech when a reasonable person might conclude that the speech is intended to incite violence? Is such inflammatory speech the equivalent to shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre when there is no fire – a situation where we clearly draw a line?

Then consider the Response. We have historical examples from the lives and work of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: passive resistance to provocation has proven effective. There are other choices. Is it appropriate to try to shout down the speech you abhor or block the assembly or demonstration of the group with whom you disagree? Some in both America and Europe have gained attention using ridicule to embarrass their opponents. Is there a point where violence is justified and if so, what are the conditions that would justify such a response? Some suggest that abusive language or aggressive pushing or “in your face” taunting often leave one with no choice. Gandhi and King would most likely disagree arguing that any form of violence demeans one’s cause.

Our students need to address the extent to which people can speak their minds; and they need to consider appropriate responses to speech we dislike. They need to understand how historical memory might be a source of one person’s pride but another’s sense of oppression. As noted above, there are very few absolutes to be found as we explore the range of choices on these questions. At the end of the day, in some cases we may have to “agree to disagree.” The discussion won’t be easy but if a social studies classroom can’t take up these value-laden issues in a thoughtful and respectful manner we call our very mission into question.

Tim Weinland and Dan Coughlin
“Controversies over freedom of speech on college campuses have existed as long as there have been college campuses. But the specific issues vary with each generation.”

That is the first line of Erwin Chemerinsky’s new book, “Free Speech on Campus,” written with Howard Gillman. Mr. Chemerinsky is not only one of the foremost legal scholars on the First Amendment but also a firsthand witness to the free speech debates of today as the new dean of the University of California Berkeley School of Law.

Here he talks with Natalie Shutler, the editor of the On Campus column, about hate speech, censorship and what campuses can and can’t do. This interview has been edited and condensed.

Natalie Shutler: Hi, Professor! I have spent the past year talking with college students about free speech and, as you know all too well, it’s a contentious topic for them. In this loud internet age, in which provocative opinions are hitting us constantly and from all sides, plenty of students don’t see value in hosting more of the same on their campuses. One thing I appreciate about your new book is that you are thoughtful about these students’ concerns, even if you disagree with their conclusions.

Erwin Chemerinsky: I think we have to be attentive to the fact that many students want to restrict speech because of very laudable instincts. They want to protect other students from hate speech. They want to create an inclusive community for all. But the response to hate speech can’t be to prohibit and punish it. It’s unconstitutional. We have to find other ways to create inclusive communities.

Natalie: For many students, it’s not just about hate speech, but the kind of speech that creates harm. This term is agonizingly broad and open to wildly different interpretations. But students aren’t wrong in thinking that speech can be a weapon.

Erwin: Students are quite right. We protect speech because of its effects. If speech had no effects, it wouldn’t be a fundamental right. Those effects can be positive but they can also be very negative. Speech can cause enormous harm. It can be hurtful, it can cause people to be excluded, and it can interfere with education or employment. Especially in colleges and universities, we have to be attentive to that.

Natalie: But you do take a hard line in your book that even hate speech must be protected.

Erwin: The law under the First Amendment is clear: Hate speech is protected speech. Over 300 colleges and universities adopted hate speech codes in the early 1990s. Every one to be challenged in court was ruled unconstitutional. And there are good reasons for that.

After some really ugly incidents at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s, the school adopted a hate speech code that was undoubtedly well intentioned. But a federal court declared it unconstitutional, in part, because it was so vague. It said that there could not be speech that “demeans or stigmatizes” anyone based on race or gender. But what does that mean? A sociobiology student who challenged the law said, “I want to study whether there are inherent differences between women and men. What if my conclusions are deemed stigmatizing on the basis of gender?” And during the years Michigan’s speech code was on the books, more than 20 black students were charged with racist speech by white students. There wasn’t a single instance of a white student being punished for racist speech, even though that was what had prompted the drafting of the Michigan speech code in the first place.

That’s part of a much bigger historical pattern: As we saw in Michigan, when hate speech codes or laws are adopted, they are most often directed at the very groups they are meant to protect.

