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Civics for the Internet Age

A new, bipartisan curriculum aims to help US students make sense of a highly polarized country.

By Jamie Stark | Spring 2017

Students have cried in Tim Rierden's social studies class at Wood River High School in Hailey, Idaho, scared that their parents might be deported under President Donald Trump. Some of their classmates' parents probably voted for Trump, like 31 percent of voters in red Idaho's Democratic-leaning Blaine County.

How is Rierden supposed to lead political discussion in such an emotional and rapidly shifting, partisan world? Rierden has the kids jump on their school-provided Chromebooks. He uses a free curriculum, called AllSides for Schools (http://www.allsides.com/schools) , that aims to encourage productive discussions on controversial issues. The curriculum's first module, called "Relationships First," helps students recognize that despite political disagreements, they likely share core values with their peers. As discussions progress, Rierden refers students to the AllSides website (http://www.allsides.com/) , which compares news stories from different outlets side by side, identifying each source as conservative, liberal, or moderate.

Rierden often uses these comparisons as a jumping-off point for conversations, breaking students into small discussion groups and then asking them to share what they learned with the whole class. "We're getting more to the point of looking at the source rather than looking at the information," Rierdan says. Students are starting to consider their own attitudes toward the content, and how different biases might lead to different headlines.

The program seeks to help students step out of their information bubbles and discuss ways that

individuals and outlets can be biased. "The information we get is the same information over and over again," says John Gable, founder of AllSides, describing the way that modern media consumption creates echo chambers. "We are more confident and more ignorant at the same time."

Gable worked as a project manager with Netscape (which offered the first commercial Web browser) in the 1990s and has argued for years that the tribalism of the Internet can drive people into media bubbles. In 2012, he launched the AllSides website, on which much of the AllSides for Schools curriculum is based, to encourage people to "embrace and label bias, and seek stories from differing viewpoints." Now he wants to bring a younger generation into the dialogue, through AllSides for Schools.

Gable worked for Republican senators in the 1980s but partnered with Joan Blades, the founder of left-leaning MoveOn.org (http://front.moveon.org/) , to launch the nonprofit AllSides for Schools in September 2016. Since then, teachers from at least 37 states have registered to use the Common Core-compliant curriculum. And Blades has sat in on 10 conversations in classrooms. "They agreed they knew more about The Great Gatsby than voting, and they weren't sure if it was worth it to vote," Blades says. She thinks students seem to feel overwhelmed by the modern media deluge.

"There's a fantasy promoted in Hollywood where the teacher walks in and spontaneously you get this great discussion, and that's not what happens in the real world," says Diana Hess, dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education and coauthor of The Political Classroom. Hess believes that for students to understand the difference between a ginned-up controversy and worthwhile news, teachers should spend more time on careful planning, consulting with other teachers, and incorporating outside resources that can help them focus on the facts in front of them, rather than the politics around them. But that's increasingly difficult in a US society "segmented into ideologically homogeneous communities marinating in a stew of sameness," she says.

So how do we verify truth in an age of individually tailored realities? These days, you "don't do that by having another oracle on the mountain like Walter Cronkite," Gable says. "You do it by making it part of the flow." The flow for high schoolers probably involves scrolling through several apps. Although what counts as "liberal," "conservative," or "moderate" ultimately is a subjective assessment, AllSides tries at least to make it easy to see stories from multiple angles at once.

When a student asked Rierden why events in Benghazi, Libya, were important in the election, he directed the class to AllSides news stories that offered different perspectives on the issue before leading a discussion. "You can field those pop flies, and then you go to AllSides and say let's look at how this news source handled it," says Rierden. "And then they can decide."

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