

Sphere in the Classroom: Teaching American History in Polarized Times

By Bekah Congdon

A veteran teacher grapples with the rising tide of political tribalism and leans on Cato's Sphere Education Initiatives to bring civility back to the classroom.

As a history teacher for more than 35 years, Frank Wiswall has seen political and cultural trends come and go, influencing his students in both positive and negative ways. But there is a marked difference about today's tribalism, which has seeped into Wiswall's classroom and caused a chilling effect on the open debate of ideas.

"It has been a dramatic change. I've seen the way my students interact with each other and with the world around them change—especially since the advent of smartphones," Wiswall says.

Wiswall has taught for 26 years at Cranbrook Schools, a private college preparatory school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Last fall, he resumed teaching US history after more than a decade—a challenge he faces with both excitement and trepidation.

"This can be the most stimulating or the most divisive subject right now," Wiswall says. "Many topics in American history have become politicized. For some of my students, this has encouraged them to be more confrontational. For others, I think they don't feel comfortable expressing their views in class for fear of being on the 'wrong side' of a given issue."

The teaching of US history has become a major political battleground. Approaches to teaching topics like the Civil War, the civil rights era, and America's Founding are hotly contested by students, parents, and policymakers alike.

"It's not just a flashpoint in education; it's a flashpoint echoing throughout all of American culture," Wiswall says.

The increasing politicization of historical subject matter—combined with what Wiswall believes is an overreliance on social media to form political views—has hampered free speech and civil discourse in schools.

Rather than relying on facts, reason, and analysis in forming political opinions, Wiswall observes many students using the internet and social media to find content that confirms their biases rather than taking the time to research and understand an issue from every angle.

"The expansion of personal technology has eroded my students' ability to focus and fragmented the sense of community. It's made me adapt how I teach and how I encourage participation," Wiswall says. "What I've learned from Sphere has helped with that."

Sphere Education Initiatives provides professional development seminars and teaching resources to middle and high school educators to help them bring tough conversations on key policy topics into their classrooms. A suite of curriculum content introduces students to diverse points of view—libertarian, conservative, and progressive—and models free speech, respect for viewpoint diversity, and civil discourse.

A cornerstone of Sphere Education Initiatives is the Sphere Summit, a summer program featuring presentations and



Veteran teacher Frank Wiswall leads a thoughtful discussion with students at Cranbrook Schools in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, applying the civil discourse techniques promoted by the Cato Institute's Sphere Education Initiatives.

workshops with leading policymakers, scholars, and academics. More than 6,000 teachers across the country have attended a summit since 2019 and have collectively reached over 750,000 students.

Wiswall, who has attended the summit every year since 2020 with a growing group from Cranbrook, is among the educators who say the training, resources, and network provided through Sphere have allowed them to revive open and civil discourse in their classrooms—even and especially during discussions on hotly debated issues.

“Sphere has made me rethink and readjust my teaching approach, mainly by being more aware of how I can turn almost any topic into an opportunity for civil dialogue between my students—and ensuring that my classroom is a safe space for an honest and genuine exchange of radically differing ideas,” he says.

To create such a space, Wiswall has used creative ideas from Sphere not only in lesson plans and instruction styles but in the setup of his classroom.

“I organize my classroom in a big circle, and I explain the advantage this gives my students in terms of centering the class on shared discussion,” he says. “I emphasize that I am only one of the voices in the room, and I want to hear from everybody. But what I hear needs to be backed up with evidence and facts. It must be well-informed.”

This academic year, Wiswall has placed renewed emphasis on fostering civil discourse by introducing debate-centered instruction. Inspired by the 2023 Sphere Summit, he has his students engage in debates on pivotal US history topics such as judicial review, the nullification crisis, secession during the Civil War, and the assessment of Reconstruction's success or

failure. Recognizing the prevailing trend of misrepresenting opposing viewpoints in public discourse, Wiswall imparts a crucial lesson to his students: the ability to argue persuasively for both sides of an issue, even if they personally disagree.

“I want my students to listen in order to understand, not just to respond,” he says. “They can disagree, but it has to be done with a layer of civility that recognizes the common humanity of the other person talking to them.”

To this end, Wiswall employs the ideological Turing test—an exercise he learned at the Sphere Summit. He asks his

using “the ultimate source material”—the US Constitution. He’s guiding his history students through the document article by article while connecting the dots between the protections the Constitution provides citizens and the actions of politicians that could be interpreted as violations of Americans’ constitutional rights.

“I tell my students that voting is not a spectator sport,” Wiswall says. “If there is nothing else I do for these students before they leave, I want to make sure they are ready to get into the arena and have a thorough understanding of our Founding documents so they can be informed participants in our democracy when they start voting.”

For Wiswall, Sphere represents an opportunity not only to enhance teaching but also to rebuild a sense of community that has become fractured over time.

“You meet so many teachers through Sphere whose views really differ—and yet you find in listening to different people that we’ve got a lot more in common than that which divides us,” Wiswall says.

That feeling of connectedness—even among those with whom he strongly disagrees—is something he wishes to instill in his students.

“I want my students to leave my class with the ability to respectfully disagree with others while still understanding they are intelligent human beings who are worthy of dignity and respect.” ✦

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students to state the opposing view on an issue as accurately and compassionately as possible. If a student is unable to do so, he suggests they conduct more research on the issue—relying on primary source materials, facts, and critical analysis as the basis of their opinion rather than emotion or allegiance to a political party.

In emphasizing the importance of establishing strong foundations, Wiswall is