Natalie: You make the distinction in your new book that this doesn’t mean that the First Amendment is absolute. For example, there is no constitutional protection for a “true threat” or for harassment. Campuses can protect students against that kind of speech. But before you address unprotected speech, maybe we should talk a bit about the history of free speech, which you lay out in your book.

Erwin: It is hard to imagine social progress anywhere that wasn’t dependent on freedom of speech. The civil rights protests of the 1960s — the lunch counter sit-ins, the marches and demonstrations — were essential to federal civil rights acts and the end of Jim Crow laws that segregated every aspect of the South. The anti-Vietnam War protests were crucial for the end of that war. This has been true throughout American history. The 19th Amendment that gave women the right to vote was the product of demonstrations and speech.

Natalie: Now, as you point out, many students associate free speech with the vitriol of the internet more than they do with the civil rights movement. I feel for them. The internet is terrible. But how do you see things turning around? How do you think students could begin to associate free speech as something for the vulnerable?

Erwin: Some of this is about a lack of education about the history of freedom of speech. I do worry that students today may equate free speech more with cruel or racist posts on Yik Yak than with the civil rights protests of the 1960s. But even...
when students talk about harm and safety, they need to remember how malleable those terms are. There is no doubt that the civil rights protests deeply offended many Southerners, however objectionable that may sound to us today. An example like that illustrates why offensiveness to an audience can’t justify stopping speech.

Natalie: Identity is important to nearly every college student I talk to, regardless of their background or political persuasion. You make the case that free speech is the basis for asserting identities and, in particular, was necessary for the expansion in public of countercultural identities — including, and I’m reading straight from the book here, “forms of expression that challenge traditional religion, prevailing social mores, familiar lifestyle choices, inherited views about sexuality, or historic gender roles.” But of course, some identities are much more vulnerable to intimidation than others.

You argue that college administrations need not ignore that. An administration can’t bar a campus speaker, but it can engage in its own speech by reaffirming the social standards of the community and reaching out to students who might be offended or hurt. Campuses don’t need to stand behind offensive speakers; they just need to allow them the opportunity to speak.

Erwin: I think it’s so important for campus officials to respond to and condemn hate speech. Just because the First Amendment protects a right to say something, that doesn’t mean it should be said. Campus officials can describe the type of community they want to create and denounce hate speech as inconsistent with it. Many years ago, when I was teaching at the University of Southern California Law School, someone wrote a very offensive homophobic slur on a chalkboard. The dean did not try to find out who did it or threaten punishment. Instead, he wrote a very powerful statement about why what happened was inconsistent with the community we aspired to be. His message had an enormously positive effect.

Also, it is very important that the students themselves respond to offensive speech. They can hold counter-demonstrations, teach-ins and protests. All of that is protected speech. They just can’t protest in a way that interferes with the ability of others to speak.

The law is clear that even in places that are open to speech, there can be time, place and manner restrictions, so long as there are adequate places for free speech. There is a right to speak on the campus, but there is no right to come into my classroom and shout me down. There is a right to use public streets and sidewalks, but a city can prevent trucks with sound amplification equipment from playing music in the middle of the night. Dormitories are also a very special place of repose for students. It’s their home, and the Supreme Court has recognized the protection of privacy of people in their homes. So there can be much greater restrictions in dormitories — but it always has to be content neutral. It can’t be based on content or message.

Natalie: Right, so you could say that no one is allowed to hang flags from their window, but not that no one is allowed to hang Confederate flags from their window.

Erwin: Exactly.

Natalie: Obviously violence — like what we saw in Charlottesville and could presumably expect near other college towns in the coming year — is not protected by the Constitution. But I have heard from many students that they are frustrated with the idea that people of color and other vulnerable demographic groups are responsible for staying nonviolent and peaceful when aggressive demonstrators march on their colleges. It’s not that they want violence, but that they feel that they are being told to respond to aggression with passivity. Could you comment on that? I certainly understand where they are coming from.

