

What I Did During Summer Vacation: Restoring Civic Culture Together seminar

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Back in June of this year while I was wrapping up my students' grades, I received an unexpected email from "[Stossel in the Classroom](#) (SITC)" a website designed to help teachers encourage students' critical thinking. SITC provides teachers with free (We love that word!) DVDs on a wide variety of topics compiled by Mr. John Stossel over his 29+ years as a consumer reporter, best-selling author, and TV commentator. I used Mr. Stossel's DVDs in my classroom to provoke debate/discussion over science and social issues that coalesced with our school's character education objectives. In case you are not familiar with the man, John Stossel has received 19 Emmy Awards and numerous accolades for his reporting on hot button issues such as healthcare, education, taxes, and climate change among others. But what is truly unique about him is his Libertarian perspective. As a Libertarian, Mr. Stossel holds a healthy skepticism toward big government and cherishes individual liberty – themes which run through his presentations and which I found useful in helping students improve the way they think through and process contemporary issues.

The email I received from SITC invited me to participate in a seminar entitled, [Restoring Civic Culture Together](#). The conference promised to "...restore a spirit of civil, constructive, and respectful discourse and engagement; and to return facts, analysis, and research to primacy as the vehicles for discussion and debate." As an 8th grade science teacher, data-driven analysis combined with discussion and debate had an immediate appeal to me, but I had also witnessed considerable discord among my students due to the current political/social climate. Many of my more conservative students felt they could not freely express themselves at school for fear of being bullied or made fun of. My classroom had become a "safe space" for many of these students. So, this topic had immediate appeal to me and caused me to keep reading instead of immediately hitting the delete button (a common practice among email-besieged teachers).



Peter Goettler, President, Cato Institute

The seminar was being hosted by the [Cato Institute](#) – a well-known Libertarian Think Tank in Washington, DC. This was to be the inaugural event; the first time Cato ever developed a program oriented toward teachers and school administrators. In the email they outlined their rationale by saying, "All of us are rightly concerned by the coarsening of our civic dialogue and the partisan bitterness that exists today in America. The Cato Institute has joined with friends and partners from across the spectrum to produce a non-ideological summer program for educators to analyze these challenges and seek solutions... To protect our liberal democracy, the Summit will explore what we as individuals can do to restore a spirit of civil, constructive, and respectful discourse and engagement. To that end, the

Summit will emphasize the common values and objectives we hold as citizens. The Sphere Summit features discussions from balanced points of view by leading experts from think tanks, media, and the academy." In his opening remarks, the president of Cato, Mr. Peter Goettler, explained that he and his staff originally came up with this idea back in 2018, but they couldn't decide who to focus upon. Politicians? The Media? And then they came up with the idea of inviting teachers and school administrators. After all, "...who better to address the issue of teaching civility than teachers" said Mr. Goettler in his opening remarks. Thus, the Sphere Summit was launched, with the help of several very generous benefactors.

My first inclination was to send this email along to my colleagues who teach social studies. As interested as I was, the topic seemed a better fit for them, but none of them were interested. So, after wrestling with what I should do, I decided to apply. The email reported that 100 teachers had already registered for the conference and that scholarships were available. I could not afford paying for a week in Washington DC, not to mention the costs of the conference, so I decided to apply for the scholarship. About two weeks later, to my surprise, I received notification that my application had been accepted and I was receiving a full scholarship from Cato to attend this event! Woohoo!

The conference featured a host of prominent "policy wonks" from liberal, conservative, and libertarian persuasions. At the time the email was sent, confirmed speakers included philanthropist Donald Graham; Jonathan Rauch and Darrell West from the Brookings Institution; NYU law professor and former ACLU president Nadine Strossen; Jeffrey Rosen from the National Constitution Center; U.S. Representative Justin Amash; and Stefanie Sanford from the College Board.

As noted on the [Sphere Summit website](#), the conference objectives were:

Civic Culture: Explore and address the current state of public discourse, partisanship, and tribalism in America.

Foundations: Discuss shared values essential to a restoration of civic culture.

