Schechter Manhattan

COHORT 5

Daniel Paul,
Teacher

For my Civic Spirit project, my 8th graders were given the task of having a structured debate about the involvement of Jews in the Civil Rights Movement. They were coming to the end of a six-week unit on this topic, and the final week was delivered by an educational theater company called 'Exploring Black Narratives' (EBN). The debate centered around the idea of one side arguing that Jewish Americans needed to get more involved in the movement, while the other argued that it was too dangerous for them to do so and they should take a back seat and avoid the violence that was arising due to the movement.

What were your goals?

I deliberately set up the debate in such a way that each team had to find a way to create common ground with the other, and not just do the classic 'we're right, you're wrong, here's why' approach to debating. The students were instructed to give speeches that were more persuasive than argumentative: they had to find ways to explain that the other side's approach was not THAT different from their own and that there were logical reasons for coming around to their way of thinking. I wanted the students to learn that in real life, you don't 'win' an argument by blasting the other person's ideas, but by finding common ground and attempting to bridge the divide, cajoling rather than compelling the person whose view is different from yours.

How did this project fit within the context/mission of your educational setting?

One of the things we were hoping to achieve by bringing in EBN was to broaden our students' horizons. This school is very small, and the students can sometimes give the impression of living in a very narrow, closed-off world, not fully understanding the wider issues of the world they inhabit. I wanted them to learn about the Civil Rights Movement from people of color, and I also wanted them to be ready to engage with others who have very different opinions in a way that is constructive and can lead to personal growth.

How did students engage in the project?

This class loves debating, and so they took to the task with gusto. They had to write one-minute speeches to express their views and one-minute responses to others' speeches where they could ask questions or give comments. Their speeches had to be created in just 10-15 minutes, so they worked eagerly. The overall result was a series of speeches that did fit the brief of making a clear point while also acknowledging the views of the other side and their legitimacy.

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In what other ways did you integrate civics into your classroom or educational community this year? Which of Civic Spirit's Three Pillars did you focus on?
The focus for the 8th grade this year has been the American experience through the 19th and 20th centuries. Units on otherizing, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement all helped build the students' understanding of what it was like for different groups, especially minorities, to live in America through these times of immense change and conflict. The pillar of democratic fluency was therefore at the forefront of the syllabus, but this particular exercise was a great way to enhance the students' civic skills, a different pillar of Civic Spirit.

What aspects of this project and your Civic Spirit experience did you find especially meaningful?
I have repeatedly commented to anyone that might be interested that the Summer Institute was by far the best professional development I have had in America, possibly the best ever, including my teacher training at the University of Cambridge, UK. The quality of the presentations, not just in content but in format, and the fantastic cohort of teachers, made for a truly enlightening experience. This project was also one particularly dear to me, as I think it's so important to train young people to have difficult conversations without increasing polarization. In the America of today, it is crucial for people of strongly opposing views to be able to have informed and open conversations where they are capable of listening to the opinions of others without immediately dismissing them. They must also be able to make their points clearly but subtly enough that they can persuade the other person of the legitimacy of their views, as this is the only was that people can bridge the growing divide between groups that are not able to see eye to eye on the biggest issues affecting America's and the world's citizens today.

To view Mr. Paul's curriculum on MLK's letter, click here!