Erwin: There is no right to engage in violence. Campuses can take steps to prevent violence — such as preventing weapons at demonstrations, having speakers be in areas where safety can best be assured, and moving counter-demonstrations to another area. Also, if speech is a true threat — causing a person to reasonably fear imminent physical harm — it is not protected by the First Amendment.

Natalie: What about the argument that some inflammatory speakers come to campus with the express aim of creating a hostile environment?

Erwin: It is important to recognize that a public university has no choice but to allow speakers on campus even if their message is regarded as hateful or racist. If the campus tried to exclude such a speaker, it would get sued and the speaker would win and likely would be made a martyr for the First Amendment in the process. Nothing can be gained by exclusion. But the campus must ensure safety for its students, staff and faculty. This might include regulating where the controversial speaker is allowed to be present and, likely, it will include more of a police presence. I am sympathetic to the concerns of students who are wary about more police coming to campus, but not having law enforcement present in the face of a danger to public safety risks even greater harms.

The central principle of the First Amendment — and of academic freedom — is that all ideas and views can be expressed. Sometimes they are ideas and views that we might consider noble, that advance equality. Sometimes they might be ideas that we abhor. But there is no way to empower a government or campus administration to restrict speech without allowing for the possibility that tomorrow, it will be our speech that is restricted.
Four N.H. Teachers On How They Plan To Talk About Charlottesville

By RICK GANLEY & MICHAEL BRINDLE • AUG 29, 2017

New Hampshire Public Radio

The events that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia earlier this month sparked a national dialogue about racial tensions in America. It's a conversation that's continuing in classrooms across the state, as another school year gets underway. We asked four New Hampshire teachers how they’re planning to incorporate discussions about the violence that occurred in Charlottesville into their classrooms. We asked them to record themselves and send in their thoughts; here’s what we heard:

James Gaj, Nashua High School South

“I currently teach a current events class and that covers anything, current events, anything that’s going to pop up in the news, and Charlottesville is definitely something that fits the mold. What we’re going to do is we’re going to have to talk about that the first day of school because it is in fact so relevant to today, especially when we’re talking about things like extremism and hate groups, domestic terrorism, people like Timothy McVeigh and Randy Weaver.

“One thing that we do study is the psychology of what makes people act the way that they do. We know that these people that showed up for this rally were neo-Nazis and the KKK and people like David Duke. And we want to know what makes them tick, what made them get there, how come they act the way that they do. And also it’s really important for the kids to understand this kind of thing because the world that they live in doesn’t contain people like this right now. They are in for a rude awakening when they graduate and go out into the world that they’re going to meet a bunch of different people. And that’s one of the things that I really try and explain and open their eyes to.”

Kim Carrozza, Nashua High School South

“I’m going to be talking about Charlottesville in my fall classes this semester because I want to show the continuum of race relations in America, beginning with reconstruction, coming through Jim Crow and the great migration in the 20s through the 40s, the civil rights events of the 50s and 60s, right up to the present day in Charlottesville. I want students to be able to trace the chain of events. What happened? How did we get from reconstruction 150 years ago to Charlottesville? Why haven’t things changed? So I’m preparing by finding primary sources, both written and visual, so that students can trace the history of race relations so that they can look at it from a political, economic, and social viewpoint so that they can compare pictures of past race incidents likelynchings to Charlottesville and protests that we see going on today.

“Can they solve the problem? Will moving the monuments really solve the problem? This hits into my core subject US history because it shows students the connectedness and relativity of history in their daily lives. I often hear from students ‘Why do I have to learn about history? It’s not important. It doesn’t impact me.’ Charlottesville is why we have to learn about it. If they don’t understand how events started in the past, they won’t understand why these events are happening today. You can’t solve a problem if you don’t understand its complexity: its political complexity, its violence complexity, its social complexity, and its economic complexity. That’s what I’m hoping to impart to my students and the hope that they’ll walk away with a better understanding of why these things are happening and what they can do to help solve the problem.”