Applications: Demonstrate and share tools and approaches for the classroom on current public policy issues from diverse viewpoints. Other topics will include the U.S. Constitution, the rule of law, and freedom of expression.

Understanding Each Other: Examine political philosophies -- progressive, libertarian, and conservative -- and engage with leading scholars and educators on how to communicate effectively with, and understand the viewpoints of, audiences with diverse perspectives. Adherents of the various political philosophies will explain the ways in which those philosophies are often misunderstood.

Policy Discussions: Analyze key policy issues from diverse perspectives with an emphasis on shared values and common objectives, guided by scholars from leading public policy organizations and academic institutions.



(Left) Ramesh Ponnuru, Senior Editor National Review and Brian Sabourin, (Right) Panel discussing the topic "Understanding Each Other"

Once I arrived at the conference I was surprised to discover that every teacher had received a scholarship! Almost every state was represented but most teachers came from California, Florida, and Texas. Only 4 teachers attended from New Jersey, and lucky me, I was one of them!

The conference was a very professional and exhausting affair (see website for schedule), beginning at 8am every day and going as late as 9pm. Each day was filled with excellent presentations and to my surprise, question and answer sessions that were as long as the presentations themselves. They seemed to actually want to hear our point of view! I was definitely not used to this, nor were the other teachers present!

The political makeup of the teachers was predominantly liberal. No surprise there, but I would estimate that about 15% of us were conservatives and maybe 5% libertarian. I don't think they deliberately planned it this way. After all, how could they? But as I came to discover, our political orientations challenged us to practice civil dialogue when confronted with the various seminar presentations and with one another. In other words, we were a little like guinea pigs in this first conference. We practiced civil dialogue as well and brainstormed ways in which we could adapt this process to our schools and classrooms. Discussions were designed to take place during presentations, over meals, and after formal programming with our roommates and friends. It was an exhausting ordeal, but one which helped us better understand our prejudices.

In the opening dinner program, Annie Duke, a championship poker player and decision strategist, talked with us about how to guard against confirmation bias – the tendency to favor information that confirms our preexisting beliefs or prejudices, and cognitive bias – the tendency to maintain our perspectives

regardless of contradictory information – such as believing in something just because everyone else does (herd mentality). The problem with these psychological orientations is that they lead to bad decision making, which in turn can lead to a variety of negative outcomes. I have personally experienced this as a teacher. This might come as a surprise to you, but our modern educational system does not always seek to encourage objective thinking and decision making. Sometimes schools/teachers seek to tell students what to think instead of teaching them how to think. Ms. Duke shared some excellent insights on how we as teachers can help our students avoid these tendencies. Her [website](#) provides teachers and school administrators with many helpful resources for addressing the process of informed decision making. It is a useful tool for enabling students to make better "informed" decisions.

In addition to the provocative conference atmosphere and excellent food (just had to mention that), Cato was extremely generous in providing us with free reading material. Every speaker had a book to hawk that was given to us for free! I will not need any reading material for some time!



Mr. Tom G. Palmer, Executive Vice President for International Program, Atlas Network presenting on Civic Culture and Foundations and with my roommate and me

On the first full day of the conference, Mr. Darrell M. West, a well-known liberal and policy wonk at Brookings Institute (liberal think tank), shared a presentation based upon his new book entitled, *Divided Politics Divided Nation – Hyper conflict in the Trump Era*. Now, this being the first presentation on the first full day, we conservatives were ready for a Trump bashing, but as it turned out, Mr. West did not attribute the current political polarization solely to the president. As he points out in his book, the political climate has been moving in this direction for a long time. The difference today is the extreme degree of polarization. Political polarization has become so extreme that it is generating social problems. Both sides are suffering from confirmation and cognitive bias, and due to the proliferation of social media, even children are taking sides! Some families are deeply divided over politics not to mention our schools! The answer, according to Mr. West, well... that is not going to be easy, but he felt that our conference is a good step in the right direction. If we teachers can model civil dialogue and help students learn how to do the same, perhaps we can improve the current state of affairs. We must become better at respecting and listening to one another, which brings me to yet another presentation on the First Amendment.

