HAFTR High School

CEDARHURST, NY

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I cannot adequately express how valuable Civic Spirit has been in challenging me to push beyond my self-induced constraints in teaching English and rekindling my love for being a student. That first day when I walked into the New York Historical Society conference room and was faced with a room full of strangers, I was anxious, and my anxiety only grew when I realized that almost all of the teachers present were social studies teachers. But rather than that being a deterrent, I found that I loved the deep dive into our founders, the way they viewed our democracy, and how that affects my own views and those of my fellow Americans today.

Over the course of those four days, what I found was a collaborative experience that was equal parts nurturing and challenging and really opened my mind to the possibilities for incorporating U.S. History and Civic Spirit in my ELA classroom. What started that Thursday afternoon at the New York Historical Society as a seed of an idea to challenge my AP English Language and Composition students with old-fashioned Socratic Seminar style round-table discussions on various aspects of American Identity truly blossomed and focused over the next several months with the help of my mentor, the amazing Audi Hecht. After collaborative discussion, we decided that I would focus on the First Amendment for my project. I introduced the project to my juniors at the beginning of February when I assigned our anchor text: *The Soul of the First Amendment by Floyd Abrams.*

In mid-February, I divided my students into two groups. The first was: What freedom of speech means to Americans/How it is unique to America. The second was: Limits to Freedom of means to Americans/How it is unique to America. The second was: Limits to Freedom of Speech/When we do not have the right to speak freely? I gave each group a coordinating packet with guiding questions and instructions for research requirements. I assigned the first three chapters of Abrams' book and began teacher-led discussion of Abrams' work and introduced key Supreme Court cases the following week. I gave my students homework time to begin their own research. I then gave them a full week of class time to continue their self-guided research and prepare for our roundtable discussions.

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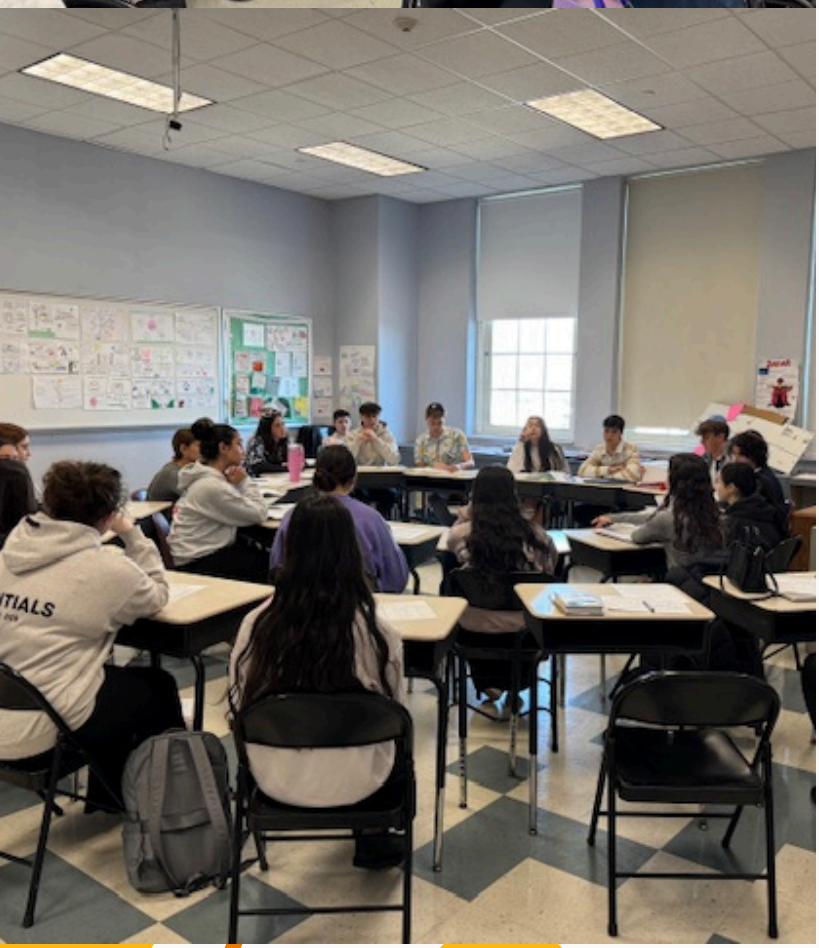

We scheduled our roundtables for early March with one group (the inner circle) engaged in an almost completely student-run discussion of their topic while the other group (the outer circle) wrote notes on handouts that guided their observations. Two days later, they swapped for the second round of discussions. At the end of the week, we had a class debrief of their experiences, and they turned in their personal reflections on the experience.

Throughout this project and the culminating round-table discussions, my students were engaged, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable. They incorporated history and current events, along with philosophical discussions of moral and ethical considerations. To say that I was impressed by these discussions is an understatement. This was a resounding success, and I am already thinking ahead to how I will approach this project next year and whether I might replace or supplement with another Constitutional Amendment. Thank you, Civic Spirit, for this amazing experience.