Sara Bennett, Lebanon High School

“I am an English and social studies teacher at Lebanon High School. This year, I co-teach teach a class called humanities with Andrew Gamble and our plan is to discuss Charlottesville as either an introduction to looking at humanity through the lens of the United States government and how it operates or to discuss it during our free speech unit, talking about the First Amendment. As far as preparing goes we have been reading articles, looking at photographs, thinking about strategies that will get our students to empathize and sympathize with those who have different viewpoints than they do. I think especially being up in New Hampshire, where it's not as diverse as the South and our student body is primarily white, to look at Charlottesville in a new lens will be really helpful for students to understand different perspectives.

“I think it’s important for students have a dialogue about what is happening in Charlottesville, what has happened, what’s happening across the south with the Confederate statues because they’re entering into the world in a year. They’re not going to have school. They need to have informed opinions and knowledge about political events. I think they think that politics a lot of times is something that’s separate from them and it’s not personal and it’s sort of these guys making rules that they don’t totally understand. Events like this kind of bring it to them and allow them to have their own opinions and think about who do I want to vote for, how does this stuff affect me, why does it matter.

continued on page 9
Lisa Petersen, Granite State Arts Academy in Salem

“We are a public performing arts charter school. This coming year I will be teaching 9th 11th and 12th grade English. Last year I taught 11th grade humanities which was U.S. history and English. I will have those same students as 12th graders this year and going into the school year, I know at this point that I will be discussing and opening up the dialogue of the events that occurred in Charlottesville with them. I have been making sure I keep myself informed so I am able to answer any questions they may have and to ensure we can have an open and respectful dialogue about the events. I also subscribe to Teaching Tolerance, both online and in print, and frequently look to them for appropriate ways to approach such discussions in the classroom.

“The Common Core asks us to make our students into critical thinkers, and when an event like this happens it can’t be ignored. We live in an information age when students are seeing both full accounts but also sound bites and it’s important to discuss how that can influence our society too. What is the difference between a sound bite and the actual article that comes from? When I get the question like why are they so angry and what do they think is being taken from them, I ask students what do they think. Honestly, the answer is usually nothing is being taken from them and anger gets them nowhere. There is no place for that kind of hate. We must keep the dialogue open to young people.

“Here’s something I honestly grapple with all the time: I’m constantly asking myself am I the right person to teach this. Am I the right person to have this discussion? And I don’t know. Perhaps I’m not. But I do know that I’m willing to and I’m constantly striving to stay informed to get my students to ask thought provoking questions. I’m going into my 20th year of teaching and in my tenure I have tried to always ensure my classroom is a safe space.  I have no tolerance for words of hate in my classroom environment.”

US News and World Report: High School Notes

High School Teachers Can Stay Neutral on Current Events

It may be tough in a polarized political climate for teachers to hold back opinions – but educators say it’s crucial they do so.

By Alexandra Pannoni, Digital Producer | Aug. 7, 2017, at 8:00 a.m.

Teachers should allow teens to take charge of discussions on current events, experts say. As high school teachers prepare for the first day of class, they should be ready to address current events with students – but are generally advised to hold back their opinions, educators say. “This is a place where students are finding and refining their voice and you are in an authority position,” says Chris Bunin, a social studies teacher at Albemarle High School in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Teachers could even risk their jobs if they share opinions.

Students need help finding their own voice so they are prepared to defend it, but also need to know how to understand opposing viewpoints. “So many times, people just don’t even want to consider the other side,” Bunin says. But understanding other points of view and learning how to compromise are how communities and individuals can break the gridlock, he adds.

In today’s polarized political climate, it may be tough for some teachers to remain neutral when discussing hot topics with their students. The following three tips may help.

1. Find out what questions students have: Questions asked by teachers could have some inherent bias, Bunin says. Instead, he suggests teachers ask students if they have any questions to kick off discussions.

“Often those questions will lead to a very authentic conversation where you are not providing an opinion – you’re just providing answers to their questions,” he says. Students also feel like their voice is being heard, he says. Bunin used this technique earlier this year when President Donald Trump’s administration issued an executive order limiting immigration and the flow of refugees. His students were talking about it, and he
knew he had to address the topic in class. Some students had simple questions, but if Bunin didn’t have answers, he researched the topics with his students.