Cato, being a libertarian think tank, has strong opinions on first amendment freedoms. They rightly assert that Free Speech is the most revolutionary and successful idea in political history, which is why it must be protected. Jonathan Rauch of the Brookings Institute and Nadine Strossen, former president of the ACLU and NYU Law School professor, spoke on the absolute necessity of the First Amendment and the astounding absence of this law's application in today's popular culture. Libertarian moderator Caleb O. Brown also challenged them to address the current trend in "hate speech." While they agreed that there are certain times and places where speech must be regulated, free speech must still be kept free - especially when there is disagreement.

We need to help today's students understand that disagreeing with someone else's viewpoint does not give them the right to attempt to silence or stop that person from saying it! We see this problem being played out throughout society today - in social media where Google, Facebook, Yahoo and other tech firms are being accused of fixing algorithms to favor one political view over another; on cable news networks who have been called "Fake News" for inaccurate reporting; and so on and so on. Consequently, schools need to step up to this challenge and provide more first amendment education. Schools need to do more than just talk, however, they must practice and model first amendment behaviors in the classrooms. One idea presented that can help facilitate modeling practice was the [Ideological Turing Test](#). This test challenges a person to present the opposing viewpoint so precisely and persuasively that the opposing person believes that the presenter is on his or her side. Such a practice can be adapted for use in a variety of subjects – certainly in the science classroom as well as social studies and language arts.

Presentations and discussions along the same vein as described above were scattered throughout the conference. On our last night, we were invited for dinner in the Rayburn Congressional Office Building

where Representatives Justin Amash (previously R-MI but now an Independent) and Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) spoke on the topic "Working Together In Congress", and no, this topic was not intended to be a facetious joke. Amash and Lofgren cited actual bipartisan work they did together but also lamented the current stagnation and unwillingness to cooperate across party lines. Basically, they agreed that partisanship has never been as divisive as it is now. When asked to what extent congressional behavior models what is being taught in school, both representatives said that what really goes on is nothing like what we teach! Not very encouraging to say the least!



Dinner together in the Rayburn Congressional office building and the panel discussion with Representatives Lofgren and Amash.



I shared with Rep. Amash how disappointed I was with his recent statements, but I appreciated the explanation he gave during QandA. He thanked me for my comments and we parted as friends – very civil I must say!

Before I finish this report, I want to mention two more websites very useful for teachers. The first of which is www.humanprogress.org. Ms. Chelsea Follett, Managing Editor of the human progress website, a project of the Cato Institute, presented a great overview of the various ways in which teachers can use data to support their teaching and encourage data-driven decision making in students. Her presentation was such a breath of fresh air! While many people tend to think that our world today is in really bad shape – a perspective often held by students – this website provides real statistics that show we are not nearly as badly off as we sometimes think! What's more, it provides a wide assortment of data, from science to social issues, which can help students develop informed opinions. I recommend checking out the [Your Life in Numbers](#) link. It's a fun way to look at where we have been and what has been accomplished in our lifetime.

The second website is from the [National Constitution Center](#) located in Philadelphia, PA. This site is great for physics as well as government and social studies classes. The [Interactive Constitution](#) is a great link that contrasts experts with opposing opinions on key issues but portrays them engaging in polite, civil dialogue and even agreeing on certain topics – a great way to model civil dialogue to students! The [We The People](#) podcast link is also great for keeping up with current events and their connection to the constitution. Finally, the [Classroom Exchange](#) allows students and teachers to interact with other students somewhere else in the United States. They can practice having civil dialogues with students from another school that takes a different position on a constitutional issue. They even offer a lesson plan link to help with lesson planning and design. Check it out!

In summary, I look forward to the coming academic year with more hope than I did at the conclusion of the previous one. I hope to use the insights of this conference to inspire my colleagues to work together as models of civility and promote a climate of civil dialogue among one another, in our classrooms, and throughout the school. As teachers we can help to moderate the uncivil trends seen in our current political leaders and media personalities. We can give students the tools to better process, understand, and respect differences in opinion while also learning to base viewpoints (as much as possible) on data-driven decision making. Maybe Cato had the right idea to focus on the education of children to address the extreme polarization which the adult community in our country seems unable to overcome.



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