

Civics

CONTINUED FROM | PAGE 3

In past years, HYPE students have held discussions on happiness, progress, fear, love, responsible citizenry, rights.

Today, 1,200 high school students from five New Hampshire high schools will gather to host the 9th Annual HYPE Conference at the Hamel Center at the University of New Hampshire to discuss the topic "What Does Democracy Look Like?"

The HYPE format for discussion adheres to the rules of Socratic dialogue – groups of 5 to 15 work together to find a universal truth or conclusion about a topic. Each member is invited to share a first-person experience regarding the topic, followed by a question session aimed at clarification, hopefully fostering a better understanding of his or her relationship to the topic. Rule No. 1 is that only one person speaks at a time.

Souhegan Ethics Forum students have been working towards this conference all year long. Two months ago, on January 12, I visited the Ethics Forum 9th HYPE Training Day at the New Hampshire Institute of Politics on the campus of Saint Anselm College where 150 student-leaders from five high schools – Derryfield School; Oyster River; Spaulding; Bedford; and Souhegan – came for training to act as facilitators of discussions that will take place today at the UNH HYPE conference. Each facilitator will host a discussion group of about 10-12 students.

Brooks is more often found giving up the microphone to a student than using it to express his own opinions – actually the methods of the perfect Socratic teacher. At the very heart of dialogue – and a meaningful conversation – is the question. The open space that follows a question is an invitation – the furthest thing from an accusation. The question-centered process encourages students to find their own voices, be visible to themselves so they build the confidence to be visible to their peers, to think for themselves, share opinions, build community.

The central circular table in the New Hampshire Institute of Politics library seemed an especially apt metaphor for a conference about civil discourse.

In this age of polarized politics, it is refreshing to see young people reminding us – and publicly demonstrating – the civics of civility – and producing better, more aware citizens in the process.

In preparation for the HYPE Conference, participants read Richard Bellamy's *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction* in which they learn about one very famous instance of public discourse that shaped modern western civilization – the famous Putney Debates of 1647 that addressed divisions in the English Civil War. Soldiers serving in the Parliamentary Army could not vote for members of Parliament. Out of protest, they formed a new political party, the "Levellers" – because they believed the law should protect the poor and the wealthy equally.

Levellers were elected from each regiment to attend the debates chaired by Oliver Cromwell, and proposed a constitutional proposal entitled "An Agreement of the People" – defining the parameters of the English government, aimed at removing grievances, abolishing arbitrary power, and setting limits on authority. The result was very personal: all Leveller soldiers, who made up the majority of the regiments, were known to carry this Agreement with pride, tucked into their hatbands.

Woodcut illustrations of these famous debates depict opposing sides gathered around a circular table. There is good reason that the geometric shape of negotiation is a circle. A circle offers each person the same view of everyone else at the table – no hierarchy, just a meeting of the minds, placing each person on "level" ground.

In January, because most of the students gathering around round tables for HYPE training had never met before, student facilitators began their sessions with "ice-breakers" to warm up group dynamics. This task sounds simple but necessitates that group leaders sensitize themselves to all points of view, abstain from taking sides, and do not push their own agenda. Leaders are taught to be flexible, to allow a conversation to go many divergent directions, guard against anyone monopolizing discussion and encourage each person to share his or her opinion.

What was so refresh-

ing about the training session I attended is that I did not detect any ego or emotion in the room, and I came away totally ignorant of individual political persuasions – conservative, liberal, Trump-hater, or Hillary enthusiast. There was no name-calling, no venomous accusations, yet the discussion spanned the topic – covering everything from voting and representation to immigration; the media; issues of character; the history of past presidents; how celebrity and social media impacts daily politics and perceptions.

Why is it we so often forget the basics of civil discourse? I was reminded of an old college friend who felt so passionate about her own beliefs that she pontificated to me but never once asked a question. She assumed my silence meant disagreement and disagreement must mean that I was wrong. This from a former college debater schooled in the pros and cons of each issue who was now a PhD in clinical psychology – yet she assumed she knew me without once asking a question.

HYPE has expanded way beyond expectations. It won the Granite State Award in 2014 and has been awarded two Pulitzer Arts Foundation Awards in conjunction with the NH Humanities. A question-raising format transforms the classroom while it teaches students to think – but it also can change personal relationships. One Latin teacher said that one of her students had been complaining about difficulties with his mother. But that since he had been studying philosophy, "she was different." More precisely, had this student gained insight into empathy, finding a new way to look at his mother?

In this age of polarized politics, it is refreshing to see young people reminding us – and publicly demonstrating – the civics of civility – and producing better, more aware citizens in the process. Socrates said: "I am a citizen of the world and my Nationality is Goodwill."

D. Quincy Whitney is a career journalist, author, historian and Nashua resident of more than 40 years. Contact Whitney at quincysquill@nashuatelegraph.com.