One Twitter user offered advice on how teachers can facilitate discussions.  

Create space for discussion. Be a facilitator not a lecturer. Teach students HOW to listen. Use neutral language.

2. Let students lead discussions: Teachers should try not to get too involved in discussions and ensure all opinions are heard, says Sean Jacobsen, a political science teacher at The Michael J. Petrides School in New York. “It’s one thing to correct factual things, but to put your own opinion in – it can be dangerous,” he says. Additionally, teachers shouldn’t get emotional – and must keep their students’ emotions in check too, he says.

Bunin, the teacher in Virginia, tries to set expectations for discussions. His techniques include asking students to summarize the previous speaker’s opinion before they offer their own thoughts, to show they are listening. He also discourages students from using the conjunction “but” – since that word immediately negates what someone said. He asks them to use “and.”

One Twitter user described a strategy teachers could use in class to ensure all opinions are represented.

1. Hold debates on controversial issues, but insist claims are supported with evidence.

2. Then randomly ring a bell to during each discussion to flip the “side” of the debate. (challenging students to argue both perspectives).

3. Share opinions responsibly: Bunin says it’s tough for teachers to be 100 percent unbiased in the classroom and that there can be discussions where it’s OK for teachers to share their thoughts with students.

“It’s a flexible thing. It’s always situational,” Bunin says. “Some of the most pressing current events, it’s really important for us to not put our opinions out there.

“Twitter users offered their opinions below.

Depends what you consider neutral. Facts are facts even if some consider it “fake news” or “biased opinion”.

Research on cognitive biases indicates that even “neutral” is interpreted as opinionated. Something journalists are seeing first hand

When sharing his thoughts with students, Bunin begins by saying he is not trying to impress his opinion on his students. He also offers some background or history on the topic. But Bunin always holds back sharing personal beliefs with students at the beginning of the year. He waits until the middle of the year, when expectations and respect have developed, before he considers sharing.

Generally, however, he thinks it’s a good idea for high schoolers to learn how to discuss opposing viewpoints. Many of his senior students will be in the real world soon, he says, so he sees no harm in modeling the right way to have discussions before graduation.

Alexandra Pannoni DIGITAL PRODUCER
Alexandra Pannoni is an education digital producer at U.S. News. You can follow her on Twitter or email her at apannoni@usnews.com.
Imagine a basketball coach with no hoops and no ball who provided a textbook history of basketball, showed video of some of the greatest games, and imparted a passion for teamwork. But she never held a practice and the players never bounced a ball. How would her team do in a game? How well do our students and former students do as participants in a democracy—with all that we’ve taught them of history, geography, government, and economics? Knowledge, skills, and values are necessary aspects of a good civic education but the most important element has been left out—action. Civic duties involve doing things in the world—pushing us to go beyond knowledge, thinking skills, and values within our classrooms. Civic education requires practice working with others to take action.

One in four Americans surveyed approve of the current Congress and less than half of the current president. What about at the grassroots? What percent of Americans regularly act on the insight that, “In a democracy, the highest office is the office of citizen?” The American people have been taught to be democratic citizens about as effectively as that basketball coach, with no hoops and no ball, taught her students to play basketball.

Civic Competence

The NCSS says, “The aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence...” Civic competence isn’t all or nothing. It can even be a means through which you engage students in other content. In other words, you can teach Ancient Egypt and also empower students to be participants in a democracy.

Civic competence enables people to be “active and engaged participants in public life.” Instead, social studies students are often taught to be more informed spectators around historical (and occasionally contemporary) controversies, rather than participants. And it’s a crucial difference—the basketball team that used their practice time to watch films of classic championships could talk intelligently about basketball, but not play it.

Teaching for Civic Participation

Teaching for participation requires a significant step beyond “student-centered” lessons that elicit student’s opinions and encourage them to better argue for those opinions. Although this “clickbait” orientation (“Was Lincoln a racist? Use these three texts to prove your perspective!”) can work well as a means, it can’t be where we end up. A society where everyone argues over random controversies isn’t a democracy—it’s Twitter. Democratic participation as a goal for social studies asks us (with Paul Simon), “What are you going to do about it? That’s what I’d like to know.”

