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## Teaching Civics in an Uncivil Age

**Working in a U.S. history class should be a dream job, and it is, but our nation's current climate makes it much more difficult than I imagined.**

When I was in sixth grade I had to write an essay about what I wanted to be when I grew up. (Very creative assignment, I know.) I said I wanted to be the first woman president. I raised a few eyebrows with that one in 1977. Although I changed my mind in later years, I never lost my interest in government and politics. I have the political science degree to prove it. Working in a U.S. History class with the first unit focus on citizenship should be a dream job and in some ways it is, however, I also feel like I am negotiating a minefield.

High school juniors are social creatures and are often most impressed by what their friends just posted on Tumblr, but they are also highly attuned to things that affect them and are starting to look up and away from their navels. We want to engage them in critical thinking about our nation and the world. We strive to give them facts and offer ways to discuss opinions and ideas. Our racially, ethnically, and economically diverse population is the future demographic makeup of our nation—at least I hope it is. They have unique perspectives that deserve to be heard. Ideas that need nurturing. Opinions that differ from each others and from mine. And an understanding that "the land of the free and the home of the brave" may as well be Xanadu.

And therein lies the problem: How do we as adults teach civic responsibility and tolerance in an age of incivility and divisiveness especially when that Incivility is often directed at them and/or their families, culture, and religion? How can I get them to back their opinions with facts and research when the highest officials in our land don't see a need to do so? How can I ask them to drop the name-calling when the president's favorite word is "loser"?

More personally, how do I teach social action and responsibility without steering them toward what I believe those actions should be and what I think they should take aim at? As a former journalist, I am familiar with trying to stay balanced and I also know how hard that is. I am trying. I am aware that data—our favorite education cure-all—lends itself to interpretation just as easily as words. I really am trying. In fact, I am doing so well, that we've been back in school a whole week and I haven't once said: "Don't act the way our president and Congress act. You're better than that," although I have been tempted many times.