Public life is what we do, decide, and say together that affects more than just our own family. In a participatory democracy, government should be “of the people by the people and for the people” and public life thus includes serving on a jury, voting in an election, paying taxes, and knowing how to advocate that a bill becomes a law. But public life in a democracy also extends beyond the edges of government into block associations, community gardens, coaching Little League, and volunteering at the homeless shelter. Public life includes the newsworthy and the neighborly—from organizing civil disobedience against a war to bringing a casserole to a school fundraiser.

Reorienting Social Studies To Civic Competence—The C3 Framework

The C3 Framework reorients social studies towards “civic life,” the third C after college and career. The framework encourages teachers to plan units along an “inquiry arc” that culminate in civic action and communication. The inquiry arc proceeds (more or less) along the sequence of compelling question, disciplinary techniques, sources and evidence, and communicating conclusions and taking action. Standard social studies courses in the U.S. have primarily focused on the middle two steps—looking at historical materials and doing history type-things with it—like creating a timeline or connecting two events. The C3 Framework bookends this standard “content” encounter with a compelling question that animates students to actively involve themselves in the learning and with an “action step” that challenges students to do something with what they’ve learned.

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The inquiry arc parallels what regular people do when they contribute to civic life. For example, several pedestrians have been injured at a local intersection. A group of neighbors gets together and figures out their compelling question, something like “How can we get the city to make this a safer intersection?” They learn disciplinary techniques of analyzing maps and traffic flow. They immerse themselves in comparisons of their intersection and others in the city, looking at satellite photos, statistics, and gathering testimony. And then they figure out how to take action—they share their conclusions at public meetings, increase awareness through signs and posters, and advocate with elected officials. The C3 Framework provides the democracy basketball team with a ball and hoops and some chances to practice with them.

If social studies teachers for grades 6-12 offered five inquiry units per year, a typical student would graduate with 35 experiences of asking powerful questions, using disciplinary techniques, gathering evidence, and doing something with what they’ve learned. By the end of high school, students should be helping to craft their own compelling questions and action steps should become more authentic and powerful. These experiences and skills would serve as powerful foundations for students’ lifelong civic participation. Organizations from the National Action Civics Collaborative could provide “jumper cables” for schools to boost their civics instruction immediately.

A Vision of Powerful Social Studies

It’s October 2025 and 12th grader Tina Rodriguez is nervous as she steps to the microphone. She’s had a lot of practice presenting her ideas in public after years of C3 social studies units. But this is her first time speaking to more than a hundred people at a meeting that she and her classmates have spent months planning. She had borrowed from exemplars from her 10th grade unit on Women’s Suffrage as she wrote her speech. As she looks down at her clothes she thinks back to her first “communicating conclusions” assignment—a speech about the school dress code in her 6th grade classroom. Tina looks back up and sees that the elected officials her class had invited to the event had all appeared—the college student who worked with her Government class had been right, as well as cute—outreach does work. Nearby her classmates Barry, Zhao, and Imani were sweating—Barry and Zhao would be debating against Imani and the president of the local Chamber of Commerce. The students had decided the best way to involve the local businesses in the discussion was to invite their strongest critic to speak against the plan, when a “power-map” revealed they needed some local business support. They had done a lot of work, and now Tina’s job was just to set the tone and get the event going.

With a strong voice she tells the audience, “Thank you very much for joining us in this assembly. In being here, you have already shown your support to our primary message—that young people are not just the future of our society, but already important participants. Whether you decide to support lowering the local voting age to 15, as most of my classmates and I advocate, or to oppose the change, as several of my classmates and the Chamber of Commerce encourage, our democracy becomes more powerful when everyone has a say and we really listen to each other.” In her pause, as the audience applauds, she has a feeling of being part of a story that her fellow Americans had been enacting for a long time. “We'll divide up after the debate in small groups, facilitated by my classmates, to discuss the proposal. And we can guarantee that, at least here, everyone will get a chance to be heard!”

John Troutman McCrann, a high school math teacher, NBCT, and MfA Master Teacher Fellow in New York City, writes about his quest to integrate inquiry- and performance-based learning into his instruction, and how these concepts might inform education policy. Follow him on Twitter: @JohnTroutMcCran The author appreciates the “Citizen Power” challenge grants project, cosponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute, American Federation of Teachers and First Book, with funding from the Aspen Institute’s Pluribus Project, for its support in developing these perspectives. Special thanks to Leo Casey, executive director of the Shanker Institute.

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Decline in teaching social studies contributes to national discord

BY JACQUELINE COLEMAN    SEPTEMBER 05, 2017 12:12 PM

We cannot afford to wait until the next national tragedy to value social studies education in this country.

In addition to cultivating the skills and dispositions most sought-after by employers, a robust social studies curriculum aids in closing a “civic achievement gap” that disproportionately affects low-income families.

Without a strong social studies curriculum at the core of our education system, we must admit we are failing our children — especially our most at-risk populations — and allowing the next generation to fall victim to the misguided, revisionist history that fueled the hateful acts in Charlottesville.

Social justice, civil discourse, empathy, historical context and civic engagement are at the heart of preventing and resolving instances like the one we witnessed there.

We often hear, “People are not born that way; hate is a learned behavior.” So, why have we not declared a national educational priority? If education’s purpose, as Malcolm Forbes said, “is to replace an empty mind with an open one,” then we should make a concerted effort to do just that in our school communities every day. We have allowed the very courses and subjects that provide the perfect avenue for these much-needed conversations to dwindle in importance over the years.

Experts have followed “the decline of social studies education” for over half a century. Its began as World War II ended and our nation turned its focus to math and technology. In 1975, the New York Times wrote, “If knowledge of the past is in fact relevant to our ability to understand the present and to exercise freedom of mind — as totalitarian societies, both real and fictional, acknowledge by stringently controlling what may be studied or published — then there is cause for concern about many Americans’ sense of history.”

During our most recent recession, school systems were forced to trim down to bare bones. Guided by No Child Left Behind, schools were strong-armed into prioritizing math and English, pushing science aside, and hiding social studies on the shelf, dusting it off only when there is a national holiday to be celebrated.

Almost four decades after the Times warning, a 2013 article in The Atlantic, reinforces, “It’s clear that something has to change when only one-third of Americans can name all three branches of government; when only 23 percent know the First Amendment supports freedom of religion.”

If we subscribe to the belief that hate is a learned behavior, we must also take ownership for failing to provide an educational space to combat the inequality that haunts minorities every day and that paralyzes our nation in times of tragedy.

History matters. Civic engagement matters. And, because of their decline, social justice, civil discourse, and empathy have become lost arts in a nation of people who can no longer talk to one another.

Every year that we put social studies on a shelf and perpetuate the irresponsible idea that it is not a national educational priority, we waste an opportunity to teach skills in humanity to our most impressionable citizens, and future leaders.

Every generation hopes to leave a better community, nation and world for their children and grandchildren. I would argue that this “better place” is not a gift to be unwrapped, but rather a framework to be built.

A strong social studies curriculum that provides equitable opportunities for civic engagement, civil discourse and historical context would certainly make for a more perfect foundation.

Jacqueline Coleman of Harrodsburg is an assistant principal and founder/president of Lead Kentucky, which teaches young women leadership skills.
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Special Notice on Membership Dues

Membership in CCSS runs from July 1 to June 30th each year. Many of our members renew their membership at our annual fall conference. There will be no fall conference in 2017 as CCSS is hosting Northeast Regional Conference in Hartford on April 12-14, 2018. Members who are current on their dues for the 2017-2018 year will be sent a discount code for registration for NERC. Please be sure to renew your membership by the start of the school year. Dues may be sent to CCSS, PO Box 5031, Milford, CT 06460.

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